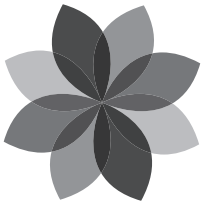


Year C, Volume 2

Lent through Pentecost



# Connections

*A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*

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General Editors

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
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# Publisher's Note

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

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

We at Westminster John Knox Press want to thank the superb editorial team that came together to make *Connections* possible. At the heart of that team are our general editors: Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, and Cynthia L. Rigby. These four 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOEL B. GREEN  
THOMAS G. LONG  
LUKE A. POWERY  
CYNTHIA L. RIGBY  
*General Editors*

# Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

JENNIFER L. LORD  
*Connections Editorial Board Member*



Connections

# Ash Wednesday

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Isaiah 58:1–12

Psalms 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

## Isaiah 58:1–12

<sup>1</sup>Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.

<sup>2</sup>Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgments,  
they delight to draw near to God.

<sup>3</sup>“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.

<sup>4</sup>Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high.

<sup>5</sup>Is such the fast that I choose,  
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?

<sup>6</sup>Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

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

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

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

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
 the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
<sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry  
 and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
 then your light shall rise in the darkness  
 and your gloom be like the noonday.  
<sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually,  
 and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
 and make your bones strong;  
 and you shall be like a watered garden,  
 like a spring of water,  
 whose waters never fail.  
<sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
 you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
 you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
 the restorer of streets to live in.

## Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In times of heightened conflict, anxiety can degrade the ethical and spiritual foundations on which a community has built its identity. The prophet in such times is called to help believers remember who they are. The prophetic voice must be robust in its rejection of distorted thinking and compelling in its invitation to renewed communal memory. The postexilic traditions in Isaiah 56–66 reflect just such a prophetic sensibility. Isaiah 58:1–12 calls the community back to the care for the vulnerable that had been foundational to Israel’s self-understanding in earlier generations.

Verse 1 opens with God’s address to a masculine singular subject. The prophet here may stand also for the righteous hearer within the community. In this late Isaianic material we see no biographical details about the prophet, something quite different from the historical realism of the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which brim with names, dates, and locations. Where Isaiah of Jerusalem and all Israel were identified as God’s chosen “servant” in earlier Isaiah texts (20:3; 41:8, 9; 42:1, 19; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 49:3; 52:13; 53:11), in later chapters, the Lord speaks of “servants” (54:17; 65:8, 13, 14). Isaiah 58 may be inviting the

faithful to raise their voices in a polyphony of prophetic witness.

The prophet is to decry sin as if with a powerful blast from the ram’s horn (*shofar*, NRSV “trumpet”). Mention of this liturgical instrument connects ethics with right worship. The Lord had descended atop Sinai with a supernal blast of the *shofar* (Exod. 19:16, 19; 20:18) to give the Law that would organize Israel’s understanding of holiness and justice. The *shofar* was to be sounded on the Day of Atonement in the jubilee year, during which slaves were to receive manumission and leased ancestral land was to be restored to its owners. Here, the transgression of Israel is named with brutal candor: ritual is used to secure self-interest, as if God could be manipulated by those engaged in exploitative economic practices. The venerable Amos of Tekoa had derided liturgy devoid of ethical commitment (Amos 5:21–24). Now Isaiah excoriates believers for seeking the righteousness of God—the Deity’s support and vindication of them—without demonstrating their commitment to right behavior in community.

An unjust congregation dares to move blithely toward the altar as if God will disregard their egregious sins? No! Authentic spiritual praxis must be detached from self-interest and the antagonism

generated by it (vv. 3–5). Worship should be inseparable from sustained work for justice (vv. 6–7). Mature obedience integrates ritual observance with loving action for the vulnerable.

Sophisticated structuring devices enhance the power of this ancient poetry. First, rhetorical questions hammer at the complacency of the audience. The prophet ventriloquizes his opponents, a tactic of ironic discourse deployed brilliantly by Micah of Moresheth centuries earlier (see Mic. 2:6; 3:11; 6:6–7). The audience hears accusatory questions that transgressors hurl at God: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” (v. 3). Those accusations are met by devastating rhetorical responses. God mocks, “Is such the fast that I choose? Is it to bow . . . the head like a bulrush? Such fasting will not make your voice heard on high!” (vv. 4–5). God will not respond to prayers of unrepentant oppressors. The Deity insists on compassion as defining for covenant: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice . . . to let the oppressed go free?” Does not true piety require that one share bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked?

A second structuring device consists of key words that repeatedly draw hearers’ attention to the heart of the prophetic message. Four motifs are noteworthy in the Hebrew: the verb “to call” (*qr*); and the nouns “yoke” (*motah*); “appetite, need, self” (*nefesh*); and “righteousness, vindication” (*tsedaqah* and *tsedeq*).

1. The verb “to call” occurs four times in our passage (and a fifth time in v. 13). The prophet’s role is to *cry out* about believers’ transgressions and callousness toward the poor (v. 1), challenging the deceptive way in which the community calls “fasting” a superficial observance that betrays their lack of knowledge of what God desires (v. 5). When believers show their obedience by caring for the vulnerable, then they will *call* on the Lord and be heard (v. 9). Then the reformed righteous community will see Zion restored, and the congregation—identified in the masculine singular—will be *called* “repairer of the breach” and “restorer of streets” (v. 12).

2. The noun “yoke” occurs three times. In verse 6 it comes up twice: the fast that God ordains is for believers “to loose the thongs

of the *yoke*” and to “break every *yoke*.” Then in verse 9, the point is reiterated: only when believers have “removed the *yoke*” from their midst will they be guided, protected, and strengthened by God (v. 11).

3. The noun *nefesh* occurs five times. This multivalent term signifies need—mapped along a spectrum from hunger/thirst to desire to greed; thus “appetite,” literally or metaphorically—and it signifies the embodied self. In verse 3, *nefesh* occurs in the complaint of unjust worshipers: “When we starved *our bodies*” [NJPS], they ask, Why did the Lord not heed? In verse 5, God repeats the *nefesh* language to rebut the complaint as misguided. In verse 10, *nefesh* occurs twice: two contiguous usages are arranged in a chiasm emphasizing the mutuality that should characterize community. What the NRSV translates as, “if you offer your food [*nafsheka*] to the hungry, and satisfy the needs [*nefesh*] of the afflicted . . .” might also be rendered, “If you offer to the hungry *that which satiates your own need*, and the *need* of the afflicted you satisfy . . .” The final occurrence is in verse 11: the Lord will satisfy the *need* of those who have responded with compassion to the afflicted. The needs of the other are interwoven with believers’ own needs in an inescapable mutuality.

4. The motif of righteousness comes up three times. In verse 2, the term signifies the righteousness that the people should demonstrate and the righteous judgments that they expect from God. In verse 8 is an extraordinary image: for those who practice compassion for the downtrodden, their *righteousness* will go before them, and the glory of the Lord will be their rear guard. The image evokes the pillar of cloud/fire that led the Israelites in the exodus and positioned itself between them and the pursuing Egyptian army. A marvelous ambiguity infuses this metaphor: the point may be that the community’s own righteousness will direct them in the way they should go, or one may understand this as the Righteous One (NJPS, “your Vindicator”), that is, God, leading and upholding those who do right. Either way, *shalom* obtains only when the community treats the needy with equity.

Care for the vulnerable was at the center of Israel’s sacred laws. Israel’s ancestors had been enslaved in Egypt, their children born into

conditions of grave risk (see Exod. 1). Breaking their chains and escaping under Moses' leadership, Israel struggled through the wilderness to Mount Sinai. There God revealed the mandate of holy rest, Sabbath, as precious gift, not only honoring the cessation of divine work in primordial time (Exod. 20:8–11), but respecting the needs of laborers and slaves (Deut. 5:12–15).

The covenant community must be unfailingly compassionate toward widows, orphans, outsiders, and all who find themselves in conditions of precariousness (Exod. 22:21–24; Lev. 19:9–10, 33–34). Then, and only then, will the believing community be “like a watered garden,” fruitful and at peace.

CAROLYN J. SHARP

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The sum of the two tables of the Ten Commandments and—according to Jews and Christians alike—the sum of the Torah/Law, as well as the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ, is love of God and neighbor. Contrary to trendy affirmations of cultural relativism, proclamation of this form of love is found across the world's classic religious traditions (including, among many others, the Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamic traditions).

The pertinent meaning of “love” must be precisely defined. Its essence can be specified with traditional contrasts among *eros*, *philia*, and *agapē*. *Eros* designates love in the sense of one's desires for oneself. At the other extreme, *agapē*, a power not at all rooted in one's own intentions and desires, designates love by which one is seized for others. *Philia*, commonly referred to as sisterly or brotherly love, is agapaic love for those to whom you are specially connected or whom you personally prefer (e.g., children, comrades, friends, lovers); generally, *philia* designates the area where *eros* and *agapē* overlap.

There is nothing inherently wrong with *eros* or *philia*. However, divine love, kenotic love, the love that is the summary of the Torah, the Ten Commandments, and of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the love to which we are called as faithful children of God, the love of the God who *is* love, is *agapē*.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with *eros*, with having and fulfilling one's own desires for, say, food, shelter, safety, sex, music, sport, or even social recognition and respect. However, the parameters of *eros* are unremittingly oriented to oneself. Taken alone, *eros* is isolating, solipsistic. So people wholly consumed by *eros*

are not only cut off from all true fellowship, but insofar as they gain social power and influence, they will undercut just and peaceable relations among people as well.

Significantly, the love celebrated above all others in modern Western society—indeed, the only love that is acknowledged by modern Western rationality to be an actual part of the natural world—is *eros*. In modern game theory, individuals' decisions are considered to be rational (e.g., not dictated by misunderstanding, prejudice, or instinct) insofar as they are made in accord with self-interest. In political theory, when it comes to understanding how reasonable people will respond (in contrast, say, to people controlled by propaganda or coercion), it is assumed they will respond in accord with self-interest (at best, enlightened self-interest). Talk of kinship or reciprocal “altruism” in biology is not about *agapē* (or even altruism in the usual sense). For predominant streams of modern rationality, all rational decisions are presumed to be self-interested decisions. In mainstream modern Western ethics and politics, insofar as we are dealing with what is reasonable (again, not coercion or confusion), there is only self-interest (at best, enlightened, but still self-interest). There is no *agapē*, only *eros*.

Accordingly, for mainstream modern Western rationality to act in accord with self-interest is wholly natural. In stark contrast to the world's classic faith traditions, all of which draw a contrast between those who are selfish and those who are loving/generous, modern reason endorses a contrast among those who “understand how the real world really works” and idealistic simpletons. Many people experience the

power of *eros* in their work lives, where desires for oneself—for job security, good salary, benefits, and power over others—are presumed to be wholly natural. In this context, one can see, for instance, the value of keeping Sunday (or the Jewish Sabbath, religious holidays, and so forth) as a day when agapaic reality is concretely manifest in this world—perhaps even to the extent that ideally on such days virtually no one, no matter their means, has to work (this in stark contrast to an increasingly economically stratified society in which more and more people must work multiple jobs throughout every day of every week in order to survive).

At an international level, the rule of *eros* is evident in what are now standard, unqualified appeals to national self-interest, or in standard talk of gatherings of “the world’s leading economies” (in contrast, for instance, to gatherings of the world’s most equitable, loving, or just nations). To be sure, there is no virtue in failing to understand “how the real world really works.” There is nothing wrong with attending to one’s security and interests. The trick is to be in the world but not of it, to be utterly realistic about “natural” dynamics while striving to live in accord with *agapē*.

The NRSV entitles this passage “False and True Worship.” Beyond the significant but obvious distinctions, notice how false worship confusedly treats God as selfishly pleased with otherwise pointless acts meant to direct praise and attention upon God, instead of imagining God as perfect *agapē*, as being consumed with concern over all those suffering on earth. What loving person would want someone to sing praises to them while the singer’s suffering was neglected? Here, the essential unity of love of God and love of neighbor becomes visible. The God who *is agapē* rejoices with those who rejoice and cries out with those who cry out, and most urgently wants the needs of those who cry out to be met. So, when we love our neighbor, when we rejoice with those who rejoice and cry out with those who cry out, which includes working urgently to meet the needs of those who cry out, we not only love as God loves and love whom God loves; we address God’s greatest

pains and hopes, which is a way of loving God. When we concretely love “the least of these,” we concretely love God (Matt. 25).

The “least of these” can carry pejorative connotations that Jesus addresses in his story of the widow’s mite, where Jesus says that a penniless widow’s giving is greater than the large sums given by the wealthy (Luke 21:1–4; Mark 12:41–44). In this regard, note that Isaiah is speaking not to a mighty nation, but to a recently traumatized and relatively weak and vulnerable people.

This prophetic correction of confused worship and mistaken understanding of God has radical implications for Christian identity. As Jesus makes clear in his parabolic “sheep and goats” reiteration of this proclamation, the *only* factors that distinguish sheep from goats are the kind delineated in Isaiah 58: did you feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, free the oppressed? Only these factors are included in Jesus’ declaration of his own mission when, reading from Isaiah, he publicly initiates his ministry (Luke 4:18–19). According to Isaiah and Jesus, the heart of all true worship is ultimately related to concrete acts of love.

Let’s imagine God listening to a church choir. *Confused* theology imagines God enjoying the choir, and enjoying even more the fact that all of the choir’s words and thoughts are wholly directed to God. *Discerning* theology imagines God feeling the love experienced by the members of the choir as they revel in their own voices and community, and it imagines God feeling the solace, rest, comfort, communion, or joy experienced in the congregation with whom the choir worships, and it discerns God’s joy in all this multifarious loving of neighbor, which is thereby, simultaneously, loving of God. One might imagine too God’s delight in the taking of offerings, the passing of the peace, the food bank, the church groups advocating for social justice. According to Isaiah’s prophetic word, the true praise and worship in which God delights is primarily a horizontal affair, and the reward is received in the joy givers experience in the giving of gifts.

WILLIAM GREENWAY

## Ash Wednesday

### Psalm 51:1–17

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



## Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Comedian A. Whitney Brown once said, “Any good history book is mainly just a long list of mistakes, complete with names and dates. It’s very embarrassing.”<sup>1</sup> While the Bible is not exactly a history book, it does narrate the story of the relationship between God and God’s people. As far as the people’s part is concerned, it is very embarrassing.

While the superscription of the psalm attributing it to David is almost certainly not an accurate historical note, it is instructive to hear Psalm 51 in connection with 2 Samuel 11–12, where the great and heroic King David breaks at least half of the Ten Commandments, including the prohibitions against murder and adultery. It is very embarrassing. Major items of the vocabulary of Psalm 51 also suggest another narrative connection, Exodus 32–34, the golden calf episode (compare especially words describing God’s character in Ps. 51:1 with Exod. 34:6, as well as the vocabulary of disobedience in Ps. 51:2–5 with Exod. 34:7). Here, shortly after the people of God have received the Ten Commandments and have promised to obey all that God has spoken (see Exod. 20:1–17; 24:3, 7), they disobey the first two commandments. Again, it is very embarrassing, especially since, as Claus Westermann points out, Exodus 32–34 anticipates the entire subsequent history of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

The lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday provide still another text to place in connection with Psalm 51: Isaiah 58:1–12. Having been forgiven for the history of disobedience that resulted in the Babylonian exile, and having been restored to life in their own land, the people once again disappoint God. The issue is worship: fasting (Isa. 58:2–12) and, later in the chapter, Sabbath observance (vv. 13–14). As it has turned out, worship is not an activity by which the people attempt to put themselves at God’s disposal, but rather an activity by which the people attempt to put God at their disposal. In short, as the prophet puts it, “you serve your own interest” (v. 3c; see also v. 13).

It is very embarrassing; but the people, who should have been embarrassed, instead feel entitled (v. 3ab).

To turn worship into a self-serving exercise is a perennial temptation. When our liturgical practices do not facilitate our submission to God’s will and do not equip us to obey, God is not pleased. Isaiah 58 clearly communicates God’s displeasure, as does Psalm 51, especially verses 16–17, which mention another major liturgical activity, sacrifice (see also Ps. 50:14, 23). Although sacrifice lay at the heart of Israelite worship (see Lev. 1–7), and although Psalm 51 recognizes that there can be “right sacrifices” (v. 19), the danger of self-serving liturgical practice was and is paramount, as both the psalmists and the prophets suggest (see also 1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:10–20; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8). As for us, our worship certainly can be meaningful, faithful, and effective in orienting us to God and God’s will; but the danger is that it can also easily devolve into mere entertainment and/or self-congratulation.

When read in connection, Psalm 51 and Isaiah 58 commend the following related postures for faithful worship and discipleship:

**Humility, as Opposed to Entitlement.** The repetition of “broken” in Psalm 51:17 effectively makes the point, especially in concert with the word “contrite.” God invites humility, which is in sharp contrast to the sense of entitlement expressed in Isaiah 58:3ab.

**Generosity, as Opposed to Acquisitiveness.** The psalmist’s prayer for forgiveness and transformation includes, “Sustain in me a willing spirit” (v. 12). While not entirely clear, “willing spirit” may suggest generosity. In any case, the psalmist promises to turn outward (v. 13) and to become a witness to God’s “righteousness” (v. 14, my trans.; NRSV “deliverance”). In Isaiah 58, the contrast to the self-interest of the people takes the form of overflowing generosity, involving actions that

1. A. Whitney Brown, *The Big Picture: An American Commentary* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 12.

2. Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. W. Stott (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 50, 54.

the prophets characterize elsewhere as justice and righteousness (see esp. vv. 6–7).

**Genuine Praise, as Opposed to Self-assertion or Self-congratulation.** Psalm 51:15 is frequently used as a call to worship, but worshipers are seldom aware of its context. The psalmist’s promise to praise follows immediately the promise to be a witness to God’s “ways” (v. 13) and “righteousness” (v. 14), suggesting that genuine praise involves submission to God’s will. In other words, praise is a way of life as well as a liturgical activity. The language of praise is not as explicit in Isaiah 58, but it is clearly implied. When the people live as God intends (vv. 6–7), their “righteousness” will go before them (v. 8, my trans.; NRSV “vindicator”), and they will be followed by the “glory of the LORD” (v. 8). The word “glory” may indicate God’s presence, but it also suggests the honor

or praise that is due to God. In both Psalm 51 and Isaiah 58, therefore, submission to God’s will—“righteousness” (Ps. 51:14, NRSV “deliverance”; Isa. 58:8, NRSV “vindicator”)—will constitute the genuine offering of praise to God. Genuine praise is in sharp contrast to the psalmist’s self-assertion (especially if Psalm 51 is read with David’s behavior in mind) and to the people’s propensity to congratulate themselves in Isaiah 58.

While the embarrassing reality of human sinfulness is amply evident in both Psalm 51 and Isaiah 58, neither text is content to let disobedience be the final word. What is ultimately determinative is God’s willingness to forgive (Ps. 51:1; Isa. 58:8–9), as well as God’s ability to restore (Ps. 51:10–13; Isa. 58:11–12). The appropriate response, then and now, is humility, generosity, and praise.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

### 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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

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

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

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

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

When a reading begins with verse 20b, it is natural to wonder, “was there something in verse 20a that we were not supposed to hear?” The choice to begin with this half-verse is meant to lead us into chapter 6. If 5:20b announces the theme, we cannot understand this verse in isolation. We need to go back to what Paul said immediately before: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (5:18–19). When Paul says, “Be reconciled to God,” he gives an imperative, an urgent command to do this! This reconciliation cannot be done by human effort alone, but only through the power of God in Christ.

We hear several themes from Paul’s correspondence with the Corinthians in these verses. God, through Christ, is the source of our reconciliation. Paul made this clear with a beautiful

metaphor in 4:7, “but we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” (The reconciliation Paul talks about is not with only one person or one group of believers, but with “the world.”) This is cosmic reconciliation. Yet, Paul brings this reconciliation down to earth, saying that God “has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Such reconciliation is not only between God and the believer, but between one believer and another.

Paul has been deeply concerned about the human realities of reconciliation in Corinth. Paul’s first letter pointed out the deep divisions within the community. Some claimed allegiance to Paul, others to Apollos or Cephas, and others to Christ. He asked, “Has Christ been divided?” (1 Cor. 1:12–13a). There were lawsuits among believers, different opinions about sexual morality, divisions at the Lord’s table, and arguments over speaking in tongues. Paul had a heavy heart about all these divisions within what he called

## Imitators of His Patient Endurance

Let us, then, hold steadfastly and unceasingly to our Hope and to the Pledge of our righteousness, that is, Christ Jesus, who bore our sins in his own body on the tree, who committed no sin, neither was guile found on his lips but for our sakes he endured everything that we might live in him. Therefore let us be imitators of his patient endurance, and if we suffer for the sake of his name, let us glorify him. For he set us this example in his own Person, and this is what we believed.

Now I exhort all of you to be obedient to the word of righteousness and to exercise all patient endurance, such as you have seen with your very eyes, not only in the blessed Ignatius and Zosimus and Rufus, but also in others who were of your membership, and in Paul himself and the rest of the apostles; being persuaded that all these “did not run in vain,” but in faith and *righteousness*, and that they are now in their deserved place with the Lord, in whose suffering they also shared. For they loved not this present world, but Him who died on our behalf and was raised by God for our sakes.

Stand firm, therefore, in these things and follow the example of the Lord, steadfast and immovable in the faith, loving the brotherhood, cherishing one another, fellow companions in the truth, in “the gentleness of the Lord preferring one another and despising no one. Whenever you are able to do a kindness, do not put it off, because almsgiving frees from death.” All of you submit yourselves to one another, having your manner of life above reproach from the heathen, so that you may receive praise for your good works and the Lord may not be blasphemed on your account. Woe to them, however, through whom the name of the Lord is blasphemed. Therefore, all of you teach the sobriety in which you are yourselves living.

“Polycarp to the Philippians,” in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 134–35.

“the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). Krister Stendahl said this dissension within the community led Paul to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:

And then [Paul] ends by saying, so there remain those three: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of them is faith. Well, that’s what he should have said, according to his own thinking. The basic line: He is the apostle of faith, everything depends on faith. But here, suddenly, there is a breakthrough in his thinking, and he says: And the greatest of these is love, agape, esteem of the other, not “insisting on its own way,” as the RSV puts it.<sup>1</sup>

Stendahl surprises us when he says, “and the greatest of them is faith.” He wants us to be surprised, to see that something happened to Paul in his ministry in Corinth. Paul realized that love was essential to bridge the chasms that

divided believers from one another. Paul was writing to people he had come to know well, concerned about their particular questions and conflicts. This was not systematic theology, but a pastor writing to people he cared for deeply.

Paul had received at least one letter from the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:1) and had written back more than once. Most scholars agree that there are fragments of at least two or three letters within 2 Corinthians. However these fragments were put together, this epistle may not be so different from the way we might write a letter (if anyone still writes letters!). We start with one subject, then remember something that does not quite fit yet should not be forgotten. We may end the letter with a thought we had not expressed before, then add a postscript (P.S.). Paul often had more than one P.S. in his letters. He hinted a warning in a P.S. near the end of his Corinthian letter: “So I write these things while I am away from

1. Krister Stendahl, “Why I Love the Bible,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 35 (Winter 2007): <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/winter2007/why-i-love-bible>.

you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Cor. 13:10).

Within the framework of Paul’s second letter and with 1 Corinthians ringing in our ears, we return to the half-verse that begins the Ash Wednesday text: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” As the reading moves into chapter 6, there is a sense of urgency. Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah to wake the Corinthians up: “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Isaiah’s words cannot stay in the past. “See, now is the acceptable time, see now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2b). Without underlining or italics Paul emphasizes the word “now.” Do not wait until I visit you again. “We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way,” Paul says, “so that no fault may be found with our ministry” (vv. 3–4a). Paul wants the Corinthians to trust him and his ministry. He knows they have been tempted to follow more showy leaders; “super-apostles” he calls them! (11:3–6).

When Paul says “we” in these verses, he usually means “I.” He seems to be bragging that he has endured more than anyone. Such boasting can be very off-putting to contemporary readers; perhaps it was to the Corinthians too. However, for Paul this boasting has a purpose: “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness” (11:30). Why? Because he wants all the credit to go to God and not to himself. His credentials involve afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors,

sleepless nights, and hunger. He puts flesh on this list later on, describing the particular hardships he has endured (vv. 23–27). “And, besides other things,” he adds, “I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches” (v. 28), which included the Corinthians.

How did Paul survive these hardships? He is not shy. He tells us: “By purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God” (6:6–7a). Depending on how you do the counting, you can see nine hardships and nine gifts, but math is not the main point. Paul’s message is clear: I endured only through the power of God. He closes this section with powerful antithetical pairings: “We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (vv. 8b–10).

In many ways this is exactly the right word for Ash Wednesday. The Gospel reading from Matthew 6 tends to draw us into ourselves: give alms secretly, pray inside your room, and do not let anyone know you are fasting. The mood is usually somber as each person receives the sign of ashes in the shape of a cross. One motion downward, another motion across. Most people have probably heard that the vertical line points to our relationship with God while the horizontal line points us toward one another. Paul brings these two lines together in this text. Be reconciled to God. Be reconciled to one another. When? “Now is the acceptable time.”

BARBARA K. LUNDBLAD

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Ash Wednesday is a unique day in the church calendar, a day of potent symbol and stark sensory resonance. It marks the beginning of the Lenten season of austerity and preparation, the turn toward Jerusalem and the cross that comes at the bottom of the mountain after the transfiguration. Ash Wednesday is when the Christian journey takes on its darkest and most serious cast. Within the liturgy itself, and within

the readings, we experience the reality of death, the risk of faithful offering, the certainty of the cross on the road to resurrection.

On Ash Wednesday, the church calls her people to repentance and recommitment. The message is harsh, even frightening. You are dust and to dust you shall return. We are reduced to our most elemental components. The ashes—traditionally produced by burning blessed palms from

the previous year's Palm Sunday celebration—speak to crushed dreams, a return to essentials, a distillation of our holy stories, the heart of our relationship with our Creator and the creation. We hear the lessons on Ash Wednesday knowing that we will leave marked by our mortality.

This passage from 2 Corinthians, with its insistence on reconciliation and its unflinching description of the sacrifices of Christian life, draws us into the struggles of the early church. There is no easy triumphalism here, no glorious crowds who hear the story but once and fling themselves into Christian life. The introductory chapters of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians speak to broken relationship, disappointment, missed connection. Paul has forgone a visit to the Corinthians out of some combination of his own pain and theirs. He counsels reconciliation not as a joyous or easy step, but as the only Christian way forward in a context of real brokenness. Paul and his companions are deep into the hard work of following and proclaiming Jesus. They find themselves called to recommitment, to remembering who they are and why this journey is worth the effort and the pain.

In the passage immediately preceding this one, Paul restates his credentials as an ambassador for Christ. This message of reconciliation is Paul's best translation of God's call to God's people, his best interpretation of the meaning of Christ's sacrifice. His message crosses boundaries of culture and experience; he inhabits the struggling world of his listeners, yet owes allegiance to another world, another set of laws, another sort of economy.

The contradictory and counterintuitive nature of the divine economy as expressed through Christ comes to us through Paul's pairings of opposites in 6:4b–10. The follower of Christ expects and accepts "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, [and] hunger," but not with long-suffering resignation. Rather, "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God" provide a vital counterweight, allowing for a life of dignity and even joy under the grimmest of conditions.

The heart of the gospel, in Paul's view, is that the balance always weighs in God's favor, and thus in the favor of the faithful: "We are treated

as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything." The homiletical challenge here is to convey the underlying hope without romanticizing the very real suffering. Paul does not offer the divine economy as an escape from the cruelty of the world, but rather as an inversion of the expected effects.

Most of the historic liturgical churches in which Ash Wednesday is celebrated are struggling to adapt to changing times and shifting community context. Paul's context of conflict, hurt feelings, church fragility, and exhausted leadership will resonate easily with many congregations, especially in places where the Ash Wednesday services are small gatherings of the most committed members of the congregation. These words from the early church offer a helpful reminder that the faithful church has not always been large and flush. The itinerant preachers of 2 Corinthians appear to aspire to neither for the churches they have planted. They insist on faithfulness as the measure, under the most trying circumstances and in the face of both the open hostility of the world and the intransigence of relationships among the faithful.

In other places, especially in large immigrant Latino communities, Ash Wednesday may draw a larger crowd than usual, filling the churches with people who seek the comfort of a long-remembered ritual, one with ancestral resonance that may well predate any encounter with a Christian church. That group will require a somewhat different homiletical approach, one which considers the possibility that this will be one of the few Christian proclamations that listeners will hear this year, one that honors the humble request for the gift of ashes with a larger context, one that speaks not only to brokenness but also to deep and enduring hope.

Paul's words about grace speak well to this second context. We turn in repentance not because we are dirty or unworthy, but because we are dust. We are made of the substance of creation. We come from God and will return to God. We are of the same substance as one another, inseparable from the world God has

made. None of us is left out of the promise or exempt from the love. Christ's sacrifice frames our repentance. We can give the grace that is necessary for reconciliation because that grace was first extended freely to us.

The descriptions of Paul and his companions' suffering beg a connection with the struggles of the day. Is this a multiethnic community struggling to find unity, a community of individuals who live on the edge of economic survival or fear deportation? What are the justice issues with which the congregation has or might engage? Where is the need for reconciliation most pressing? How might this congregation, gathered in a particular time and place, model and invite the larger community into the sacrificial work of reconciliation?

Connections to the personal struggles of the gathered congregation abound as well. Are there those among your listeners who suffer from bullying, exclusion, a sense that the world has no place for them? Someone surely is grieving. Someone is wondering why the material blessings of life offer so little depth of satisfaction.

Increasingly, Ash Wednesday is a time when churches venture outside their walls and sanctuaries. Many clergy and congregations spend

time on the streets on Ash Wednesday, offering the gift of ashes with little or no liturgical context. While "ashes to go" is unlikely to offer a conventional homiletical opportunity, the experience of being out and about with ashes is almost certain to offer homiletical connection to this particular passage. For those who went out, what did you see? What were the struggles? Where did you find humility, inspiration, or the urgency of reconciliation? For those who did not share the "going out" experience, how might the stories of the day inspire?

This reading invites a closing connection with the season of Lent ahead. Living into the hopeful contradictions of the divine economy provides a fruitful avenue for contemplative experience as we set our experiences of suffering and persecution alongside our experiences of blessing and transformation. The call to find healing and reconciliation in the midst of broken relationship will offer a practical challenge to the lives of most hearers. The call not to "accept the grace of God in vain," but rather to offer ourselves fully for both death and resurrection, is as good a guide as any for forty days spent moving closer to Christ.

ANNA B. OLSON

## Ash Wednesday

### Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

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

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

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

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

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

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Ash Wednesday is noteworthy among Christian holy days for several reasons. First, it is one of the few days in the Christian year where believers all over the world wear a visible sign of their faith for others to see. The practice of imposing ashes on the foreheads of worshipers started in the seventh and eighth centuries. In the Roman Catholic Church, the ashes come from burning the leftover leaves from Palm Sunday the previous year. The ashes are placed or “imposed” on the heads of the worshipers with the words, “Remember, man, that thou art dust and to dust shalt thou return.”<sup>1</sup> Although the Protestant reformers abolished the practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many Protestant churches today have found renewed purpose in observing Ash Wednesday and the

practice of imposing ashes as a sign of collective penance and mourning. Ash Wednesday is also important because it is the inaugural day of the Christian Lenten season, the fourth season in the Christian year. Lent is the forty-day period before Easter (six and a half weeks, not counting Sundays), which is dedicated to reflection, penitence, and self-denial. The temptation story of Jesus and his forty-day fast is the biblical rationale for the period of Lent in the lives of believers (Mark 1:13; Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2).<sup>2</sup>

Today’s lection, however, does not launch the Lenten season by reflecting on the story of Jesus’ temptation. It revisits Jesus’ teaching discourse in Matthew 6 and focuses on three practices: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Matthew 6 is part of a larger section in the Gospel known

1. Peter S. Dawes, “Ash Wednesday,” in *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, paragraph 1220, accord://read/NIDCC#1220.  
2. Howard Sainsbury, “Lent,” in *NIDCC*, paragraph 7333, accord://read/NIDCC#7333.



widely as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Here the Gospel carefully and intentionally portrays Jesus doing something he has yet to do in Matthew—namely, sitting down and speaking (5:1–2). Up to this point in the story, the Gospel portrays Jesus on the move, traveling all over Galilee (3:13; 4:12, 13, 23) and teaching as he goes (4:23).

The lectionary for Ash Wednesday can be divided into three smaller, contiguous sections in which the issue of alms is addressed first (6:2–4), the issue of prayer second (vv. 5–6), and the issue of fasting last (vv. 16–18). The Lord’s Prayer appears in the middle of these sections, immediately following the warnings against improper approaches to prayer (vv. 7–15). Although this omission is a blaring silence in today’s Scripture lesson, it is exceptionally helpful for reconsidering the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer. By focusing on Jesus’ words before and after he models prayer, readers are reminded that prayer alone—especially public prayer—is not a sufficient indicator of rightness when benevolence for others, private prayer, and voluntary moderation are lacking.

In Jesus’ day, the custom of benevolence or almsgiving was a common practice of both the Jewish tradition and the larger Roman world. According to the Old Testament, almsgiving is about offering relief and resources to impoverished members of the Israelite community to ensure their well-being and survival. On one hand, benevolence is an act of obedience in which God’s people follow the divine commands to attend to the lower orders of society by caring for the community’s orphans, widows, and immigrants (Deut. 24:17–18; 10:18–20; 27:19; Exod. 22:21–27). On other hand, almsgiving is a faithful act of imitation in which believers reenact the precedent God set by providing for the destitute Israelites in the wilderness (Exod. 15:24–26; 16:3–4; cf. Exod. 22:21–24).

The practice of almsgiving is also an important topic for later noncanonical writings from Diaspora Judaism in the early Second Temple era (515 BCE–70 CE). Writings such as the books of Tobit and Sirach in the Apocrypha use the Greek term for almsgiving and benevolence

present in Matthew 6 (*eleēmosynē*) and explain its merits. For example, Tobit 4:6b–8 says, “And to all who do righteousness give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye be envious when you give alms. Do not turn your face away from any poor person, and the face of God shall not be turned away from you. If you have abundant possessions, give alms from them accordingly; if you have a little, do not be afraid to give alms according to that little” (see also Tob. 1:3, 16; 4:16–17; 14:10–11 *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*). The book of Sirach specifies charitable deeds as not only what God commands, but also as a representation of the finest understanding of what it means to be human: “There is no good for him who persists in evil and for him who does not willingly offer charity” (Sir. 12:3; 35:3; 40:17, 24 *NETS*).

According to Jesus’ Jewish tradition, everyone, irrespective of wealth and status, can be charitable. The Roman world made a similar point about the purpose and practice of benevolence in the broader society. Seneca, a first-century Roman philosopher and senator living at the time of Jesus, states that benevolence is “the art of doing a kindness which both bestows pleasure and gains by bestowing it. . . . It is not, therefore, the thing which is done or given, but the spirit in which it is done or given, that must be considered” (Seneca, *On Benefits* 1.6). Similarly, Jesus puts more emphasis on the ulterior motives and spirit of the almsgiver than the actual gift itself. The language of almsgiving (*eleēmosynē*) does not occur in the Gospels of Mark and John. It occurs only in Matthew and Luke, albeit for different purposes. In Luke, the language of almsgiving is positive, encouraging Jesus’ disciples to do it as a marker of their identity and loyalty (Luke 11:41; 12:33). In Matthew, however, the term appears only three times and all instances are in chapter 6. In this case, the term is used to censure the Pharisees for doing the right thing for the wrong reasons (Matt. 6:2, 3, 4).<sup>3</sup>

Strikingly, today’s lectionary entwines individual authentic acts of charity with communal practices of prayer and fasting. A central issue is

3. Kyoung-Jin Kim, “Alms, Almsgiving,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 1:106.

about who sees what. In the case of the synagogue leaders, whom Jesus pejoratively labels “hypocrites,” the purpose of benevolence, prayer, and fasting is to be seen by others to legitimate one’s authority and status in the community. It is an issue of influencing human perception and praise through deceit (Matt. 6:2; 5, 16). In contrast, Jesus names the art of secrecy as a more faithful testament of piety and character (vv. 3–4, 6, 18).

On Ash Wednesday, this passage reminds Christians that true faithfulness is not public spectacle, but quiet and decisive action. The task is to realign one’s priorities. Instead of focusing on the accouterments of life that bolster personal reputations and prominence, Jesus challenges listeners to do three things: (1) help others, out of one’s means, with little exhibition, (2) align

and realign oneself consistently to God (v. 6), and (3) disengage from a life of consumerism (*aphanizō*, vv. 16, 19–20). Consequently, the ashy mark believers wear on their heads today is pointless if Jesus’ challenge is not accepted. Today, Jesus does not call believers to the work of the prophetic trumpeter sounding a warning of danger (Matt. 6:2; Joel 2:1–2; Isa. 58:1–2). Rather, Ash Wednesday is about “commending” oneself to the service of others and to be content with anonymity. Today is about looking inward and reckoning with our own selfish wishes and biases, while willingly looking outward to a world we may not be accustomed to seeing and serving (2 Cor. 5:20b–6:10; Joel 2:12–17).

SHIVELY T. J. SMITH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

How curious is it that on Ash Wednesday, when we are marked with a blackish cross on the forehead, which is visible when we go back to work or the neighborhood, we hear Jesus say, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them”? Not leaving well enough alone, Jesus warns us not to be “like the hypocrites,” who “disfigure their faces to show others that they are fasting.”

Ash Wednesday is the one day when what we do in worship lingers visibly through the day. The worship is dark and somber. The truth about each one of us is exposed: you are mortal; you need forgiveness. It is true every day, of course, but the weight of this knowledge might crush us if we carried it daily. So on this day we carry the ashes, whose weight is real but negligible. Most of us forget we have ashes on our heads until someone stares quizzically. Maybe someone asks, or a friend offers you a cloth. Do you rub it off right away? Or carry on with a glimmer of the healthiest possible spiritual pride, in defiance of Jesus’ admonition, “When you fast . . . wash your face”?

Way back in Genesis 4, Cain was marked on his forehead as a sign of his guilt, but also of divine protection. Yes, he had killed Abel; but then the Lord, motivated by nothing but mercy,

marked him so he would live safely in Nod, east of Eden. Can we carry this sense of our mortal guilt and yet also the lightness of mercy when we are not sporting the ashes? Maybe when you wash your face in the mornings, you might trace a cross on your forehead with your finger. Or when you rinse away the makeup at day’s end, you imagine God’s mercy washing away the grime of the day’s sin, before bedtime on Ash Wednesday, but maybe also on all the other days. No one will see—except God and you.

The liturgy invites us to create our own liturgies in daily life outside the church. After washing in the morning, you get dressed. The King James Version of our text reads “Enter into thy closet, and . . . pray to thy Father.” The result? “Thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee.” What if every time you enter your closet, you simply pray? If you do, you know you are doing God’s will, since Jesus asked us to do just this, and there will be a reward. What might that be?

Spellbound capitalists that we (i.e., North Americans) are, our hopeful hunch is that a reward from God will be monetary, or at least some tangible blessing. Almost as if to clarify things before we traipse off in the wrong direction out of the closet, Jesus presses on to say, “Do

not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.” It would be hard to pinpoint any biblical commandment more frequently ignored. John Wesley pinpointed the general Christian response to Jesus’ command: “They never designed to obey it. From their youth up, it never entered into their thoughts. They were bred up by their Christian parents . . . to break it as soon and as much as they could, and to continue breaking it to their lives’ end.”<sup>4</sup>

Mind you, this is not the sort of thing a sensitive, pastoral preacher would bring up in an Ash Wednesday homily. Most churches do not even collect an offering on Ash Wednesday. Exegetical experts may have an opinion on how Jesus’ thoughts about praying in secret came to be redacted right next to his warnings about laying up treasure on earth. Theologically, the pairing makes all the sense in the world. When we come forward for the imposition of ashes, we are told, “Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Repentance, in a spiritual culture where “sin” is a diminished category, is not about this or that peccadillo, but rather who is God and what is not.

Clearly, the greatest of the pseudogods who clamor for our devotion is money. So mighty is the high god of money that we cling to it, and are stingy in giving it to the church where we receive our ashes. Just as Jesus tells his listeners not to make a show of their piety on the one day we do exhibit our ashes, Jesus warns us not to “sound the trumpet when you give alms” so as to elicit the adulation of people in a church where we quite carefully observe anonymous giving. What Christians give to their churches is a closely held secret, but not because of holy devotion to Jesus’ words in Matthew 6. Anonymity relieves donors of the competitive spirit that prompts generous giving to universities and nonprofits—but simultaneously relieves donors of the responsibility to give as they are able.

When Mike King, the father of Martin Luther King Jr., arrived at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, finances were in disarray. After surveying the situation, he concluded that the problem was anonymous giving, which led to anonymous nongiving. So he placed a ledger

at the entry to the sanctuary, detailing each person’s contributions for all to see. Feelings were ruffled, but donations soared; the budget crisis was alleviated. Jesus worried about giving to attract attention—which is really no different from his hidden worry about not giving because there is no attention. What do we give in secret?

Cain’s fury against his brother was incited because of his sense that God was pleased with Abel’s offerings. Then he was marked, for his guilt, but also as a sure sign that the terribly guilty one was also embraced by holy mercy. On Ash Wednesday, and during Lent, should we not raise the question of whether our offerings, of money and passion and self, are pleasing to God? Does the mark of the ashes at the beginning of Lent declare to the world, I am someone who has laid up treasure on earth—and with reckless abandon? This would not be practicing piety to be seen by others; this would be the confession of sorrow and complicity in a world alienated from God.

Matthew raises key questions about the business of giving up something for Lent. Do we choose a trifle, like a donut or coffee or a TV show? Do we dare to go for the gauntlet and think about giving up treasure we may be laying up for ourselves on earth? Could that happen secretly? What goes on in secret anyhow? Sometimes we give up something for Lent, maybe chocolate or alcohol, and we in effect “look dismal” and “disfigure our faces”—to ourselves, pitying or congratulating ourselves for such a noble sacrifice. Could it be cheerful, so we wash our face and look joyful, or actually know the joy of getting unattached or less attached to those treasures on earth?

Lent can begin with good intentions but then fritter away into nothing at all. A season of investment in the treasury of heaven can happen, evidently, only as we withdraw from the treasure we have been banking on earth. This is a hard lesson, won only in prayer, solitude, and humility. Perhaps the best lines in T. S. Eliot’s grand poem “Ash Wednesday” form just such a petition: “Teach us to sit still / Even among these rocks, / Our peace in His will.”

JAMES C. HOWELL

4. Theodore Jennings, *Good News to the Poor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 31.

## Ash Wednesday

### Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

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

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

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

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

## Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

This Ash Wednesday–appointed passage calls people to repent in anticipation of the “day of the LORD” (2:1). The call follows Joel’s vivid depiction of a locust plague that had destroyed the land (1:1–20), a disaster that signified God’s judgment on the people. Priests are called to lament (1:13) and to announce a fast. In the opening verses of chapter 2, the prophet shifts to address the Day of the Lord. Now, the locust plague portends larger apocalyptic destruction, with invading army, fire, and signs in the heavens. Verse 12 then invites the people to repent, so that the destruction may be averted. Immediately following the call to repentance in this passage, the Lord has pity and reassures the people that the “northern army” will be removed (2:18–27).

The theme of judgment pervades Joel: starting with the locust plague, expanding to anticipate the Day of the Lord, and here reassuring the people of their salvation from that destruction. Chapter 3 then goes on to describe the Day of the Lord in relation to all nations (not just Judah), leading to holy war between the Lord’s warriors and the surrounding nations. The final vision portrays blessings for the Lord’s people following the destruction of their enemies (3:17–21). This passage therefore acts as a hinge, turning from the judgment on the people of Israel, toward the judgment on the nations who have scattered the people to other lands. The call to repentance is critical to interrupt the preceding and following destruction, and to connect the wrongdoing of the people of Israel with the wrongdoing of the nations, which has affected them. To neglect either of these—the real guilt of the people or the real oppression that they have faced at the hands of others—would be dangerous.

Judgment and repentance echo throughout the prophetic books, from Isaiah to Malachi. The prophetic section of the Old Testament begins, “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD. . . . Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? . . . Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from

before my eyes” (Isa. 1:4, 5, 16). The Hebrew canon concludes with Malachi proclaiming, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5–6). The themes offered here in Joel resonate with the chorus of prophets who call for the people to change their ways before the coming of God’s righteous judgment.

The depiction of the Lord as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (v. 13) is identical to other Old Testament descriptions of God, especially in the Psalms (see Pss. 86:15; 103:8; and 145:8). This same affirmation appears ironically in Jonah 4:2–3, where the antiprophet complains, “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me.” It was obviously a common description of the God of Israel. Joel is not telling the people something they do not already know.

The lectionary pairs this passage from Joel with Scriptures that both echo and challenge the prophet’s words. The epistle reading, 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10, issues an urgent call to “be reconciled to God,” because “now is the day of salvation!” The urgency to repent resonates with Joel’s call to return to God. Paul offers a christological claim that stands in some tension with Joel: “For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). That is, Jesus Christ, who is “without sin,” serves as a substitute for our sin, so that we may become righteous in him.

Many classical Christian theological claims are implied here: substitutionary atonement, justification, and a pervasive understanding of sin from which we need to be rescued by God’s gracious intervention. The question that arises in juxtaposing these texts is, what is the relationship between our repentance and God’s forgiveness? Joel makes it sound as though God may relent *if* we return “with fasting, with

weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12). Yet Paul calls people to be reconciled to God *because* of Christ, in whom God has already reconciled the world to God’s self (2 Cor. 5:19). Is the logic if/then, or because/therefore? These two affirmations are not necessarily opposed, but they do present an important tension that a preacher may wish to address.

Finally, the Gospel, Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21, presents another fruitful tension with Joel. Together the evangelist and the prophet call their listeners to fasting, prayer, and repentance, traditionally associated with the season of Lent. While Joel instructs us to blow the trumpet to call people together for solemn assembly, Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel cautions his followers, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them. . . . whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:1, 6). Are solemn assemblies themselves salvific, or can they devolve into displays of pseudo-piety? This is an important caution from Jesus. At the same time, are we only called to individual, private acts of repentance, or are there important occasions when we need to gather as a community, to offer public corporate prayers of confession and repentance? This is the word that Joel might helpfully offer us today.

Beyond the lectionary, and beyond the prophetic themes of judgment and repentance already mentioned, Joel also has important

connections to earlier portions of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially descriptions of the priesthood. According to the book of Numbers, blowing the trumpet was the sign appointed to call the people together for a solemn occasion. In Numbers 10, the Lord instructs Moses to make two silver trumpets to be used for this purpose (Num. 10:8; cf. Num. 29:1 and Ps. 81:3). Joel appears to be unique among the prophetic books in calling for a solemn assembly using trumpets, and giving an explicit positive role to the ritual priesthood. This suggests that for Joel more than many other prophets, the priesthood has a vital role in leading the people to repentance (see 2:17).

In the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus both echo Joel’s call to repentance. So, for instance, John’s first words in Matthew are “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2), and Jesus repeats these words at the beginning of his own ministry (Matt. 4:17). Like Joel, John and Jesus warn of an impending day of judgment, for which people need to prepare by changing their ways. Like Joel also, Jesus (unlike John) emphasizes that God is not only just but also merciful. This is a good opportunity to notice the continuity between Jesus’ own teaching and the call of prophets like Joel; rather than portraying Jesus as a break with the teachings of the Old Testament, this is one place where we can see deep resonance.

MARTHA L. MOORE-KEISH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Amid the devastating experience of mass destruction inflicted on the Jewish people by a scourge of locusts and its residue of famine, drought, and severe heat, the prophet Joel set forth a vision of hope by declaring the possibility for a new life. The restoration of hope in a time of seeming hopelessness is what all suffering people desire most of all, and Joel’s listeners were no exception. Both they and the prophet shared a common worldview based on a covenant that their God, YHWH, had initiated with their ancestral father Moses on Mount Sinai. In

that agreement, the people promised to remain faithful to God, who in turn promised to protect them from all harm. Alas, the environmental crisis that Joel addressed clearly evidenced their failure to honor the agreement they had made. Yet Joel reminded the people that their God was willing to forgive them if they truly repented of their wrongdoing. That constituted the basis of their renewed hope.

Unlike the OT Jewish nation, the United States is not a theocracy. While not inimical to religion, this nation chose to keep religious

institutions and the state separate, so that neither could interfere with the internal life of the other. Nonetheless, that constitutional arrangement has not diminished the importance of religion in the private lives of American citizens.

Certainly much violence accompanied the founding of our nation, beginning with the many wars of conquest with the country's native peoples, wars that greatly diminished their numbers and dispossessed them of their land and pride of sovereignty. Being reduced to vassals must have been the greatest of all indignities for them and their progeny, some of whom live today on reservations, without any hope of having their fortunes restored. Living now as a captive people they can only strive vigilantly to protect the limited territorial rights granted them in the many treaties they made with their conquerors. Thus the extent to which they are hopeful about a new life is a subject worthy of serious inquiry.

Another example of this nation's violent treatment of peoples is seen in the horrific system of chattel slavery, whereby millions of innocent Africans were imported to this country to serve as forced laborers. That brutal system endured for two and a half centuries. Following a bitter civil war it gave way to a similar system of oppression called sharecropping, which lasted for another century. Moreover, the system denied full citizenship rights to former slaves.

Unlike the Native Americans, enslaved Africans eventually discovered in their masters' Bible religious themes and stories that spoke about freedom. In fact, the story of Moses, raised as a slave in the pharaoh's palace, called by God to lead his people out of slavery, brought joy to the hearts and minds of all Africans who heard it. Accordingly, they soon made the story the subject of what has become one of America's most cherished songs, "Go down Moses." In time they organized what black scholars have named "the invisible church." Hidden from their masters in the brush arbors, they would meet to sing, pray, testify, and do what was necessary to encourage and strengthen one another in their suffering by pointing them to the

divine source of their hope. Those clandestine meetings became the incubator for the African American religious experience, because in those spaces countless numbers of so-called Negro spirituals were created from tidbits of Scripture and melodies drawn from hybrid African musical rhythms that had survived the experience of slavery. In addition, those spaces nurtured leadership, communal support, and a steadfast hope for a better day.

A further example of the theological meaning of freedom and hope for these oppressed Africans is seen in the practice they instituted of bestowing the name Moses on their cherished leaders, the most prominent of whom was the courageous Harriet Tubman, who led countless numbers of enslaved people to freedom through what came to be called the Underground Railroad.<sup>1</sup> Further still, the hope of seeing the promised land as instilled in them by their leader Moses was invoked by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the sermon he delivered the night before he was assassinated. On that occasion he spoke about having been to the mountaintop, where he saw the promised land. He declared that though he might not live to get there himself, they would certainly get there. That hope envisioned in a dream has sustained African Americans throughout their history in this land.

Alvin Ailey's creative dance "Revelations," one of America's greatest treasures, has inspired generations of peoples round the world in the celebration of that hope. Sorrowful, jubilant, and hopeful, that suite of spirituals, gospel songs, and blues movingly choreographed portrays the deepest grief and greatest joy of the human soul that can be felt by all peoples.

Unlike Native Americans and African Americans, the vast majority of Americans have had little or no experience of mass suffering during the past century and a quarter. Thus, after it became clear on September 11, 2001, that the United States was under attack, the entire nation was surprised, traumatized, and perplexed. Having long assumed that America was a good nation and loved by everyone round

1. Readers might be interested in the fine novel that was published recently and which received the National Book Award for Fiction: Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

the world, many exclaimed, “Why us?” Others asked, “Why do they hate us so?” Needless to say, the 9/11 terrorist attack dispelled the illusion of universal love for our nation.

With the absence of a national religion, spontaneous shrines soon emerged at the working sites where many first responders lost their lives, and photos of lost relatives were posted all over the city. Everyone was in deep mourning. The nearby Trinity Church opened its doors and became a staging site for all the volunteers who very soon began their work of searching through the rubble for possible survivors or remains. Both civic leaders and ordinary citizens seemed to be motivated by the impulse to maintain the normal routines of daily life as a way of signaling to the enemy that their terror had failed to break the spirit of Americans. Thus the collective resolve to return to the normality of daily life as quickly as possible provided the necessary motivation to do something other than watch the repetitive streaming of the event on television news channels.

The citizenry was comforted by the extraordinary outpouring of sympathy and material assistance from around the world. The relatively rapid actions of clearing the site known as Ground Zero, the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, deliberations about designing a memorial, rebuilding the towers, and devising a method to administer the Victims Compensation Fund all combined in building hope for the future.

Individuals and communities that have experienced little or no hardship take good fortune for granted. Consequently, when they face suffering, they have virtually no coping resources on which to rely. They then must turn for comfort and hope to those who have experienced similar life-and-death struggles. Those resources may be selected parts of sacred literature, music, or the personal visitations, prayers, and testimonies of compassionate souls. All such ministries of grace help the process of enabling hope when and where it is most needed.

PETER J. PARIS



# First Sunday in Lent

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Deuteronomy 26:1–11

Psalms 91:1–2, 9–16

Romans 10:8b–13

Luke 4:1–13

## Deuteronomy 26:1–11

<sup>1</sup>When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, <sup>2</sup>you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. <sup>3</sup>You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” <sup>4</sup>When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, <sup>5</sup>you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. <sup>6</sup>When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, <sup>7</sup>we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup>The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup>and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup>So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup>Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Throughout the Pentateuch, sacred story and law are closely interwoven. After the primordial havoc of the flood, Noah emerges from the ark to build an altar; his ritual offering secures a commitment from God never again to destroy every living creature (Gen. 8:20–22). When the Israelites struggle their way through the wilderness to Sinai, they consecrate themselves (Exod. 19:10–15) to meet a dangerous Lawgiver who descends upon the mountain in thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, with “a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (vv. 16–25). The magnificent remembrance literature of Deuteronomy offers a theological “history” of ancient Israel rich with ritual and juridical practices, forming

a people whose polity and cultic observance are narrated as the core of covenantal relation.

In Deuteronomy 26, the offering of firstfruits is grounded in a larger narrative that claims God has ordained the conquest of Canaan by Israel. The territory on the far side of the Jordan is described not as the home of the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 7:1; cf. 20:17), but as “the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (26:1–3). The Israelites are to become sovereign over this territory through extermination or subjugation of the indigenous inhabitants—the project, literally and rhetorically, of the book of Joshua. The Christian preacher should be mindful of the three verses preceding our passage.

Anomalous in a context of case laws about internecine disputes and economic equity, these verses just prior to our lection (25:17–19) serve to fan enmity against a hated antagonist of Israel. Israel is exhorted never to forget the savage attack they suffered at the hands of the Amalekites, indigenes portrayed as scurrilous (“undeterred by the fear of God,” v. 18 NJPS) in their assault on Israelites “famished and weary.” The image of Amalek ruthlessly picking off the weak and those “who lagged behind” (v. 18) may be meant to evoke the predatory Arabian wolf or lion, a rhetorical move that would surely have catalyzed a fearful and aggressive response in the implied audience. While rhetoric about obliterating Canaanites is not foregrounded in our passage as such, the larger conquest narrative in which 26:1–11 is embedded must be handled with care by the preacher.

The Talmud tractate dealing with firstfruits, *Bikkurim*, discusses legal classifications of various “seed” offerings, who may bring the offering, and who should say the declaration. From other citations in rabbinic literature, we may surmise that the ritual of offering firstfruits was richly resonant for ancient Jewish worshipers. Jeffrey Tigay notes that the Dead Sea scroll known as the Temple Scroll (11QT) “prescribes that the first barley, wheat, wine, and oil be brought on different dates, at fifty-day intervals,” and that, according to *Bikkurim*, “in the late Second Temple period farmers . . . would come in groups made up of people from towns in the same region. They traveled in a festive procession, led by a flute player and an ox with gilded horns and an olive wreath, and were welcomed by officials outside Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup>

## A Sign unto This Nation

The Lord has made me a sign unto this nation, an’ I go round a’testifyin’, an’ showin’ their sins agin my people. My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa’n’t goin’ to keep nothin’ of Egypt on me, an’ so I went to the Lord an’ asked him to give me a new name. An’ the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an’ down the land, showin’ the people their sins, an’ bein’ a sign unto them. Afterword I told the Lord I wanted another name, ‘cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the Truth to the people. . . . I journeys round to camp meetin’s, an’ wherever folks is, an’ I sets up my banner, an’ then I sings, an’ then folks always come up round me, an’ then I preaches to ‘em. I tells ‘em about Jesus, an’ I tells ‘em about the sins of this people.

Sojourner Truth, “The Lord Has Made Me a Sign,” in *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 11 (April 1863), 473, 478.

In Deuteronomy 26:5, the unusual way of describing Israel’s origin, “My father was a wandering Aramean” (*’arammi ’oved ’avi*), has drawn scholarly attention for many centuries. Both the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua narrate “Israel” as a group that came as landless outsiders to the territory on which they settle. The ritual declaration in the firstfruits ceremony inscribes that foreignness via the demonym “Aramean,” one from the region of Aram<sup>2</sup> in what has become modern-day Syria and southeastern Turkey. The modifier *’oved* may be translated as “wandering,” but we should not imagine a purposeless traversing of terrain. The term could signify a journey or, alternatively, the nomadic or seminomadic movement of agriculturalists pasturing herds over great distances. Other meanings using that Hebrew root include losing one’s way, going astray, and being a fugitive. Thus the semantic possibilities range from the traditional NRSV version to the striking formulation of Louis Stulman: “My father was a Syrian refugee.” As Stulman observes, “The confession . . . refuses to suppress language of loss, trauma,

1. Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 239.

2. The Arameans were not a unified people but, rather, a diverse group of tribes and states spread across the Levant and southern Mesopotamia. See K. Lawson Younger Jr., “Aram and the Arameans,” in *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2016), 229–65.

and marginality. Instead it makes the nation's hardships part of its public narrative."<sup>3</sup>

Who, then, is meant by "my father" (*'avi*)? Abraham could be the referent, as the originary ancestor of Israel; he is said to have come from Aram-naharaim, a region of Haran (see Gen. 11:31; 24:4, 10), and upon arriving in Canaan, he goes immediately down into Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20). Jacob is also a strong possibility, especially if we read "Jacob" as signifying both the patriarch and his kinship group. Conflict with his brother Esau drives Jacob away from the family to his maternal uncle Laban Paddan-aram (Gen. 28–31); see the NJPS translation, "My father was a fugitive Aramean," and Hosea 12:12, "Jacob fled to the land of Aram; there Israel served for a wife, and for a wife he guarded sheep." Many years later, Jacob's son Joseph is betrayed by his brothers, taken by force to Egypt, and imprisoned, later growing politically powerful. The household of Jacob eventually joins Joseph in Egypt; the descriptor "few in number" (*bimte ma'at*, Deut. 26:5) is congruent with an earlier note that seventy persons from the household of Jacob went down to Egypt (Gen. 46:27).

The liturgical recital continues with the narrative thread of the Joseph story: "he became a great nation, mighty and populous," then Egyptian oppression intensified against the Israelites, and "the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" (Deut.

26:8). The description of the land of Canaan as a "land flowing with milk and honey" (v. 9) underlines the debt that Israel owes to their redeeming God, not only for their rescue from slavery, but for blessing them with agricultural bounty. Four occurrences of the phrase "land flowing with milk and honey" in Exodus are explicitly connected to the list of Canaanite indigenes whom Israel has been commanded to displace (see Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:2–3). Thus even the trope of abundant land cannot be separated from slaughter. Again, the contemporary preacher must consider this liturgical recital with attentiveness to the dark undertones of that larger narrative.

Our passage offers a notable turn to direct address of God in verse 10: "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." In continuity with ancestral tradition, the prayerful worshiper makes an offering to God from the abundance that God has graciously bestowed. Rejoicing is the appropriate response of the whole community to God's goodness (v. 11). The landless Levite and stranger (*ger*) are to be included in the jubilant celebration, something that demonstrates care for those who remain vulnerable in this community. Israel thus claims its identity ritually as a people sustained by God's goodness long ago, aware of God's continuing blessings, and mandated by covenant obligation to continue to care for those in need.

CAROLYN J. SHARP

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

First, for a reality check about the distance between us and Deuteronomy, see Deuteronomy 25:5–12. The insistence about "firstfruits" in today's lectionary reading may feel more familiar than repulsive verses that dictate merciless cutting off of women's hands, and in sharp contrast to those verses, it is a teaching to be affirmed. But the "firstfruits" call is also profoundly distant from predominant modern Western understanding. For today it is natural to think it reasonable and responsible to

give not the firstfruits of our labor—which we think of without qualification as *ours*—but to give from the excess of our wealth (see in this regard Jesus' evaluation of giving from excess in the story of the widow's mite: Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4). For predominant understanding, giving is admirable because we are going above and beyond any reasonable norm insofar as we are willing to give to others what is, after all, rightly *ours*, from *our* land, *our* labor, *our* talents. To give not from abundance but from

3. See Louis Stulman, "My Father Was a Syrian Refugee," *Journal for Preachers* 40 (2016): 9–14.

firstfruits, by contrast, marks a radically contrary orientation, for it concretely acknowledges all we possess belongs first of all to God. Nothing is first of all *ours*. We give or possess only what we have already been given (Deut. 26:10).

We can think that what is ours is ours, privately, exclusively, firstly ours, because modern Western thought understands the relationship between self and world very differently from Deuteronomy. The modern Western self is conceived as existing first as the discrete, atomistic “I,” whose natural, foremost concerns are for personal survival, security, power, and flourishing in a war of all against all. The modern Western ethical and political emphasis upon “rights” is anchored in this picture of self and world, and modern ethics and politics are wholly anchored in the natural rights of individual I’s. Smart individuals will pursue their *enlightened* self-interest, but modern thought never escapes the horizon of self-interest. Enlightened self-interest leads people to organize themselves into civil orders (e.g., families, tribes, city-states, nation-states, transnational legal structures) in order to secure degrees of power that far outstrip the potential of any individual. Of course, the selfish motivational structure remains intact, so there is ceaseless struggle both among individuals within each collective and also among collectives in the war of all against all.

Times of greed, when one individual or collective concludes they possess or can successfully seize disproportionate power over others, are ripe for tyrants, tyranny, and oppression. Times of scarcity, when fearful, desperate individuals or collectives conclude there is, for instance, not enough food, water, or treasure to allow for the flourishing or survival of all, are ripe for sectarian intolerance and ethnic cleansing. Dynamics of greed and of scarcity can be mutually reinforcing—most obviously when tyrants leverage others’ fear about survival in order to motivate sectarian intolerance and violence (all to the advantage of the tyranny).

Modern ethical and political understanding is extraordinarily vulnerable to these dynamics, for tyrants or sectarians have typically concluded their actions are indeed wholly consistent with their own enlightened self-interest; so for modern rationality the only counter to

greed and tyranny is martial resistance by the oppressed. Notably, in a modern understanding, the oppressed never resist out of commitment to what is loving, just, or good, but out of commitment to their own self-interest (in stark contrast to Amos or Isaiah, or modern prophets like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Gustavo Gutiérrez). The modern picture is abetted by unqualified Darwinian accounts of motivational dynamics, where the self-interest/enlightened self-interest either/or is described in terms of selfish and cooperative genes (more accurately, parasitic and symbiotic interactions), with all dynamics ultimately subservient to the rule of survival of the fittest (I wholly affirm evolutionary theory delimited within the sphere of science, but not, as in this case, when asserted as an unqualified metaphysic/religion).

What drops out entirely in modern Western understanding is conceptual space for any affirmation of the loving, good, or just. This trivializes the protest of the oppressed by stripping it of any moral dimension (for they too are understood to be wholly motivated by self-interest). It also serves as a salve to the dominant who are acting to preserve their privilege, for on this account they are, after all, only doing what is natural, what anyone in their position would do. Of course, insofar as this understanding of reality holds sway, the oppressed themselves are terribly well prepared to replicate the oppression they have experienced insofar as they gain power; so the vicious wheel of history rolls on in an unending war of all against all (this is precisely the dynamic described and repeatedly decried in the Deuteronomistic History).

The reality of the power of self-centered human motivation has been recognized for millennia. New in modernity is the contention that this story is not only true, but that it is exhaustively true, that all appeals to the call of God, to the call of love and justice, are confused. This passage, by contrast, is not only exquisitely sensitive to all the self-interested dynamics that modernity baptizes as “natural.” It proclaims that we are not first of all isolated selves with individual rights; we are first of all children of God, brothers and sisters who have only what we have first received, and who in turn should desire to give as we have been given (in accord

with standard triage protocols, with paramount concern/effort for those in the greatest need).

Today's text is exquisitely sensitive to the power of the natural in the modern, selfish sense. Ideas of possessing the "promised land" and of being God's "chosen people," combined with memories of having been oppressed in Egypt and also "natural" tendencies to self-aggrandizement and self-centeredness, threatened to lead (and, as the prophets lamented, did lead) the Israelites to see themselves as specially favored, to forget other peoples who already lived on the "promised land," to nativist intolerance of ethnic diversity, to sectarian ritual purity, and to forget the poor and vulnerable (it may be worth adding Deuteronomy 26:12 to the reading with regard to this last concern).

The text struggles against these diverse threats by anchoring Israelite identity in an immigrant, a "wandering Aramean"; by reminding the Israelites that they were themselves poor, marginalized, oppressed strangers in a strange land; and by urging them to share their bounty "together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you" (so, no ritual or ethnic sectarianism; all

attend to the basic needs of and break bread with all). This vision is not unrealistically utopian. This is not a classless society. It is built upon and so inescapably embodies the scars of strife (e.g., it includes "aliens"). However, it is a society whose people remember their own forced migration and slavery, a society where diverse peoples are affirmed in their diversity but where all are called to recognize a shared indebtedness to God; and so it is a society in which both diverse identities and common responsibilities to one another are affirmed. In accord with this recognition that firstfruits belong to God, Deuteronomy is saying that Israelite society (and any society) is good and faithful insofar as it is dedicated first and foremost to ensuring a basic standard of living for all, regardless of religious, racial, or ethnic identity. It means that good people and good societies will struggle to ensure *first and foremost, before any toleration of personal excess*, that national and international laws will be structured so that the basic needs of all—education, health care, food, clothing, and personal/familial security—will be met.

WILLIAM GREENWAY

## First Sunday in Lent

### Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16

<sup>1</sup>You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

<sup>2</sup>will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.”

.....

<sup>9</sup>Because you have made the LORD your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling place,

<sup>10</sup>no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.

<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

<sup>14</sup>Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.

<sup>15</sup>When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honor them.

<sup>16</sup>With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

### Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

The Revised Common Lectionary is designed in such a way that the lesson from the Psalter is normally to be understood as a response to the Old Testament lesson; however, this principle of construction is not immediately obvious in the case of Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 and its relationship with Deuteronomy 26:1–11. Rather, the more obvious connection is between Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 and the Gospel lesson, Luke 4:1–13, in which verses 10–11 contains a quotation of Psalm 91:11–12. His quotation is puzzling, because it is the devil who is quoting Psalm 91! On the one hand, as a career-long Psalms scholar, I am pleased to see that the Psalms have such wide currency that even the devil can quote them. On the other hand, when the devil quotes the Psalms, it should alert us to the fact

that Scripture in general can be misinterpreted; more particularly, the assurance that the Psalms offer their readers can be misconstrued.

From a form-critical perspective, Psalm 91 is universally categorized as a psalm of confidence/trust/assurance; and it contains a threefold occurrence of one of the Psalter’s key words in the vocabulary of the faithful: “refuge” (vv. 2, 4, 9; see Pss. 2:12; 5:11; 7:1; 11:1; and often). Furthermore, the assurance that the psalmist articulates and claims in the midst of overwhelming danger and opposition (see vv. 3–7, 13) is given unique emphasis by the fact that Psalm 91 concludes with a divine speech in verses 14–16. The speech contains seven first-person verbs; and because seven is the biblical number of wholeness or completeness, this syntactical construction

reinforces the comprehensiveness of the promise of divine help and protection. Plus, in the midst of the seven verbs there is a verbless clause that stands out by way of its position and differing syntax: “I will be with them in trouble” (v. 15).

Why does Jesus reject the promise of divine protection and deliverance, interpreting the quotation of Psalm 91:11–12 by the devil as a test (Luke 4:12)? As always, context is crucial. For Jesus to claim the assurance of Psalm 91:11–12 in this context would have been self-serving. In another context, later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will claim and embrace the assurance that the Psalms offer. This latter context is a cross, from which Jesus says, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46; see Ps. 31:5).

This complex of connections provides timely and important instruction for the First Sunday in Lent. In particular, Jesus’ rejection of the assurance of Psalm 91:11–12 at the beginning of Luke is a reminder that the cross is the destination of Jesus’ journey throughout the Gospel. Jesus’ journey will not be devoid of opposition and suffering, as the devil suggests might be possible. Rather, Jesus will claim divine deliverance and protection “in trouble” (Ps. 91:15). Herein may lie instruction for our own Lenten journeys. It is entirely possible for our Lenten disciplines, for instance, to become self-serving rather than cross-bearing (see Isa. 58:1–12, the Old Testament lesson for Ash Wednesday).

As Albert Camus once suggested, it seems that some Christians are willing to ascend a cross, only to be seen from a greater distance! The things we give up for Lent can become sources of pride that call attention to ourselves, rather than practices of penitence and humility. As demonstrated in Luke 4, it might even be possible to claim the assurance of Psalm 91

in an attempt to avoid suffering, rather than embracing the suffering that derives from serving God faithfully and enacting God’s love in the world, as Jesus did. This is a temptation to be avoided, as Jesus avoided it.

If there is a connection between Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16 and Deuteronomy 26:1–11, the clue may be the Hebrew word translated “dwelling place” (Ps. 91:9). It also occurs in the first verse of Psalm 90, which opens Book IV of the Psalter; this verse seems to offer a response to the crisis of exile that is articulated in the conclusion of Psalm 89. The exile represented a sort of renewed landlessness, and Psalms 90–91 respond by suggesting that the true home of the people of God is not the land; rather, it is God’s own self. The true assurance is to make “the Most High your dwelling place” (Ps. 91:9).

While Deuteronomy 26 anticipates entry into the land, the final chapter of the Pentateuch severs this anticipation from the narrative account of entry into the land in the book of Joshua. The canonical effect is to conclude the Pentateuch—the Torah, the first and most authoritative division of the Jewish canon—with the people of God still outside the land. This seems odd, but it almost certainly reflects the crisis of exile and the enduring situation of the people of God in the postexilic era; that is, they would never fully possess and control their land again. That was the bad news, but the good news was that God would be their “dwelling place in all generations” (Ps. 90:1; see 91:9).

That assurance is still good news. It does not promise an easy or carefree existence, but it offers the assurance that empowered Jesus, and empowers us, to bear the cross as we follow Jesus (see Luke 9:23).

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

## First Sunday in Lent

### Romans 10:8b–13

<sup>8b</sup>“The word is near you,  
on your lips and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); <sup>9</sup>because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup>For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. <sup>11</sup>The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” <sup>12</sup>For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. <sup>13</sup>For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

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

Paul is writing to people he has never met. When he wrote to the Thessalonians, Philipians, Corinthians, and Galatians, he knew people in those communities and called some of them by name. He had been to those cities and regions, but he has never been to Rome. In the first chapter he voiced his fervent hope to “at last succeed in coming to you” (Rom. 1:10). He repeats that hope near the end of his letter, planning to stop in Rome on his way to Spain (15:23–24). In this letter Paul does not address the kinds of divisions that plagued the community in Corinth, but he is concerned about relationships between Gentiles and Jews. “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek,” he proclaims, “the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him” (10:12). Paul had written similar words in his Letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:28). In Romans, Paul is working out what that bold proclamation means—not only for the Romans, but also for him. While affirming that Gentiles have a place within the “body of Christ,” he is equally passionate to show that God’s promise to Israel has not been revoked.

The reading for this First Sunday in Lent is part of Paul’s program to affirm God’s promise and generosity to *both* Gentiles and Jews. In verse 8b, Paul is quoting the conclusion of a

text from Deuteronomy 30: “‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).” He wants his readers to trust God’s closeness, but we do not get the full impact of this conclusion unless we know what it is concluding! Beginning in 10:6 Paul quotes the questions that the conclusion answers. He paraphrases Deuteronomy 30:12–13, bringing Christ into the text: “‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” Paul makes a common Jewish exegetical move, using “that is” to bring Christ into the text. He also makes an interpretive turn when he writes, “Who will descend *into the abyss*?” (italics added). The Deuteronomy text asks, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us?” (Deut. 30:13). Paul changes the geographical image of crossing the sea to give a picture of Christ rising from the abyss of death.

Is Paul writing primarily to Jews? We might assume so because half of the verses in today’s passage are from Hebrew Scriptures (Deut. 30:14 in 10:8b; Isa. 28:16 in 10:11; and Joel 2:32 in 10:13). If he is not writing to Jews, why quote Hebrew Scripture? In the salutation to his letter Paul seems to be writing primarily to Gentiles (Rom. 1:5–6, 13). Paul is a devoted follower



of Christ, a believer in the crucified and risen Son of God. Yet Paul remains a Jew:

Paul saw himself wholly within Judaism, as one who was assigned a special role in the restoration of Israel and the nations (Rom 11.1–15; Gal 1.13–16). He was a reformer, one who sought to redress what he believed to be an oversight (his own, formerly, and that of his fellow Jews, still); he was not the founder of a new religion, even if things later turned out otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

When Paul quotes verses from Hebrew Scripture in today's reading, he is writing as someone shaped by those texts. These words are in his body and in his bones. For Paul, this Scripture is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The text appointed for this Sunday comes right in the middle of chapters 9 to 11. These three chapters form a little book within the larger book of Romans. Paul begins this book-within-a-book declaring, "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying . . ." (9:1a), and ends this section with what sounds like a conclusion: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen" (11:36). In the verses between 9:1 and 11:36, Paul struggles with the reality that some Israelites (his usual word for the Jews) have not come to believe in Christ. This is painful for Paul, for as he says, they are "my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (9:3b). Paul is a Jew who has come to believe that Jesus Christ is the closeness of God.

Deuteronomy 30 provides the foundation for what he says next. Paul picks up two key phrases in the Deuteronomy text: "on your lips" and "in your heart." The next two verses emphasize these two words: "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). This is a powerful—and dangerous—proclamation to the believers in Rome. To say Jesus is Lord was treason, for the emperor

of Rome was lord. It would be one thing to speak that confession in a far-flung corner of the empire, but to make that confession in the city of Rome was a different matter. (Hopefully, Paul's letter would not fall into the wrong hands.) In the following verse Paul continues to play on the Deuteronomy text in a slightly different way: "For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" (10:10). Heart (*kardia*) and lips/mouth (*stoma*) are connected. Heart is internal; lips and mouth are external.<sup>2</sup> There must be congruence between the two. What we say with our lips should come from what we believe in our hearts.

There is a connection here with the Gospel reading for this Sunday. In Luke's temptation story Jesus does what Paul does in Romans; he quotes Deuteronomy. In Jesus' case the words of Deuteronomy provide his defense against every temptation of the devil (Luke 4:1–12). Jesus says nothing on his own, but trusts that God's word is near him, in his heart and on his lips. It is as though Jesus reaches up and touches an invisible *mezuzah* with the text of Deuteronomy inside. The devil also quotes Scripture. He quotes verses from Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus to jump from the temple spire (Luke 4:10–11), but the devil's lips do not match what is in his heart. Jesus and Paul, both Jews, trust that God's word is near, in their hearts and on their lips.

In Romans, the lectionary reading closes with a quote from Joel: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (10:13). For Joel, "the Lord" in that sentence was not Jesus, but Paul sees Jesus there. He longs for all his Jewish kin to see Jesus there too, and to confess Jesus as Lord. However, if that does not happen, Paul wants believers in Rome to know that God's promise to Israel remains: "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew" (11:2). Paul wants those of us who read his letter now to know that too.

BARBARA K. LUNDBLAD

1. Mark D. Nanos, "Paul and Judaism," in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 552.

2. Audrey West, "Commentary on Romans 10:8b–3," in Working Preacher—Preaching This Week. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preachings.aspx?commentary\\_id=2774](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preachings.aspx?commentary_id=2774).

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

This passage from Romans comes to us on the First Sunday in Lent. For those who did not attend Ash Wednesday services, today's lessons serve as the invitation to the observance of Lent, when repentance and reconciliation, approached through spiritual discipline and austerity, take center stage in Christian life.

We enter the middle of a conversation in Romans, or at least, a discourse by Paul that presumes knowledge of some of the fledgling church's challenges in Rome. Rome is a multi-ethnic, religiously diverse population center. Followers of Christ in Rome include those born into both Jewish and Greco-Roman religious traditions. Having grappled with the question of how Greek and Jewish believers can share in Christian community in previous letters, Paul jumps in with both feet, offering a full-fledged defense of the possibility of an ethnically diverse church and approaches to following Christ that draw on the strengths of multiple religious traditions. Jews and Greeks are religiously distinctive, but also are ethnic, cultural peoples with different histories, social locations, and relationships to empire. Paul affirms that God's generosity is not limited by a particular way of expressing faith. God is large enough to span our ways of expressing our allegiance and the varying shapes of our hearts.

The resonances will be many for US churches that find themselves in diverse or changing communities. As fewer churches find themselves easily recruiting new members of the same ethnic, denominational, and linguistic background as longtime members, increasing numbers of congregations must ask the question of how diverse practices and customs can come together in one church. Especially in the historic denominations, many congregations struggle to see beyond the way things have always been done. This reading invites longtime members to imagine that new people from outside their cultural and religious worlds might bring new gifts, express faith in new ways. Paul points to the unity of Christ and the generosity of God as starting points for this project. This lesson suggests that the tests of what unite us

will be simple ones, ones that will have little to do with liturgical colors, or the ordering of prayers, or the placement of candles. We may sing in different languages, to different familiar melodies, but we will offer what is on our lips and on our hearts.

The reading begins with the word: "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (Rom. 10:8b). The word of faith, in Paul's view, has power to unite a diversity of practice and background. It is not complicated or far off (the rather complex theological argument Paul has undertaken in the Letter to the Romans thus far notwithstanding). The reference to the nearness of the word suggests both a connection to Jewish tradition and accessibility to those with no prior experience of the God of Israel. For those versed in Hebrew Scripture, a word that is near, written on the lips and the heart, calls to mind Deuteronomy 11:18 and Jeremiah 31:33. For those unfamiliar with God's promises through the covenant with Israel, a word that is near and accessible invites fullness of participation. Depth of knowledge and tradition enriches faith, but is not a prerequisite.

The preacher calling her or his congregation to the observance of a holy Lent might well make good use of both "insider" and "outsider" aspects of this claim about the word of faith. It is a chance to root Christian belief in the covenant at Sinai, while at the same time inviting those who are new to the faith into a life of practice and proclamation, equally solid on the ground of their own relationship with the Holy One as those who have more years of faith to their credit.

Paul calls upon the church in Rome to "confess with your lips and believe in your heart." Just as there are insiders and outsiders to the history of God's relationship with Israel, there are internal and external aspects to the faith. In Paul's view, both are required. It is not enough to pay lip service, but neither is the sort of private and personal faith that never reaches the point of public confession adequate to the challenge of following Christ.

So what must we confess and believe? Paul here identifies Jesus' lordship and resurrection

as the centers of the gospel narrative. In keeping with Paul's consistent emphasis on the centrality of the cross, this suggests that the hearer must both believe and show forth a willingness to sacrifice everything. Paul emphasizes humility, even humiliation. We must be willing to give up our pride and our good standing in the eyes of others when we are called into the service of Christ. The power to risk humiliation comes in the news of the resurrection. To confess resurrection is to see beyond the visible end of the story, to believe in the triumph of love, and to embrace a life beyond fear (even when we are terrified). Naming collective and personal fears—such as loss of power, status, safety, or identity—that might hold back the confessions of Christians in your particular context may help to make this connection for the listener.

To confess Jesus as Lord is to give up dreams of a worldly and powerful king as our Messiah. Paul uses language that sets Christ in parallel with Caesar and then firmly establishes Christ's precedence. To confess Jesus as Lord is to accept that God has chosen an impoverished Southwest Asian man from a backwater of the Roman Empire to be our savior. This passage begs us to imagine that God might be doing something equally unexpected, even deeply countercultural, in our own day. When we claim a Lord who is not Caesar, what do we risk? What do we give up? Which principalities and powers have a claim on our allegiance? What will happen to that allegiance if we have only one Lord, one leader who is worthy of following? If we are called to public expression of the humiliation of the cross, with whom must

we stand? How will our respectability—often so dear to faithful church folk—be challenged? What might we lose?

In a time of political polarization, this reading from Romans offers a way beyond partisan politics. Whatever our ideal political leader may look like, the call to confess one Lord takes Christians beyond the political divides of the moment, serving as a powerful reminder that no political leader can be our Messiah. This frees the church to speak directly to love for God and neighbor, to forgiveness and to the belovedness of all God's people, values with the potential to unite us when politics divides us.

The reading ends with the affirmation of God's generosity and the universality of the gospel promise. There is hope for all of our hearts of stone. Our willingness to risk all, to take up the cross for love, to publicly offer our lives as an offering and sacrifice to God will make us one church, one community of believers. The creative preacher may start with the gathered community as a safe setting in which to hone the practice of love and forgiveness, then point the faithful out the doors and into their families, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and communities to put those basic Christian gifts to work. Paul's extravagant claim on universality is large enough to push Christ's followers into relationships beyond the walls of the church and beyond the bounds of denomination. This reading frames the Lenten invitation to turn toward the cross as one of freedom—freedom to love fearlessly and to live beyond the boundaries we and the world around us so often impose.

ANNA B. OLSON

## First Sunday in Lent

### Luke 4:1–13

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,’

<sup>11</sup>and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

### Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The temptation story of Jesus appears only in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 1:12–13; Matt. 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13), not in the Gospel of John. Yet each Synoptic version is unique in its own way. Mark’s account is the shortest, providing only a two-verse summary of the story. Although many Christians associate the dialogue between Jesus and the devil with the temptation account, it is present only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Furthermore, while the devil’s three challenges to Jesus are essentially the same in Matthew and Luke, their order and the language used are different.

In terms of Lent, Jesus’ temptation functions as the basic biblical story and rationale for the forty days leading up to Easter (six and a

half weeks, not counting Sundays). This First Sunday in Lent is an invitation for Christians willingly to follow Jesus into the wilderness. Followers subject themselves to the kind of self-scrutiny and testing that unveils each person’s deepest hopes as well as the darkest and most self-serving outcomes of their greatest capacities, gifts, and callings. Consequently, Luke’s opening scene is particularly striking, since Luke is the only Gospel to portray Jesus in the wilderness being “led by the Spirit.” Mark and Matthew’s accounts depict the Spirit driving or leading Jesus into wilderness, but not accompanying him during his adventures there (Luke 4:1; Mark 1:12; Matt. 4:1). From Luke’s perspective, Jesus is escorted through the wilderness

and is not alone during his period of encounter, testing, and moderation.

The description of being led by God's spirit "in the wilderness" echoes the story of Israel's divinely orchestrated wilderness venture after their liberation from Egypt: "So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt" (Exod. 13:18). God chooses the wilderness setting in which to reconstitute Israel as the people of God. It is the place of God's assured and responsive presence (Exod. 16:9–10) as well as undeserved provision (Exod. 16:11–17). Moreover, the wilderness is the space in which God establishes new ordinances, like Sabbath, that summon Israel to reflect on who God is for the community and who the community is to God (Exod. 16:23, 25–26, 29–30; 20:8–11; 31:13–17).

In the book of Exodus, the wilderness is not just the place of salvation and confirmation of Israel's status as God's people; it is also a venue that generates worry and doubt. Here the community faces its mortality and finitude. Israel experiences collective misgivings about its fate and confronts the uncertainty that often accompanies a new and untold future (Exod. 14:11–12; 16:1–3). Moreover, the wilderness is the place where Israel waits for the manifestation of Moses' prophetic and law-giving work. Moses fasted for forty days while in the presence of God, awaiting God's commandments (Exod. 24:18–25:1; cf. 34:28). In similar fashion, the Gospel of Luke describes Jesus' stint in the wilderness as forty days without food, in which he rehearses the commandments of God as a counter to the devil's enticements. Jesus replies to the devil's lures by restating three Torah pronouncements: (1) "One does not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4; Deut. 8:3b); (2) "worship the Lord your God and serve God only" (Luke 4:8; Deut. 6:13); (3) and "do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Luke 4:12; Deut. 6:16; Isa. 7:12). In so doing, Luke depicts Jesus as both a teacher of the Law and observant practitioner who can reinterpret it in light of the current challenge confronting him. As such, the wilderness in Luke becomes a place of responsive and contextual theological discourse.

Up until Luke 4:1, the wilderness location in the Gospel of Luke represented the work of John the Baptist. The wilderness is named as the site of John's prophetic preparation and witness (Luke 1:80; 3:2, 4; cf. 7:24). After the temptation, however, the wilderness becomes a space that Jesus traverses; and it is not the site of witness and prophecy. Rather, the wilderness becomes the site of Jesus' prayerful reprieves: "But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray" (Luke 5:16; cf. 4:42). The wilderness becomes a sanctuary for God's agent, providing an escape for rejuvenation and assurance. In Psalm 91:9–11, the psalmist remarks, "Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent." Even the psalmist's confidence about the work of angels in protecting and providing for God's agent (Ps. 91:11–12) is reminiscent of Luke 4 when Jesus responds to the devil's second challenge (Luke 4:9–11).

Perhaps most striking is the difference between Luke and Matthew's versions of the dialogue between Jesus and the devil. The order of temptations in Matthew is (1) turn stones to bread, (2) throw oneself down from the pinnacle of the temple in "the holy city" (4:5), and (3) worship the devil in exchange for imperial rule. In contrast, Luke's order and language are different. The Lukan order is (1) turn this stone to a loaf of bread, (2) worship the devil in exchange for his sovereign authority, and (3) throw oneself down from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem.

Reading Luke's account against Matthew's alone could suggest that the explicit reference to "Jerusalem," as opposed to the alias "holy city," is an incidental variant. Within the larger storyline of the Gospel of Luke (and even the book of Acts), however, the image of Jerusalem is weighty. After all, the opening scene of the Gospel of Luke places readers in the temple with Zechariah, who receives the prophecy of John the Baptist's birth (Luke 1:8). In Luke 2, baby Jesus is presented in the temple, and the prophets Simeon and Anna proclaim his messianic work publicly (Luke 2:22–38). In fact, the Gospel of Luke is so obsessed with

Jerusalem's role in Jesus' story that it spends an entire ten chapters narrating his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:28). This travel narrative is unique to the Gospel of Luke because it expands a journey that occurs in one verse in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 10:1; cf. 9:33). Not only does Luke open with a series of prophetic moments in the Jerusalem temple and spend a large part of its story building anticipation for what will happen in Jerusalem at Jesus' death. The Gospel also closes with readers watching the disciples return to Jerusalem to celebrate Christ's resurrection and ascension (Luke 24:52–53).

Together, the images of the wilderness and Jerusalem in Luke's temptation story provide a rich backdrop for reflection during the Lenten season. Lent is the time Christians purposely give our faith permission to "work on us." We

willingly subject ourselves to the pain of fitting into a daily mold or way of being we do not routinely live out, in order to encounter ourselves in new ways and wrestle with our sense of authority and insignificance, no matter how misguided. We deny ourselves the luxuries and conveniences of our surroundings, so we can remember God's provision, protection, and sanctuary for others and ourselves. In addition, we remember that just as Jerusalem is a magnetic landmark in Luke, our confession that Jesus is the Christ who has come to bring justice and salvation is our magnetic landmark of faith. It compels us to take seriously this time of penance so that we can become more patient, equitable, and altruistic in a world obsessed with instant remedies, dominance, and self-glorification.

SHIVELY T. J. SMITH

## Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Lent commences with combat between Jesus and the devil. Is this devil real? Baudelaire coined the idea that "the devil's greatest wile is to convince you he does not exist." Thomas Merton, taking the opposite approach, noticed Christians who attribute all manner of things to Satan and concluded that what Satan wants mostly is attention. We should not imagine a red guy with horns and a pitchfork. Painters like Titian and Tintoretto captured the sense of it when they portrayed the devil as a strikingly handsome, innocent-looking young man. C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* helps us understand that what is not of God tries so very hard to undo us. There is evil, and it is intensely personal.

Consider the terrain: from Jericho, tourists lift their gaze westward and see the Mount of Temptation. An ancient monastery, to mark the memory of Jesus' forty-day trial, is carved into the cliffs. It is one thing for Christians to build a church where a healing miracle or the resurrection happened; but why venture out to the place Satan chose to assault Jesus?

This wilderness is not a vast expanse of sand with the occasional cactus or tumbleweed.

Instead, we see a rocky, daunting zone of cliffs and caves, the haunt of wild beasts. People avoided the place, believing demons and evil spirits ranged there, knowing that predators and brigands lurked there.

Jesus chose to go there—or, as Luke strangely tells us, was led there by the Spirit. How silly are we to think that if the Spirit leads, it will be to a smooth, comfortable, pleasant place. The Spirit that leads us led Jesus into peril.

In Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, every time young Jesus reached out for pleasure, "ten claws nailed themselves into his head and two frenzied wings beat above him, tightly covering his temples. He shrieked and fell down on his face." His mother pleaded with a rabbi (who knew how to drive out demons) to help. The rabbi shook his head. "Mary, your boy isn't being tormented by a devil; it's not a devil, it's God—so what can I do?" "Is there no cure?" the wretched mother asked. "It's God, I tell you. No, there is no cure." "Why does he torment him?" The old exorcist sighed but did not answer. "Why does he torment him?" the mother asked again.

“Because he loves him,” the old rabbi finally replied.<sup>1</sup>

If this story is somehow about the love between Jesus and God, we might want to rethink the rationale for reading this passage as the kickoff to Lent. A bevy of predictable sermons will be preached with the plot of “Here is how Jesus overcame temptation; go thou and do likewise.” However, the early church’s theologians, and the other good ones through the Middle Ages and Reformation, shuddered over their inability to elude the claws of the devil. It is not that we can resist just as Jesus did. No; he is our Savior precisely because he accomplished what we could never do on even our best, holiest days. Martin Luther, whose hymns frequently deal with “the prince of darkness grim,” suggested that when we are tempted by the devil, we can be encouraged by the fact that we know and are loved by the One who conquered the devil. It is not about technique, but a relationship.

Relationships are important. John Chrysostom, Luther, and many others pointed out that the devil attacks those who are lonely. So we need to surround ourselves with other Christians. Actually, if this text is not so much about us resisting temptation, but Jesus doing so in our stead, then we have to ask, how then do we, as the body of Christ, find ourselves in this story? Does the church, postmodern and increasingly isolated, find itself in a strange wilderness? What are the temptations, the tests we must undergo? Unlike Christ, we the body of Christ fail so often. In Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Son of God who rejected Satan’s offer of power is then judged by his own church, which thinks his demands are too high.

How does the church in the world cope with the tests that are about our love for God and God’s for us? We do not know how to pull off the stones-into-bread trick. We actually give a lot of bread, through food collections and soup kitchens. Jesus refused bread, preferring that metaphorical bread, God’s Word. Do we give bread without attaching the Word—God’s Word, or the words of established friendship?

Do we assuage our guilt or pad our spiritual resume by dropping off food, while never building a relationship with the hungry, who are just as lonely as we, who have plenty of food, are?

Jesus’ refusal of power might give the church pause when we think about politics in America. Do we try the Moral Majority approach and seize whatever power we can to pursue holy ends? Is there something intrinsically perverse in the very grasping for power? J. R. R. Tolkien must have had this story in the back of his mind when he conceived of that ring of power in *The Lord of the Rings*. How desperately everyone wanted the ring, including those with noble intentions—but the ring would destroy anyone who kept it, even Gandalf the wise wizard, even Frodo the humblest of the hobbits. Power is not to be pursued, but shunned and destroyed. So the church’s calling is to be as kenotic as Jesus, emptying ourselves of power, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2).

Richard Rohr found something profound here: “This second temptation is to doubt that the kingdom of God is here, because we are overwhelmed by the apparent kingdoms of business, money, the media, etc. We ‘worship’ their influence and thus give them even more. We’re so overwhelmed by the sense of evil, so overwhelmed by the kingdom of this world, it is difficult to look beyond it and see the presence of God and the power of the Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

Luke, we may recall, switches the order of the three tests, and his order makes the most theological sense. For him, the final test, the most daunting one, is the thing we have been trying all our faith-lives to do: to trust God. The devil even cites Scripture to buttress his point, reminding us of Shakespeare’s wry comment: “What damned error, but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament?” (*Merchant of Venice*, act 3, scene 2). Just because the church reads and quotes Scripture, and just because the church jabbars away about trusting God, does not mean we are in sync with what God is asking us to do in the world.

1. Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 30.

2. Richard Rohr, *The Good News according to Luke* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 100.

Luke adds his footnote: that the devil slinked away, but began right away to look for a more opportune time to pounce again. Medieval cathedrals featured gargoyles, those comical yet scary monsters, grotesque apes and pigs. Why? Were they a bit of comic relief in such serious architecture? Were they foils to highlight by contrast the beauty of God? Did they in some

way represent that persistent truth that once you have survived the harrowing cleansing of worship, your troubles are only beginning as you cross the threshold back into the world?

So Lent is no time for heroic resilience. We tremble and trust that “one little word shall fell him.”

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