

Feasting on the Word

Preaching the
Revised Common Lectionary

Year C, Volume 1

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General Editors

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Contents

vii *Publisher's Note*

viii *Series Introduction*

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

- 2 Jeremiah 33:14–16
- 8 Psalm 25:1–10
- 14 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
- 20 Luke 21:25–36

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

- 26 Malachi 3:1–4
- 32 Luke 1:68–79
- 38 Philippians 1:3–11
- 44 Luke 3:1–6

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

- 50 Zephaniah 3:14–20
- 56 Isaiah 12:2–6
- 62 Philippians 4:4–7
- 68 Luke 3:7–18

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

- 74 Micah 5:2–5a
- 80 Psalm 80:1–7
- 86 Hebrews 10:5–10
- 92 Luke 1:39–45 (46–55)

CHRISTMAS EVE

- 98 Isaiah 9:2–7
- 104 Psalm 96
- 110 Titus 2:11–14
- 116 Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

CHRISTMAS DAY

- 122 Isaiah 52:7–10
- 128 Psalm 98
- 134 Hebrews 1:1–4 (5–12)
- 140 John 1:1–14

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

- 146 1 Samuel 2:18–20, 26
- 152 Psalm 148
- 158 Colossians 3:12–17
- 164 Luke 2:41–52

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

- 170 Sirach 24:1–12
- 176 Wisdom of Solomon 10:15–21
- 182 Ephesians 1:3–14
- 188 John 1:(1–9) 10–18

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

- 194 Isaiah 60:1–6
- 200 Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
- 206 Ephesians 3:1–12
- 212 Matthew 2:1–12

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

(FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY)

- 218 Isaiah 43:1–7
- 224 Psalm 29
- 230 Acts 8:14–17
- 236 Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 242 Isaiah 62:1–5
- 248 Psalm 36:5–10
- 254 1 Corinthians 12:1–11
- 260 John 2:1–11

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 266 Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10
- 272 Psalm 19
- 278 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a
- 284 Luke 4:14–21

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 290 Jeremiah 1:4–10
- 296 Psalm 71:1–6
- 302 1 Corinthians 13:1–13
- 308 Luke 4:21–30

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 314 Isaiah 6:1–8 (9–13)
- 320 Psalm 138
- 326 1 Corinthians 15:1–11
- 332 Luke 5:1–11

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 338 Jeremiah 17:5–10
- 344 Psalm 1
- 350 1 Corinthians 15:12–20
- 356 Luke 6:17–26

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 362 Genesis 45:3–11, 15
- 368 Psalm 37:1–11, 39–40
- 374 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–50
- 380 Luke 6:27–38

EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 386 Isaiah 55:10–13
- 392 Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15
- 398 1 Corinthians 15:51–58
- 404 Luke 6:39–49

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

- 410 1 Kings 8:22–23, 41–43
- 416 Psalm 96:1–9
- 422 Galatians 1:1–12
- 428 Luke 7:1–10

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

- 434 Exodus 34:29–35
- 440 Psalm 99
- 446 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2
- 452 Luke 9:28–36 (37–43)

459 *Contributors*

463 *Scripture Index*

465 *Author Index*

Publisher's Note

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary is an ambitious project that is offered to the Christian church as a resource for preaching and teaching.

The uniqueness of this approach in providing four perspectives on each preaching occasion from the Revised Common Lectionary sets this work apart from other lectionary materials. The theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical dimensions of each biblical passage are explored with the hope that preachers will find much to inform and stimulate their preparations for preaching from this rich “feast” of materials.

This work could not have been undertaken without the deep commitments of those who have devoted countless hours to working on these tasks. Westminster John Knox Press would like to acknowledge the magnificent work of our general editors, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. They are both gifted preachers with passionate concerns for the quality of preaching. They are also wonderful colleagues who embraced this huge task with vigor, excellence, and unfailing good humor. Our debt of gratitude to Barbara and David is great.

The fine support staff, project manager Joan Murchison and compiler Mary Lynn Darden, enabled all the thousands of “pieces” of the project to come together and form this impressive series. Without their strong competence and abiding persistence, these volumes could not have emerged.

The volume editors for this series are to be thanked as well. They used their superb skills as

pastors and professors and ministers to work with writers and help craft their valuable insights into the highly useful entries that comprise this work.

The hundreds of writers who shared their expertise and insights to make this series possible are ones who deserve deep thanks indeed. They come from wide varieties of ministries. They have given their labors to provide a gift to benefit the whole church and to enrich preaching in our time.

Westminster John Knox would also like to express our appreciation to Columbia Theological Seminary for strong cooperation in enabling this work to begin and proceed. Dean of Faculty and Executive Vice President D. Cameron Murchison welcomed the project from the start and drew together everything we needed. His continuing efforts have been very valuable. President Laura S. Mendenhall has provided splendid help as well. She has made seminary resources and personnel available and encouraged us in this partnership with enthusiasm and all good grace. We thank her.

It is a joy for Westminster John Knox Press to present *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* to the church, its preachers, and its teachers. We believe rich resources can assist the church's ministries as the Word is proclaimed. We believe the varieties of insights found in these pages will nourish preachers who will “feast on the Word” and who will share its blessings with those who hear.

Westminster John Knox Press

Series Introduction

A preacher's work is never done. Teaching, offering pastoral care, leading worship, and administering congregational life are only a few of the responsibilities that can turn preaching into just one more task of pastoral ministry; yet the Sunday sermon is how the preacher ministers to most of the people most of the time. The majority of those who listen are not in crisis. They live such busy lives that few take part in the church's educational programs. They wish they had more time to reflect on their faith, but they do not. Whether the sermon is five minutes long or forty-five, it is the congregation's one opportunity to hear directly from their pastor about what life in Christ means and why it matters.

Feasting on the Word offers pastors focused resources for sermon preparation, written by companions on the way. With four different essays on each of the four biblical texts assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary, this series offers preachers sixteen different ways into the proclamation of God's Word on any given occasion. For each reading, preachers will find brief essays on the exegetical, theological, homiletical, and pastoral challenges of the text. The page layout is unusual. By setting the biblical passage at the top of the page and placing the essays beneath it, we mean to suggest the interdependence of the four approaches without granting priority to any one of them. Some readers may decide to focus on the Gospel passage, for instance, by reading all four essays provided for that text. Others may decide to look for connections between the Hebrew Bible, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle texts by reading the theological essays on each one.

Wherever they begin, preachers will find what they need in a single volume produced by writers from a wide variety of disciplines and religious traditions. These authors teach in colleges and seminaries. They lead congregations. They write scholarly books as well as columns for the local newspaper. They oversee denominations. In all of these capacities and more, they serve God's Word, joining the preacher in the ongoing challenge of bringing that Word to life.

We offer this print resource for the mainline church in full recognition that we do so in the digital

age of the emerging church. Like our page layout, this decision honors the authority of the biblical text, which thrives on the page as well as in the ear. While the twelve volumes of this series follow the pattern of the Revised Common Lectionary, each volume contains an index of biblical passages so that all preachers may make full use of its contents.

We also recognize that this new series appears in a post-9/11, post-Katrina world. For this reason, we provide no shortcuts for those committed to the proclamation of God's Word. Among preachers, there are books known as "Monday books" because they need to be read thoughtfully at least a week ahead of time. There are also "Saturday books," so called because they supply sermon ideas on short notice. The books in this series are not Saturday books. Our aim is to help preachers go deeper, not faster, in a world that is in need of saving words.

A series of this scope calls forth the gifts of a great many people. We are grateful first of all to the staff of Westminster John Knox Press: Don McKim and Jon Berquist, who conceived this project; David Dobson, who worked diligently to bring the project to completion, with publisher Marc Lewis's strong support; and Julie Tonini, who has painstakingly guided each volume through the production process. We thank President Laura Mendenhall and Dean Cameron Murchison of Columbia Theological Seminary, who made our participation in this work possible. Our editorial board is a hardworking board, without whose patient labor and good humor this series would not exist. From the start, Joan Murchison has been the brains of the operation, managing details of epic proportions with great human kindness. Mary Lynn Darden, Dilu Nicholas, Megan Hackler, John Shillingburg, and John Schuler have supported both her and us with their administrative skills.

We have been honored to work with a multitude of gifted thinkers, writers, and editors. We present these essays as their offering—and ours—to the blessed ministry of preaching.

David L. Bartlett
Barbara Brown Taylor

Feasting on the Word

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Theological Perspective

This brief essay will attend to the continuing theological significance of (1) the reality of human despair, (2) a reading of the promise in light of both the experience of exile and the practice of waiting in Advent, and (3) the collective and sociopolitical aspects of the promise.

The Reality of Human Despair. Much of the story told in Jeremiah has to do with the threat and fulfillment of the destruction of Judah and, in particular, Jerusalem. The people have been violating their covenantal relationship with God, and the subsequent Babylonian control would serve as punishment for their infidelity. The complete sacking of Jerusalem, however, is more horrific and absolute than the people might have imagined. The destruction is so severe that God's voice, through the prophet, also wails in lamentation.

In view of the devastation that characterizes the sociohistorical context of the "Book of Consolation," Kathleen O'Connor describes the situation of the people in this way: "The people . . . are taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They are beaten, imprisoned, and face death as a people, and, like Jeremiah, they cry out to God

Pastoral Perspective

"In those days . . ." On Christmas Eve Luke will turn the church back to a historical context of Jesus' birth, anchoring the event in time with persons and places, in a world of Caesar and census: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). But on the First Sunday of Advent, Jeremiah turns us forward to the future: "In those days and at that time . . ." In these days before Christmas the future is not where our culture encourages us to go; it fosters a holiday experience that is nostalgic and immediate. "In those days and at that time" God will decree justice and righteousness. Seasonal traditions dictate charity. "The days are surely coming" when God will fulfill the promise. We are sure that consumerism will deliver our fulfillment. The church is called to hear the prophets in this season, not for "once upon a time" background music, but for an overture playing in real time, sounding themes to be developed going forward. "In those days" there will be "justice and righteousness," peace and security. Next week Zechariah will pick up the tune of righteousness and peace (Luke 1:68-79), and Advent will end with Mary singing of God's justice. The church may light its Advent candles for preparation, hope, joy, and love, but the prophets sound justice and righteousness.

Exegetical Perspective

Part of the climactic verses of the Little Book of Comfort, as chapters 30–33 in the book of Jeremiah have been called since Martin Luther, the lectionary passage Jeremiah 33:14–16 proclaims salvation in the form of restoration of the Davidic monarchy and pronounces a new name for Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. The subsequent verses also promise the revival of the Levitical priesthood. Set in a part of the book of Jeremiah where destruction of the Holy City and deportation of the people to Babylon has been threatened numerous times and already taken place for the royal court and the upper classes (see the cycles of judgment oracles in Jer. 1–25 and throughout the remainder of the book), these eschatological promises of a different historical reality are spoken to give hope to a crushed people and inspire faithful endurance of the present circumstances.

How one understands what is meant by the present time and realities for Jeremiah depends on which hypothesis of composition of the book one accepts. Most biblical scholars locate the passage in exilic or postexilic writings of members of the Deuteronomistic school, who are generally considered the authors and editors of the prose sections of the book of Jeremiah during the later sixth century

Homiletical Perspective

The season of Advent is puzzling to many Christians. The stories read during this season are, by and large, not childhood favorites. They have no star in the east guiding devout magi, no soliloquy of angels stirring shepherds to go and see the babe, no harried innkeeper, no touching moment when Mary ponders these things in her heart.

The stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation. Many prefer the major notes of joy and gladness in the Christmas stories to the minor keys of Advent.

Advent also leaves us dizzy over time. Advent is not a steady, constant, “time marches on” kind of time, a persistent drumbeat of day after day, year after year. Advent is unpredictable time, unsteady time. In this time-tumbling season, we look for a baby to be born while we know that the baby has already been born, and still is being born in us—this Emmanuel who came and is coming and is among us right now. Not only is Advent not well behaved, neat, and orderly; it contorts time. Given the nature of Advent, it is no surprise that Jeremiah is its herald.

Jeremiah speaks to hostages being seduced to start a new life in balmy Babylon. He tells a tough audience

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Theological Perspective

in anger and despair.”¹ John Calvin imagined the context in even more explicit terms: “As they were then exposed to slaughter, . . . the children of God saw thousand deaths; so that it could not be but that terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return.”²

When faced with such death, slaughter, and imprisonment in a strange place, who would not despair? While despair is among the most human of human conditions, it cannot be fully understood apart from its theological implications. In a number of his writings, Reinhold Niebuhr associated despair with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending that we are not subject to the vicissitudes of creatureliness. Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of theological hope. Humans meet despair when they cannot imagine God’s promised alternative future.

God’s Promise to a People Waiting. The writer recounts the promises made to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah,” that God would provide the people a safe, just, and peaceful future under a justly appointed and righteous ruler. This week’s reading is addressed to a people in exile. God’s promise, in this case, is meant to be a comfort and source of hope to the exiled, rather than a foretelling of the faithful remnant that appears between Jeremiah’s condemnations of unjust rulers. Here we meet the God who promises to protect and restore the people, even as they are in the midst of great suffering and at the edge of despair. It is in precisely this context that God speaks the promise, and it is in precisely this context that despair opens the door to creativity and hope. Calvin acknowledged that the promises of God seem to disappear, but that with faith and patience, we look forward to their fulfillment.

In part, this is the theological significance of Advent too. The inclusion of prophetic literature in the Advent lections points to the importance of waiting, anticipating, and trusting in a promised future that seems very removed from our current circumstance. And it is in the season of Advent that we engage in the strenuous and crucial Christian

Pastoral Perspective

A pastoral perspective on Advent is attuned to the yearnings of our day for a different day, and aware of both the temptation to look backward for God and good and the trepidation in looking forward. The prophet Jeremiah speaks a pastoral word, assuring the people of his time and ours that what is coming is of God. He is adamant about the things that we are tentative about: “The days are surely coming . . .” (here and in 23:5–6; see also 31:27, 31, 38); “I have . . . plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:11). There will be a future in God’s time and fulfillment on God’s terms. This particular text envisions not a day to come at Advent’s end, but days to come that will inaugurate a new beginning.

The congregation that observes Advent will mark time differently from those people who live December as a countdown to Christmas and the end of the year. The Sundays of Advent count forward to a time that begins with the birth of Christ. The First Sunday of Advent is for Christians the first Sunday of the year, a new year in sacred time, opening to the mystery and certainty of God’s presence. Worship that celebrates an alternative New Year’s Day affirms time as God’s home and workplace, not as a calendar of accumulating years but as a movement toward fulfillment, not a day for self-improvement resolutions but for community reaffirmation of trust in God’s promises, past, present, and future. “With grateful hearts the past we own; The future, all to us unknown, We to your guardian care commit.” Philip Doddridge wrote on the manuscript of his hymn, “For the New Year.”¹

Jeremiah 33:14–16 preached on the First Sunday in Advent rightly leads to the Eucharist; in this sacrament believers are nourished by the hope of God’s coming and participate in God’s future. An Advent liturgy recalls that through the words of the prophets God promised the Redeemer, “and gave hope for the day when justice shall roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever rolling stream.”² Prayers that are evoked by this text will acknowledge God as the One who lives and moves and comes to us in time and who works justice and righteousness in all times; they will express gratitude for time as God’s good gift; they will confess our preoccupation with the immediate and our fear of the future; they will ask for our confidence in God’s

1. Kathleen O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 174.

2. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 247. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom20.i.html> (accessed from Christian Classics Ethereal Library, March 17, 2008).

1. Philip Doddridge (1702–51), “Great God, We Sing That Mighty Hand,” in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

2. *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 133.

Exegetical Perspective

BCE.¹ Thus, the passage represents a vision of a radically new future added in retrospect with a postexilic audience in view. When read, however, from a literary canonical perspective,² the Little Book of Comfort and verses 14–16 of chapter 33 therein function as a temporary reprieve from an onslaught of judgment oracles leading up to the precise event of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem on a particular day, the ninth of Ab in the year 587 BCE.

Opening with a formula typical of salvation oracles, “the days are surely coming,” verse 14 introduces divine first-person speech. God is assuring the audience that God will fulfill “the promise,” literally “the good word” with a definite article—not “a” promise, one of many, but a particular one made to both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Harkening back to Jeremiah 23:5–6, another eschatological interlude, verse 15 reiterates what was promised there, namely, that God will birth a “righteous” (*tsedaqah*) offspring of the Davidic monarchy, who will act in ways that will promote “justice and righteousness” (*mishpat* and *tsedaqah*). While some will read this as a contradiction in terms—the Davidic monarchy has been blamed throughout the book of Jeremiah for exploitation and unfaithfulness (see Jer. 2:4–8, 26–28; 3:6–10; 7:1–15; 21:11–12)—the focus on qualities associated with the Sinai covenant, justice, and righteousness, so central to the theology and worldview of Jeremiah, does constitute something radically new in light of the present realities of destruction and impending exile.

What was promised to both Israel and Judah narrows to a promise to Judah and Jerusalem in what follows in verse 16. Both in historical and in literary terms, this makes historical sense. The Babylonian exile occurs well after the fall of the northern kingdom, so Judah and Jerusalem are at the center of the events leading up to it. Literarily, paralleling the house of Israel and the house of Judah with Judah and Jerusalem serves the movement from the bigger picture to what is at hand, the giving of a new name to the people, personified in Jerusalem. This new name is a confession of faith “YHWH is our righteousness (*tsedaqah*).” So whenever anybody utters the name of the Holy City, the person confesses his faith in the God of the covenant at Sinai. The proclamation goes even further. Given the power associated with naming in ancient Israel, giving

1. See, e.g., Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

2. See Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

Homiletical Perspective

that, despite every sign to the contrary, “days are coming,” days when God’s promises will be fulfilled. Jeremiah tells his kin that God’s future will come not by giving up on God’s promises and making the best of a bad situation—after all, “when in Babylon”—but by trusting in the creative and redemptive and sure purposes of God: “Days are coming!”

With the world that he has known crumbling around him, Jeremiah pushes his people to see a future, God’s future, which seems laughable given the current circumstances. No wonder Jeremiah is the church’s usher into Advent. Later in the season, Mary will sing about God’s future, despite her own laughable circumstance.

Along with Jeremiah and Mary, preachers would do well to consider another Advent singer. Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor who writes about this holy season amid her ministry in the roughest part of the Bronx:

Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season.

Advent unflinchingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

As the first, lone candle of Advent wreath burns, Jeremiah recalls his own city burning, and yet he speaks not of destruction but of God’s future as he offers his cry of longing, of *anhelo*. Like Jeremiah, most preachers have their own list for which they cry *anhelo*, and they serve people with their own lists of longings, for which they cry *anhelo*.

As I listen to the cries of Jeremiah throughout the scope of his prophecy, I long for the day that is surely coming when God’s future will be a reality beyond the violent boastings of the ruling Babylon of the day. I long for the day that is surely coming when in God’s future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming when God’s future has no space for violence, when we will stop producing

1. Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 211.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Theological Perspective

task of *imagination*. Together with the prophet, we are called not only to name suffering and injustice, but to lean into God's promised alternative future.

Theological imagination is not speculative, but relies on God's continuous presence and acts on behalf of creation over time. Trusting in God's provision for us in the past, we imagine what shape God's fulfillment of promises will take in the future. Although we do not bring about God's intended alternative future through sheer force of will, in our waiting we do try to place ourselves in a posture so that we might become partners with God in the advent of a new reality.

The Collective and Sociopolitical Aspects of God's Promise. The promise Jeremiah recalls is not an otherworldly, escapist spirituality that encourages us merely to "wait it out." Particularly in the prophetic literature, and echoed in Gospel texts like the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), we find repeated affirmations that God's promise includes a transvaluation of social, economic, and political relationships. In this particular lection, the prophet anticipates a time in which even the failed leadership will be made aright and "do what kings are supposed to do, namely, practice justice and righteousness. . . . When the king practices justice and righteousness, the city and the land will be healed and saved."³ In the creative moment of near-despair, the prophet calls us to imagine a new social context in which we live together in safety, peace, and righteousness. God will do this, as promised, and even bring about new life for the city.

JENNIFER RYAN AYRES

Pastoral Perspective

tomorrow and pray for those who yearn for the justice and righteousness that they will not know in their days.

Congregational life during Advent that is faithful to the prophetic vision of "the days . . . surely coming" emphasizes political as well as personal relationships. This text insists that covenantal life in all its expressions is characterized by justice and righteousness, allowing no dichotomy of "prophetic" and "pastoral." Life together is to embody the nature of God, "The LORD is our righteousness." Jeremiah uses the name first for a promised person (23:6) and again here, intentionally, for a promised place (33:16). The vision of the time to come impugns the time at hand. What leader and what community could claim "The LORD is our righteousness"? The promise challenges our reality, and drives a reappropriation of "righteousness." The word is uncommon, if not pejorative, in common parlance and unwelcome in the lexicon of many faithful because of its frequent companionship with "self."

One of the pastoral tasks is to teach the vocabulary of faith, and "righteousness" is one of the first words of the language of Advent. In Matthew's Gospel, "righteousness" is Jesus' first word, spoken to John the Baptist: "Let it be so now . . . in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Righteousness is not an attitude or an absolute standard. It refers to conduct in accord with God's purposes. It is doing the good thing and the God thing: right doing as opposed to wrongdoing, and doing as opposed to being. Self-righteousness is the inflated ego of self-approval; righteousness is the humble ethic of living toward others in just and loving relationships. A congregation will be edified by preaching and teaching that brings righteousness into its language and life. It will be challenged to reflect on the integrity of its witness in the world. *Is the Lord our righteousness? Are we ready to be named and claimed by that kind of God? Are we willing to welcome the day when God's justice and righteousness will be fulfilled?*

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

3. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 318.

Exegetical Perspective

someone or something a new name means changing them existentially. That is to say, a radical new reality is here proclaimed: the city and its people will live faithfully within the Sinai covenant by embodying its fundamental principles, justice and righteousness.

As a theological claim, such a promise goes even deeper as the new reality of a just, fair, and righteous government embraces competing theological trajectories in the First Testament—integrating the Zion covenant within the Sinai covenant.³ This promise also fits with the more orthodox Jeremianic prophecies in particular (see Jer. 16:14–21; 23:5–8; 30:2–9; 31:1–6, 21–26, 31–34). At the same time, it joins the visions of a different way of living together as a divided people after the exile, beyond former allegiances and worldviews (see, e.g., Isa. 51:19; 54:1–17; 56:1–8; 61:1–11; Zech. 6:9–15).

By focusing on these three verses during the First Sunday of Advent, the lectionary invites the preacher and congregation to draw analogies between Jeremiah's world and contemporary dynamics locally and globally. Instances of death, destruction, and exile abound, yet particularity is encouraged. The preacher who follows the assigned text and stops with verse 16, not including the remainder of chapter 33, will want to use caution not to forget Judah's concrete historical circumstances. Jeremiah's audience is a people facing impending exile or already suffering in it. Jeremiah offers that people a vision of a radically new way their political and religious institutions may work in the future. The new generation of Davidic kings will act in ways that promote justice and righteousness, rather than exploitation, self-promotion, and violence. Further, even the Levitical priesthood will live according to the Sinai covenant, rather than continue their insistence on their own orthodoxies at the expense of inclusion, justice, and righteousness in faith and religious observance. Both king and priest someday may embody and lead the way into God's bright new reality.

Leaving out the grim present reality of soon-to-be exiles allows for a too facile connection of the passage with the New Testament readings, which, while also eschatological in nature, presuppose a different historical context. The challenge and promise of grappling with this passage in the book of Jeremiah on the First Sunday of Advent lies in its contemporary echoes in the power structures of our time.

ANGELA BAUER-LEVESQUE

Homiletical Perspective

body bags—because there are no dead soldiers to fill them. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future affords no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism and homophobia.

Preaching Advent from the perspective of Jeremiah, I long for the confidence of the prophet's words about the righteous future of our God. I long for people to know the God whom Jeremiah heralds and whom Jesus will incarnate, not a hidden God who refuses to traffic in the human enterprise, but a God who hears God's people when they cry *anhelo*. I long for people to know, not the God of religious fanatics or bigots, not a God who enjoys seeing Jerusalem set afire, but the God who, in God's own time, will bring more mercy and justice than we will ever grasp.

As preachers consider the prophecy from Jeremiah, maybe there is no more important homiletical clue to preaching this text than to pay attention to the *anhelo* within them and around them. Maybe, then, Jeremiah is the best biblical voice to lead us into Advent, the season that brings *anhelo* to expression.

In many liturgical traditions, the First Sunday of Advent brings the community to the holy Table. In many ways, Jeremiah's promise that "days are coming" finds its most poignant meaning at this table of *anhelo*. Just look at it. This meal does not point to magi and a star, but to a world gone mad. It is a table not cloaked in romance and sweet memories, but set with food paid for at a price way too dear. It is not just a table of *anhelo*, it is *the* table of *anhelo* for all with deep longings, people who pray with Jeremiah for the days that are surely coming.

Maybe Advent is not so puzzling after all.

GARY W. CHARLES

3. See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

Psalm 25:1-10

¹To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

²O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

³Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

Theological Perspective

The beginning of Advent may be just the right time to consider the ten verses of petition, praise, and promise in this lection from Psalm 25. Emphasis in the first portion of the passage on the writer's needs—for deliverance, for guidance, and for forgiveness—presents a lens for reflecting on how the Advent gift to come may respond to these specific needs as well as to the needs of many, many others. Lament, honesty, and hope form the progression through the text and are interrelated elements of the response to needs included there.

Lament. Two categories—poems of praise and poems of lament—are generally accepted as a way interpreters classify the majority of chapters in the book of Psalms. Because of its petitionary nature and its focus on the requirement for help, this psalm is identified as a lament. In the liturgical tradition from which these poems arose, a lament is a deep expression of individual or communal grief in the presence of and directed to God. Some interpreters further assert that lament includes three elements: petition, praise, and assurance. A close look at the passage at hand reveals that it is not only a text that expresses the psalmist's particular needs, but also a meditation about God's goodness, which the writer trusts, hopes in, and depends on for deliverance.

Pastoral Perspective

One of the fundamental questions of life is this: in whom or what can we trust? It is a question about people, politics, the economy, and ultimately about life itself. The question of trust is certainly relevant to the question of truth in advertising and political speech. Can I trust the advertisements that I read in magazines or view on TV? Can I trust our elected leaders to tell the truth about what is happening?

The term "spin" is relevant for both of these arenas. In public relations, "spin" is a pejorative term signifying a biased report—one that exaggerates a truth or downplays a failure. The term evokes a spinning basketball atop someone's finger. You can see the ball spinning, but you can't read the label, for to do so would leave your head spinning. People who are particularly good at "spin" are called "spin doctors." We have grown accustomed to believing that advertisements and political speech will often downplay failures or exaggerate truths by spinning the facts. Yet in spite of spinning truths, it is ironic how we continue to place an enormous amount of trust in politicians and advertising.

The question of trust is also about life itself. To what extent can I trust that I am secure in life, amid terrorist threats, tsunamis and earthquakes, and news of shootings at places thought to be peaceful, like college campuses? In light of these threats,

⁶Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

⁸Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Exegetical Perspective

The First Sunday of Advent offers us a psalm of lament and Torah—complaint and a desire to learn. Lament psalms, the most common type in the psalter, express the distress of an individual or community, invoke God, state a complaint, present a petition, and usually end with an exclamation of praise and thanksgiving. As a psalm of Torah, Psalm 25 speaks one side of a deeper, ongoing educational conversation between friends. The psalmist approaches God amid the turmoil of life and asks for help. Their covenantal friendship inclines the psalmist to expect that the Lord's ways are mercy and truth, loving and sure.

Psalm 25 addresses God as a teacher. The psalmist, caught in the laboratory of life, commands, begs, and demands to be taught. What an excited student! This student intends to learn God's guidance. He knows the outcomes of the course: walking with God in faithfulness and love.

Psalm 25 somewhat faithfully follows an acrostic model; acrostic designates a structure facilitating memorization in Hebrew, because the first letter of each verse is a consecutive letter of the alphabet. The first half of the psalm, verses 1–10, contains nine commands; these include do not let me be ashamed, and show, teach, and guide me (vv. 2, 4–5a). Verses 7b–10 explain aspects of God's character. Repeated

Homiletical Perspective

Advent comes, sneaking up on us, often with surprising speed that catches us unaware and unprepared. Is it Advent already? In four short weeks we are expected to make time and space to prepare our lives for God's indwelling *and* lead our congregations through a similar time of preparation. All the while, everyone everywhere wants to break out the carols to accompany the dizzying whirl of parties and purchasing that precede Christmas, or actually is Christmas for many.

In much of the Northern Hemisphere Advent comes in the "bleak midwinter." No wonder people want to party. Still, at a deeper level, it is also possible that this may be experienced as the time of year when, as the earth lies fallow, we dwell in expectancy of the new life we hope spring will bring. This mind-set shapes the way the church in this hemisphere observes Advent. In a cold and fallow season, a season characterized by waiting and watching and wondering, it is not surprising that one might find oneself reflecting on the past and looking to the future, taking stock and hoping for something better in the springtime to come.

When we purchase those special, colorful bulletin covers for Advent, they almost always trumpet hope as the theme for the First Sunday of Advent. Hope is clearly a focus of these opening verses of Psalm 25.

Psalm 25:1-10

Theological Perspective

Historically, psalms of lament (and praise) arose in response to particular events that persons encountered. The relationship to specific incidents is indicated through the immediacy of the emotional reaction and the spontaneity of the verbal response captured in the language about the event. Reflecting the original emergence of the psalms in patriarchal family histories, the poems also relate a remarkable depth of feeling about what has just occurred. As Israel grew into a nation, however, worship practices became more communal, more formal, and less spontaneous. Some of the depth evident in earlier prayers is lost as later psalms reflect a more settled national culture and a more ceremonial worship life. The specific event prompting this text is uncertain, though some interpreters believe it to be a psalm of reflection during David's old age. Regardless of the chronology of a psalm's origin, however, scholars generally agree that the Psalms persist as an important element of individual and communal worship because they capture common human reactions to life events and invite us honestly to confront our own experiences as they are reflected there.

Progression to Self-Reflection. The honest expression of need in this psalm points to an opportunity to enter the Advent season with new openness to what is about to unfold and the help it will bring. The writer's need is evident at the start of the text, as indicated by the opening assertion of dependence: "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul" (v. 1). Need becomes even more explicit and intimate in verses immediately following the opening, as the poem moves through the first petition (vv. 2–3), for deliverance from one identified as an enemy, to a second petition (vv. 4–5), for direction in life, to a final petition (vv. 6–7), for forgiveness of the failures of youth. Progression of the three petitions goes from focus on the other as the source of the lament to a focus on self-identity, as the writer moves from the circumstantial challenge of needing to be saved from persons called enemies to personal recognition of a need to be taught and finally to repent. The progression ultimately reflects the honesty required to confront the lack and inadequacy that abounds in even the most accomplished individual life, if growth is to occur. The progression also suggests a need for reconciliation and communal well-being, since personal challenges such as need for direction and need for forgiveness may both cause alienation and prompt a plea for resolution of conflict.

Pastoral Perspective

science has become a trusted resource for sorting out how to secure our families and ourselves. For many, science has become a savior.

Thus, closely related to the question of trust is the question of salvation. Amid the anxieties, insecurities, and threats of life, in whom or what is my salvation? People often use the language of salvation when referring to politicians. In the United States, Roosevelt was considered by many a savior amid the Great Depression and World War II; both Kennedy and Reagan were in different ways considered saviors amid the Cold War; and as I write these words both Democrats and Republicans seem to be looking for a savior amid the tragedy of Iraq. Long before Jesus Christ was called Savior, the Roman emperors had adopted the title for themselves. In fact, Luke's Gospel draws a polemical contrast between Jesus as Savior and Augustus Caesar as savior.

So it is rather striking to read Psalm 25 and note the utter confidence and trust that the psalmist places in God for his or her salvation: "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust. . . . Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long" (vv. 1, 5). What is astounding about these affirmations is that the psalmist seems to know all about the threats that life can bring, yet nonetheless places utter trust in God. Indeed, the psalmist bares the soul, saying, "Do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me" (v. 2). In the Psalms we never get a clear idea about the identity of the enemy. The most helpful suggestion is that the identity of the "enemy" is open ended so that the reader can adopt the psalm to his or her own circumstance.¹ The enemy could be a badly performing economy that has left him destitute and shamed because of poverty, or a friend who has betrayed her or abandoned and failed her, or a political leader who has been a bitter disappointment or who has become a political foe; or perhaps he or she has been the victim of malpractice of some sort. Whatever the circumstance, the psalmist knows threat. Yet in spite of the threat, the focus of the psalmist is on God, in whose hands alone is the ground of his salvation.

By contrast, our attention is often diffused. Our confidence and hope for salvation may be in money, friends, family, politics, or some medical cure. While many of these resources are undoubtedly

1. See J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalm as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 91–92.

Exegetical Perspective

words give an indication of the text's direction. They include "shame" (three times, vv. 2, 3, 20), "way/s" (four times, always referring to God's way/s, vv. 4, 8, 9, 12), "hope" (twice, vv. 3, 5), and "good" (twice, vv. 7–8). The psalm lingers on certain characteristics of God. God is good (vv. 7b, 8) and upright (v. 8). In addition, God guides and teaches the humble (v. 9). God also instructs sinners in his way; finally, all God's paths are loving and faithful (vv. 8b, 10).

David begins by lifting up his soul, the essence of who he is, to his God (v. 1). In Israelite culture, this meant lifting up one's hands. The hands are empty—without weapons, without even gifts. Vulnerable, exposed, and urgently needy, David courageously invites God's scrutiny. The psalmist beckons as one accustomed to hearing from God. The psalmist prophesies that no one who hopes in God (himself included!) will be put to shame (v. 3). The psalmist draws on his rank as a covenant person. As such, he has rights and responsibilities. God has promised: "I . . . will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12). The covenant was put in place for a time like this. The covenant has to hold.

The friendship is covenantal because the psalmist (David, according to the tradition of the superscript) keeps God's commandments (v. 10). The friendship is personal because God is personal. God is *my* God (v. 2), *my* Savior (v. 5), who guides *me* (v. 5), teaches *me* (v. 5). The Lord is the depository of *my* hope throughout the entire day (v. 5), has a short memory about *my* sins (v. 7), and demands accountability from someone like *me*, for *we* are in covenant together. God rewards someone like *me* with a loving and even delightful way for keeping the covenant (v. 10, all italics obviously added!).

Because the psalmist already has kept to God's ways, he expects God to deliver him from any shame his enemies plot, and he also asks for the same blessings on the rest of Israel (v. 22). The psalmist does not request a removal of his troubles but instead demands guidance and instruction to meet them. However, he wants to get through them without shame. Shame in the psalms is associated with mockery and humiliation and is therefore an appropriate punishment for enemies—not for a covenant believer! The lives of the psalmist and God are so entwined that the enemies' triumph would bring shame upon them both.

The psalmist next calls upon God to have a selective memory. He asks God to forget his youthful sins and instead to remember God's own good qualities of mercy and love. The sins remain

Homiletical Perspective

This is a psalm of confident hope. It is the song of one who has known the complexities, the downs and ups, of life and still maintains a steadfast trust that God will provide for him, that God will care for him, that the future is ultimately in God's hands. This is the song of one who has escaped the exile, who is at home, sitting in her chair, thinking over how her life has been both challenged and blessed.

The verses we are given to consider alternate between the writer's penitence for sin committed and confidence that God will restore the writer to wholeness. Hope is always situated between the world gone wrong, life off track, tasks undone, and expectations of the world righted, life moving steadily ahead on God's mainline, work well done. It is the human condition to live in the tension between failure and fulfillment, sin and salvation, trouble and hope. This psalm shows the very human tendency to mix concerns and expectations, reality and dreams, as the stream of consciousness flows through the mind. One may be aware of having strayed from faithfulness to God at the same time one holds hope for restored relationship. Many in our congregations will identify with this kind of careful reflection that acknowledges limitations at the same time it holds hope for future fulfillment.

In this psalm, apparently written after the time of exile for the Hebrew people, the hope for return to the land of promise does not infuse the text with the anguish of exile or a desperate desire to return home. Nor, on a personal level, does the writer seem to be weighed down with guilt and shame over some great unresolved sin. This does not seem to be a *de profundis* hymn. Though there is reference to the sins of youth, the confession of this writer seems to be the confession of one who ruminates toward the end of a relatively full and decent life. This is the prayer of one whose sin consists mostly of youthful indiscretion and small transgressions that separate one from the fullness of life that is possible while living in complete obedience to God and God's law.

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann, in reflecting on this psalm, says that "humanness is pervasively hope-filled, not in the sense of buoyant, unreflective optimism, but in a conviction that individual human destiny is powerfully presided over by this One who wills good and works that good. . . . Yahweh is not *instrumental* to the hope of Israel, but Yahweh is in fact the very *substance* of that hope."¹

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 497.

Psalm 25:1-10

Theological Perspective

Old Testament interpreter Walter Brueggemann identifies recognition of the need for self-reflection as disorientation that makes way for new orientation, saying the Psalms invite us “into the wholeness that comes in embraced brokenness.”¹ In the fragile grace that emerges in moments of brokenness when we really see ourselves, the disorientation of confronting personal imperfections may indeed open a possibility for reconciled relationship. Reconciliation as a response to petitions (such as those of this psalm) can be anticipated among many other possibilities as Advent begins, but this reconciliation becomes possible only as a result of honesty about dependence and spiritual challenges. In a global culture that often demonizes both combatants and national leaders during times of war, and at a time when social cultures seem to celebrate incivility and hostility, reconciliation as the final resolution of conflict truly is a new orientation.

Hope and God. The final section of the passage (vv. 8–10) reflects hope for a satisfactory resolution of the issue presented in the initial verses. The hope expressed in this final section is implied throughout the passage as praise for “the God of my salvation” (v. 5) and appeal to the divine nature as merciful, loving, and good (vv. 6–7). Praise intensifies as the text closes, with the writer celebrating divine work. The psalmist’s praise of God points especially to divine justice, which suggests that hope exists even for one engaged in a conflict and in need of guidance and forgiveness.

Many will see the praises in these final verses as signaling the promise of forgiveness and new beginnings anticipated in Advent. The psalm pictures a listening and trustworthy God. Christians entering the Advent season may join the psalmist in celebrating the hope that emerges from the divine nature and from divine past action in faithfully leading and teaching those who come looking for and anticipating a new beginning.

ROSETTA E. ROSS

Pastoral Perspective

helpful, they can be theologically dangerous. We are easily led to believe that they are our ultimate source of salvation.

In another mistake, just as dangerous, we let ourselves believe that we are a savior of others. In a short story by Flannery O’Connor entitled “The Lame Shall Enter First,” a recreation director named Shepherd tries to help a physically disabled juvenile delinquent named Johnson. In a pointed exchange, when Johnson has refused Shepherd’s help, Shepherd says: “I’m stronger than you are and I’m going to save you. The good will triumph.” Johnson, however, replies: “Not when you ain’t true. . . . Not when it ain’t right.” “My resolve isn’t shaken . . . I’m going to save you,” Shepherd repeats. Johnson thrusts his head forward and hisses: “Save yourself. . . . Nobody can save me but Jesus.”²

This story reminds us how our attention is easily deflected from God as the ultimate object of trust and ground of salvation. Amid spinning truths and impending threats, our confidence wavers, and we trust in that which is less than God. Economic policies, political parties and ideologies, and science are often wedged into the place of God. Sometimes we even lapse into trusting ourselves. In the ministry of the church, it is common for pastors and lay leaders to think of themselves as saviors for their people. The church’s social ministries, however noble, are falsely embraced as the saving media of God.

Our psalm, however, points us to the God in whom alone is our help and salvation. The implication of the psalm is clear. We are not God. We are not saviors. Neither does our salvation rest in economics or politics. Indeed, the psalm offers the only sane affirmation amid a world in which we often trust in other saviors or believe ourselves to be saviors of others. The psalmist directs us to a practice that can be called “soul lifting,” that is, the practice of placing ourselves, our families, friends—and, indeed, the world—into the very hands of God.

ROGER J. GENCH

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), xv. See also *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

2. Quoted in McCann, 81–82.

Exegetical Perspective

unspecified, as do the ways God will shower God's own great mercy and love on the psalmist. In order to pursue the friendship, the psalmist realizes forgiveness must occur.

God's remembrances are among the sweetest words in Scripture, and the psalmist calls upon this record. For example, Genesis 8:1: God remembered Noah and all that were with him in the ark—and sent a wind over the earth. Genesis 30:22: God remembered Rachel—and opened her womb. Exodus 2:24: God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and started the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery. 1 Samuel 1:19: God remembered Hannah—and gave her a son. In the Psalms, God remembers God's mercy and truth (98:3); God's eternal covenant (105:8); and our low estate (136:23).

Derek, another significant word meaning way or journey, occurs four times in the text (vv. 4, 8, 9, 12). It carries covenantal aspects, for the canon consistently says the spiritual journey is a choice between the way of death and the way of life (see Prov. 4:14; 6:23). The psalmist knows this and cries out to be instructed, guided, and led by God. The whole course of life is to be lived in conformity with ever-present, ever-renewing covenant obligations (Exod. 18:20).

As a student favoring a repetitive learning technique, David signs up for a refresher course in the loving and faithful ways of the covenant. David commands God to repeat the instruction he already knows and to continue leading him in the new ways opening up. It is not remiss to ask for clarity and continued instruction of God's principles to meet new situations.

The psalm mentions God's lovingkindness (*hesed*) twice (vv. 7, 10). This wonderful word, which is not easily translated into English, denotes the constant love and help offered by one of superior rank toward one of lesser rank; if the help does not come, the one of lesser rank probably will perish. Often *hesed* pairs poetically with words like "covenant" (Deut. 7:9), "faithfulness" (Pss. 36:5, 57:10); "compassion" (103:4), and "pity" (109:12). God's *hesed* shows God's unceasingly generous nature in forgiving, blessing, and having compassion on God's covenant followers, and on this psalmist in particular.

ROBIN GALLAHER BRANCH

Homiletical Perspective

This is indeed the hope into which Advent invites us to enter fully, the fulfillment of the promise that, in all our living, God will provide for us, take care of us, save us.

As an Advent text that is meant to prepare us for the coming of Christ, the messianic promise is not presented directly here. Still, the implication can be drawn as the preacher encourages the congregation to look to the "God of . . . salvation." The hope of salvation is the hope for fulfillment of the messianic promise; it is the coming Christ who will bring God's redemption to God's people. One might wonder if Anna and Simeon did not chant this psalm as they waited patiently in the temple for just such a fulfillment of God's promise.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes movingly of living with such a promise: "The promise may not be fully in hand. It may still be on the way, but to live reverently, deliberately and fully awake—that is what it means to live in the promise, where the wait itself is as rich as its end. All it takes are some regular reminders, because as long as the promise is renewed, the promise is alive, as vivid as a rainbow, as real as the million stars overhead."²

Regardless of one's social situation, words of hope carry meaning. Of course, socioeconomic standing will affect how one understands and relies on hope. Preaching on this text to people of privilege and affluence may take more creative work than preaching it for those who depend on hope for a different future to see them through their daily lives. This text presents an opportunity to expand a congregation's understanding of hope beyond the familiar; or it may be an opportunity to stress hope for those who struggle with daily existence. Surely, confident hope is crucial to the good news that Advent promises will soon burst upon the world: good news that carries the promise of transformation of life from sin to salvation, from oppression to liberation, from injustice to wholeness, from life to death.

RANDLE R. MIXON

2. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1995), 41.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

¹¹Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹²And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Theological Perspective

This passage from the apostle Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians provides an important window on one early Christian church as it struggled to grasp the wonderful and bewildering future inaugurated by the risen Christ. This letter is almost unanimously affirmed as the apostle's first letter. As such it provides a view into the witness, proclamation, and practice of the nascent Christian church. According to Abraham Malherbe, in 49 CE the apostle Paul journeyed to Thessalonica to proclaim the gospel. A group of day laborers heard and received his message, and from these humble beginnings a church was formed.¹ This particular passage reveals a fundamental tension and ambiguity most clearly visible in this letter, whose traces are intermittently apparent throughout the Pauline corpus.

The Coming of Christ. There is evidence that this community was confused about and therefore focused on the coming of Christ (1 Thess. 5:1–11). This focus allows Paul not only to tolerate but to embrace the embryonic faith of the Thessalonians. Indeed, the incompleteness of their faith is a reason for rejoicing. "For what thanks can we render to God

1. See Abraham Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000).

Pastoral Perspective

There may be no more difficult day for the preacher than the First Sunday of Advent. It poses a number of challenges that upon closer examination might prove to be pastoral opportunities.

In the first instance, this is the first Sunday of the New Year on the Christian liturgical calendar, but in many settings there is scant opportunity to reflect on this significance. There is little about late November or early December that easily fosters a New-Year mood. Consider, however, the pastoral possibilities of engaging in New-Year resolution making before Christmas observances that leave many exhausted, overextended, emotionally drained, and financially debt ridden.

A congregation I served for sixteen years shared its building with a Reformed Jewish congregation that used the church's sanctuary for its High Holiday services. Celebrated in the Jewish month of Tishri, the holidays fall on the secular calendar in September or October and begin with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Observing the religious New Year at a time other than January 1 affords Jews the occasion to focus on change and renewal and on learning from the past and recommitting the future, at a time unencumbered by the folderol of secular New Year's celebrations. The Rosh Hashanah greeting is "Le Shana Tova Teekataivu," which means, "May you be

Exegetical Perspective

What's in a benediction? For Christians accustomed to hearing one spoken at the end of Sunday services, the benediction performs a key transition, sending us with God's blessing from the ordered communal intimacy of divine worship out to the more chaotic improvisational demands of faithfully lived lives in the world. The benediction in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 also effects a transition—from a celebration of intimate Christian friendship between Paul and this fledgling church (1:2–3:10) to their training in intimate Christian living with one another (4:1–12; 5:11–22) and in faithful Christian dying (4:13–5:10). This transitional purpose impacts the shape of Paul's prayer: for reunion with one another (3:11) and for the Thessalonians' growth in communal love (3:12), which is sound preparation for the coming Christ (3:13). In the Thessalonian community we have the youngest church that Paul addresses in any of his letters. Circumstances abruptly ended Paul's time with them early. It is appropriate, then, that the entire letter is summed up simply in the brief epitome of 3:11–13.

*Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you.*¹ Paul prays first that

1. Translations in italics by the author.

Homiletical Perspective

In our text, appropriate to the central action of Advent, Paul is waiting. And waiting. He is worried about the fledgling church at Thessalonica, especially since his first visit there (Acts 17) was less than a spectacular success. So he sends Timothy to visit the church and report back to him. Timothy returns with very positive news that warms the heart of the anxious, waiting Paul. This story resembles the mission of the seventy (Luke 10), where Jesus waits for their report and rejoices when they return successful. Jesus tells the seventy not to rejoice in their success, but then tells them privately that they have achieved what prophets and kings could not.

Paul similarly praises the Thessalonians: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" (v. 9). But then he also says: "May [God] so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (v. 13). Praise is followed by a prayer close to reproof. The Thessalonians were not blameless yet, but Paul asked God to make them so before the return of Jesus.

Since the season of Advent cannot escape the pull from both past and future, a good use of this strain in Paul's message might move like this. After reading the first part of the text and setting it in its context,

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Theological Perspective

again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith?" (1 Thess. 3:9–10 KJV). The fact that Paul can give thanks for a faith that is to come reveals, for our time, the ambiguity of Advent. This ambiguity is evident in our seasonal celebrations focused on an event that happened more than 2,000 years ago, while the message of Advent is focused on a reality that is yet to come. Part of the reason for this ambiguity is that we tend to view Advent through the lens of Good Friday and Easter.

Theological Tensions. There are several theological tensions presented by this text. First, any theological appropriation of it is immediately caught in the tension of living in the *now* versus living in the *then*. Second, the background of the text suggests that the adversary of this early Christian community is the Jewish community, and not, as would come to be the case, Judaizing Christians. This means that this text presents a Christianity not yet ensconced in internecine conflicts. This is a Christianity that is engaged, for better or for worse, in a genuine interreligious exchange. Third, the theological focus is on the coming of Christ and not the cross of Christ. The theological center is on what Christ will do or is doing, rather than on what Christ has done. Terms like "salvation" must be understood in this context. Salvation, as understood in this letter, is a continuing and future act, rather than a past and accomplished one. Fourth, at the time that this letter was written, the appellation "lord" indicated the head of the Roman Empire. Here the early church engaged an early hermeneutical tension: the emperor as lord and Christ as Lord. The juxtaposition of the "lord" and the "Lord" provided the occasion for both political persecution and prophetic proclamation. The fact that four times in this short pericope the term *kyrios*, Lord, is used with reference to Jesus suggests that this Christian community was determined to wrest this name from the imperial lexicon.

The Hope of the Kingdom. The major Christian doctrine illuminated by this text is Christian hope. It is significant that this earliest of Paul's letters would center on hope. As the church dealt with the delayed Parousia, the notion of hope moved from the foreground to the background in doctrinal reflection. It was not until Jürgen Moltmann recovered this emphasis in his *Theology of Hope* that this theme

Pastoral Perspective

inscribed for a good year." The emphasis is on having a *good* rather than a *happy* year. Purposeful, sober reflection is required. Rosh Hashanah, like Advent, is not about "don't worry, be happy" revelry; it is, rather, a recommitment, as a new year unfolds, to live toward the good, the just, and the true. Christian observance of the New Year at the First Sunday of Advent can help congregants embrace more fully the New Year's resolution-like dimension of Paul's prayer to "restore whatever is lacking in your faith."

A second challenge/opportunity is the timing of the First Sunday of Advent shortly after the U.S. observance of Thanksgiving and long after the consumer world has already decorated for Christmas. As the liturgical season of preparation commences, instead of decrying the secular rush to Christmas, we might admire the diligence with which secular preparation has been undertaken. A neighbor of mine in retail sales works through the night the day before Halloween to ready his store for Christmas—a secular analogy to Paul's earnestly praying "night and day" that he might see his congregation "face to face." We might also invite spiritual preparedness at least equal to the physical preparation that accompanies making ready for the holidays. Amid frenzied buying sprees and endless party going, Advent can be refocused as a time to "increase and abound in love," thus reaffirming H. Richard Niebuhr's assertion, rooted in the Great Commandment, that "the purpose of the church [is] the increase of the love of God and neighbor."¹ There is neither a simpler nor a more demanding depiction of faithful living than this.

A third challenge of Advent's First Sunday that can be an opportunity is its emphasis on the second coming rather than the first. The challenges of staying in preparation mode rather than succumbing to premature celebration are complicated when invitation is to make ready not for the birth of God's Anointed One, but for the Anointed One's return. In the first century of the Common Era, faith was bolstered by the assumption that the second coming was imminent. Paul preached with certainty about the "parousia's [second coming's] power to unite the people of God."² It is because of this expectant certainty of reunion with the "Lord Jesus . . . [and] all his saints" that Thessalonian hearts are strengthened in holiness.

1. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 27.

2. Abraham Smith, "First Letter to the Thessalonians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 714.

Exegetical Perspective

apostle and church might see one another again soon. By this point in the letter, we have already heard much of this longing in Paul (2:17–18; 3:1–5) and of Paul’s new assurance that the Thessalonians share it (3:6). We have also heard the intimate language of family, in which Paul understands himself to be both their brother (1:4; 2:1, 17) and their father (2:11), as well as their nurturing nurse (2:7). This close relationship makes a desire to reunite natural. It would be a reduction, though, to see in chapters 1–3 a mere stoking of relational fires. Paul has already commended this church for the way they “became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1:6; see 1 Cor. 11:1) while Paul’s team was ministering among them. Personal example was a central feature in the moral formation of ancient popular philosophy. Now, even at a letter-writer’s distance, Paul hopes that the active love he describes having for them while he was among them will be a model for their own love toward one another. Thus, while some see in the strikingly intimate language of the letter’s first part (e.g., of 2:1–8, 17–18; 3:1–2) the anxious attempt of an insecure apostle to regain his audience, Paul’s assurance about Thessalonian allegiance to him (3:6) suggests that it is more than that. The second part of our First Advent lection suggests that he offers his passion and compassion for them as a model.

... and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all people, as we do to you. Paul has offered the template: love others as we love you. And so after three chapters celebrating the mutual love between himself and the Thessalonians, Paul calls them to widen that circle and practice mutual love for one another in Christian community and even beyond that for all people. In this middle clause of the prayer, he sets the pattern for half of what is yet to come in the letter. Chapter 4 begins with the general summons: follow Pauls lead by walking (*peripateō*) in a way that pleases God. This will involve their not wronging a brother or sister in matters sexual (4:3–6) and generally loving their Christian brothers and sisters in a God-taught way that will even catch the outsider’s eye (4:9–12). All of this they “learned from” Paul and his team in the first encounter (4:1a) but should do “more and more” (4:1b, 10). To these daily-life instructions, Paul adds seventeen discrete commands that paint a beautiful portrait of “love to one another” lived out in the worshiping community (5:12–22).

Homiletical Perspective

let the congregation feel the warmth of Paul’s praise and then, in a kind of encomium, praise the congregation for what “we” (“we” is important here) have accomplished this year. It is encouraging for people occasionally to hear that they have done good things for God and God’s people and done them well.

Then read the second part of the text. There’s the rub. Paul prays that we might be holy in heart and blameless when Jesus comes with all the saints. Is that encouraging? The very idea that we could ever be called to blamelessness makes many want to give up without even trying. Can we imagine living a blameless day, much less a blameless life?

Just as our heads are spinning, we hear rumbles from the apocalyptic language that follows. When Jesus returns, he will bring with him those who have died. And we will go to meet them. And what else will Jesus bring? Not blame, but mercy. Not judgment, but grace. Not condemnation, but forgiveness. Not wrath, but salvation! Did Jesus condemn Peter who denied him? No. Did Jesus condemn the sinful woman? No. Did Jesus condemn Paul, who persecuted his followers? No. And Jesus does not condemn us. The news, after all, is good.

Writer and teacher Reynolds Price developed a spinal tumor that was not only deadly but incredibly painful. He tells us that he was not an especially religious person. But very early one morning he had a vision that transported him to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He saw twelve persons that he knew were the disciples and a sleeping man that he knew was Jesus. Jesus then stood up and walked toward him. Taking his hand, he led Price into the water. He took handfuls of water and poured them on Price’s head and damaged back. Then Jesus said: “Your sins are forgiven.” Price asked, “Am I also cured?” And Jesus said, “That too.”¹

We are called to do the best we can to live lives pleasing to God. Though we will surely fail to live up to the high standards of perfection, we can be grateful for those things we have done for God and live in hopeful confidence that the love and mercy of the risen Christ will not let us go. As Tennyson wrote of his faith, “Not one life shall be destroyed, or cast as rubbish to the void.”²

And there is more. Remember, when Jesus comes, he will bring with him those who have gone before, those whom we have loved and lost a while, and they will stand up for us before the throne of

1. Reynolds Price, *A Whole New Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 43.

2. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* 54:5, in *The Literature of England*, ed. George B. Woods et al. (Chicago: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1958), 2:631.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Theological Perspective

regained prominence. In the introduction to his watershed work, Moltmann observes that “the more Christianity became an organization for discipleship under the auspices of the Roman state religion and persistently upheld the claims of that religion, the more eschatology and its mobilizing, revolutionizing, and critical effects upon history as it has now to be lived were left to fanatical sects and revolutionary groups. . . . From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present.”²

It is hope that draws both love and faith into maturity. Because this text rests on the foundation of hope, Paul’s prayer in verse 12—“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you”—can be understood as an exhortation and testimony to imperfect people pursuing a perfect love.

The Work of the Kingdom. Malherbe’s observation that this letter was originally addressed to a group of laborers suggests that there may be a theological connection between the ideas of work and hope. The group of day laborers whom Malherbe mentioned at the beginning of this reflection was the locus of the meeting of the Word and the human need that gave rise to the church in Thessalonica. Their experience as workers provided a hermeneutic lens through which they viewed the gospel message. This word was one of hope as we noted above, but it was also a word that revalorized their labor.

According to some scholars, religious instructors of the day had the options of supporting themselves through the patronage of the wealthy, asking for alms, and working. Common work was denigrated because professional people of the day despised physical labor. However, the apostle Paul chose to work as a tentmaker, and according to tradition every Jew was expected to have a trade, including rabbis. Therefore, it is not surprising that theologies of hope are closely connected with theologies of work. Moltmann suggests that the hope which calls us into the future is one that requires work. That work painstakingly shapes the promise into the reality. It may well have been this realization that struck a redemptive chord in that now hopeful group of workers.

JAMES H. EVANS JR.

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 15–16.

Pastoral Perspective

How do we access the insights of the Thessalonian correspondence from a postmillennial perspective? How do we ready ourselves for “the coming of our Lord Jesus” if, unlike Paul, we do not believe in the Parousia’s imminence? Can we find value in the text’s expectancy without embracing its time line? Pastorally, the answer is surely yes. Life is full of endings and beginnings. There are crossroads moments in each life when an accounting is demanded and transformed living is called for, regardless of *when* the end will come; what we know is that it will eventually come. There comes a time when there is no time left and “there is such a thing as being too late. . . . There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect.”³

Living with a posture of expectancy is the antidote to being “too late.” Such living entails a commitment to faithfulness and diligent preparation that results in an “increase . . . in love for one another and for all” and is not dependent on the Parousia’s time line. One need not embrace a notion of the Parousia’s proximity to live expectantly, for “about that day or hour no one knows” (Mark 13:32). The time to live with purpose is ever present. Abounding love and strengthened hearts produce faithful living, not just amid the anticipation of the Parousia, but “in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2 RSV), while we wait and however long we wait.

On the First Sunday of Advent many congregations light the hope candle. A vision of “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” can encourage hope, regardless of how or when it occurs, whether the hearer conceives of this coming literally in history or metaphorically in the experiences of individuals and communities. To be ready for the “coming of our Lord Jesus” is a faithful way of living not dependent on predictions as to when. Endings and beginnings abound. Personal tragedy or world calamity can intrude at any time. Faithful preparation and expectant living can help us face whatever comes. Paul’s words of assurance that were intended to “restore whatever is lacking” in the faith of the Thessalonians can bolster the faith of contemporary hearers as well and can be the impetus for all to “increase and abound in love.”

PHILIP E. CAMPBELL

3. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 191.

Exegetical Perspective

. . . so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. The single greatest anxiety among the Thessalonian Christians concerns the shape of God's future for the dead. One or some of their number have apparently died since Paul's time in town, and the church is at a loss to understand what has become of them. During his visit, Paul had taught them that God's Son would return "from heaven . . . and [rescue] us from the wrath that is coming" (1:10; see also 5:1–2). What they clearly did not hear from Paul, or have forgotten, is what happens to Christians who don't live until that time.

To offer comfort (4:18), Paul supplies a brief but reassuring schedule of the end times, in which the dead in Christ precede even those who are alive at his coming. Paul uses the Greek phrase *hama syn autois* to describe the gathering of the dead and the living at that time: the living shall be caught up "together with them" in clouds. Thus, if Paul and the Thessalonians are anticipating their own earthly reunion at some time soon (3:11), the apostle here gives these grieving brothers and sisters the even brighter hope that they will be reunited with dear ones who are "asleep."

Consolation does not exhaust Paul's purpose for his eschatological moment. He will not have these Thessalonians sitting on their rooftops. Rather, he chases his words of assurance with a strong call to vigilance and right living in the meantime. Because the longed-for Son will come "like a thief in the night" the Thessalonians should be constantly ready for his coming—by living as children of light, embodying faith and love. This watchful, awake way of living is not a private or isolated undertaking, but involves the work of mutual edification. The day of reunion will come. The meantime is full of mundane preparations for it.

An Appropriate Prayer. Uneasy is the preacher called to hold forth on Christ's second advent. The mystery of the eschaton eludes us, leaving us and our congregations at least as confused as our ancient Thessalonian brothers and sisters. But on this First Sunday of Advent Paul's brief benediction advocates neither hopelessness nor idle cloud watching. Rather, it invites us into the uneasy tension of 1 Thessalonians: the call to live lovingly in God's present, even as we await God's brilliant someday.

ALLEN HILTON

Homiletical Perspective

grace. In a brief tribute to the great preacher Carlyle Marney after his death, the editors of *Theology Today* said: "Isn't it wonderful to dream that he has his foot in the door for us [when we come to the gates of heaven]." I live and will die in the hope that Frank Mabee, Ronald Osborn, Elizabeth Redwood, Ambrose Edens, and perhaps a few others will stand up for me when the time comes. I promise that I will stand up for you. Will I put my foot in the door if need be? That too.

Another theme that might be pursued emerges from the structure of this little text. In the first section, Timothy brings a good report to Paul, who rejoices in it. The next section contains Paul's ethical message to the church. Paul moves from praise to paraenesis by way of prayer. His prayer provides not only the transitional words that carry the text from the past to the future, but also the key word "now." I have a friend who moves regularly from one meeting to another. She frequently cannot find a nearby parking place, but that does not bother her. As she said once with a smile, "I got to pray for six blocks today." This Advent, as we wait in line at the checkout stand, get tired telephone ears from being on hold, and wonder how long we must wait to get out of this traffic jam, our daily devotions can be enriched by those open-eyed transitional prayers that join the past and future of our faith story with a blessed "God is Now."

JOSEPH R. JETER

3. *Theology Today* 35, no. 4 (January 1979): 450.

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Theological Perspective

Ordinary Bible readers are at times provided with instructions that are *almost* true, such as, “When reading the text, always look for promises,” and “Read the Bible like a love letter.” When it comes to reading Advent texts, an added *almost*-true piece of advice says, “Relate the text to Christmas”; after all, aren’t Advent texts announcing the *advent* of the birth of the Savior? As half-truths these guidelines are just that, *half*-truths; as much as they help the reader, they also may misguide the reader. What I mean is this: There are Bible texts such as the Gospel text for the First Sunday of Advent for which neither promise nor love-letter hunting does any good. This text—a heavily loaded apocalyptic and eschatological text that comes within the larger unit continuing the narrative from the first verse of the chapter—has as its message anything but sentimental feelings of love. Its promise nature is a bit more “promising” as a hermeneutical aid, but even that can be appropriated only after one hears the forceful apocalyptic nature of the text in its radical and almost fearful strangeness.

When it comes to the relation of Advent Sundays to Christmas, even that is an issue that has to be framed widely enough: while this Advent text of course speaks of the coming of the Messiah, it speaks of it in relation to the final eschatological advent of

Pastoral Perspective

Why such apocalyptic imagery of endings and great calamities on the First Sunday of Advent? It feels indecorous at the opening of “the Christmas season.” Even if one brackets an expectation that this be a time of happy socializing, in order to begin the church year with contemplation, repentance, preparation, remembering Christ’s birth—even then, one may be left wondering what the strident imagery of this passage might be saying pastorally. In a second view, the confusion of endings and beginnings is characteristic of biblical witness, as though a dimension of the life of faith can be imagined in that moment at the top of the swing when the one swinging doesn’t know whether she is completing one sweep, beginning another, or is just *still*, present to that pregnant instant in between that doesn’t really exist except as a sort of moment out of time. The Bible and the life it imagines plays with time in instructive ways.

This sense is heightened when the Jeremiah passage for this day is also brought into view (33:14–16). This passage is easier for Advent, as the prophet proclaims his vision of a reunified, prosperous people. In a time of political intrigue and changing fortunes, Jeremiah resisted those who counseled expediency. God promised faithfulness to the people from the first, and God’s promise is sure. Even in a time of material defeat, God’s faithfulness

Exegetical Perspective

The First Sunday of Advent might seem an odd time to read about the end “drawing near,” and yet it is traditional because it is appropriate, as the church reflects on Christ’s first coming, to reflect also on his return. Earlier in chapter 21, Jesus describes signs of the impending doom of Jerusalem. Now, however, the language shifts to apocalyptic drama, with nature in turmoil and humanity on alert. It raises a key question: Does Jesus here refer to the end times? Or does he continue his discussion about Jerusalem’s destruction? While Tom Wright opts for the latter in his approachable *Luke for Everyone* commentary, most scholars see a shift at verse 26 to the end times, Christ’s return, and the consummation of the kingdom.¹ This commentator agrees with the latter interpretation, for the imagery presents the completion of all that has been promised. This text does allow dual levels of interpretation, however, so it could apply to the events of 70 CE while also intimating a grander, final fulfillment.

Nature will violently mark the coming of the Son of Man (vv. 25–28). The sea shakes and the sky fills with portents, leaving people terrified and confused.

1. Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 249–56; in contrast with Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, 9:51–24:53 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1688–92; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 739–42.

Homiletical Perspective

It’s the First Sunday of Advent. The shopping malls have been displaying Christmas decorations and playing carols since just after Halloween. Children have already watched the Christmas parade. Parents and grandparents have been stocking up on the perfect Christmas gifts for months. And now these folks come to church to experience Advent worship. If they come expecting more of what their culture offers, they are certainly in for a rude awakening! In worship they won’t find Santa, nor will they encounter a smiling young Mary, a cooing baby Jesus, inquisitive shepherds, or singing angels. They may be both disappointed and dismayed by the Gospel text.

This section of Jesus’ speech from the temple in Jerusalem is full of frightening images, confusing metaphors, and shocking admonitions. We do not encounter the sweet baby Jesus people wait for during Advent this first Sunday, but the stern, adult Jesus, picturing the whole universe being shaken and turned upside down. It is not a text most preachers are thrilled to explore in congregations full of people who don’t understand why the church “can not just get on to Christmas already!”

The season of Advent demands a very different kind of preparation than the shopping malls and glitzy catalogs recommend. And on this First Sunday

Luke 21:25-36

Theological Perspective

God's salvific work, the coming of God's kingdom. That is the whole point of having the lectionaries guide preachers to the eschatological texts of the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament in terms of other readings for this season).

At the same time, there is the true other half: the Gospel text also ties the coming of the Christmas child to the whole history of Israel's expectations. This text does announce Jesus. The title "Son of Man"—a nomenclature subject to misinterpretation based on older exegesis that equated it merely with the human nature of the Savior—speaks volumes to ears tuned in to Old Testament theology. The one "like a son of man" in the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7:13-14 (RSV) was given dominion and authority over nations and rulers. While the title Son of Man of course may at times speak of the humanity of the God-Man, its main New Testament theological meaning is the opposite: it is the highest christological title. To add to the complexity of this title, exegetes are telling us that "Son of Man" is also widely used in New Testament passages that speak of suffering. In other words, perhaps the best way to try to capture what the Lukan text is telling those who are preparing their hearts for the coming of the child is to refer to the imagery of the last New Testament book, appropriately called Apocalypse, with its picture of the Lamb who had been slain sitting on the throne and to whom were given the keys of "reading the future" of the scroll.

The task of the preacher in every generation is to study carefully the "theological geography" of salvation history and help Advent Sunday worshipers make these connections between the past promises, Advent Sunday, Christmas, and the eschaton. Preparing the homily for the First Sunday of Advent's Gospel text is not the place to engage in the (speculative) guesswork of end-time time lines or charts. Luke and other evangelists drew the apocalyptic materials from the rich Old Testament (and intertestamental) reservoir without any interest—as far as I can tell—in juggling with the order of events. The message of the pericope for the Christian expositor and theologian is simply this: a transformative chain of events was launched at the announcement of the coming of the infant, God-incarnate, the strangeness and peculiarity of which can be proclaimed only with the help of this frightening apocalyptic imagery.

Once the apocalyptic force of the text is heard in all its oddity, the congregation is ready to appreciate the hope-filled message of Luke. As exegetes remind

Pastoral Perspective

will yet be written *within*, in the *hearts* of God's people. As they redirect themselves and their community toward the ways of life that God has given them, a new covenant will be written on their hearts, despite desolation and fear. And the memory of their leader David will one day be recovered as a son of David's line will be restored to the throne. Here God is relentlessly faithful, carrying and chastening hearts through all things.

And so the church turns to Luke on the First Sunday of Advent, perhaps expecting to hear another origin story of Jesus, from David's line. But this doesn't come. In earshot of Jeremiah's faith, the church has not made it so easy. We are taken, instead, to the *end*, right before the plot to kill Jesus unfolds. We're taken to a passage in which Jesus speaks not of his *first*, but of his anticipated *second* coming at the end of the age. And we're told not just to prepare, but to *beware*.

No "city sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style" here. We hear Jesus tell of more ominous signs and portents: "distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves"; the powers even of the heavens to be "shaken" and people to be fainting "from fear and foreboding." It is then that his hearers will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud. And this will mark the beginning of the end and the end of the beginning.

Luke wrote with a deep and growing sense that Christian discipleship is a kind of *living in between*—aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know this Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable, even tumultuous world, waiting to stand before him, yet not always knowing where he is.

"Look at the fig tree. It tells you when summer is coming. Read the times as you read a fig tree. Stay awake. Do not let your hearts be weighed down with things distracting from the truth of it." This Jesus taught as a second Jeremiah. "The world's a scary place, but don't let your hearts be troubled. I have overcome the world. So wait in the midst of it all, just before the dawn, for in the midst of the night there are strange and redeeming events afoot."

And with this the church begins a new year, asked to begin afresh, not just on a calendar, but in individual hearts, in relationships, in congregations, and in our yearning for a promise worth living for. Hearers of this passage are bidden to live lives of faithful, active waiting in the *meantime* because they hear again the name of the One who holds them in the *ending* time.

Exegetical Perspective

Earlier prophets identified the arrival of God's judgment in similar language (e.g., Isa. 13:6–11; Ezek. 32:7–8; Joel 2:30–31), and this may be understood as nature literally descending into chaos or as the complete overturning of earthly political and military domination. The latter would have been apparent not only in the destruction of Jerusalem but also in the political chaos of the first-century Roman Empire. The nature images, however, remind us of the sheer power and unexpected nature of a tsunami or an earthquake and the helplessness of all humanity in the face of such destruction. These descriptions portend a catastrophe greater than even the worst political disaster.

Within this first section are two exegetical cruxes: the identity of the Son of Man in verse 27 and the definition of “redemption” in verse 28. Parallels to Daniel 7:13 suggest interpreting this passage in light of Daniel's vision. While Daniel 7:13–14 depicts a single figure, the interpretation of the dream in Daniel 7:18, 22, and 27 identifies “one like a son of man” as a group given the power to reign. Throughout Luke, however, Jesus consistently uses the title “Son of Man” self-referentially; so within this context Luke's Jesus functions as the representative saint, one truly righteous who will bring about God's kingdom and, together with the saints, rule. Regarding the term “redemption,” Luke describes liberation from the fallen world and its corruption, not the Pauline sense of forgiveness of sin and deliverance from its just penalty. Those who trust in God and live faithfully need not fear when the world collapses around them. Rather, they should stand confidently, trusting in God's faithfulness to bring about their emancipation from a world hostile to Christians.

In the next section (vv. 29–31), Jesus uses a nature illustration to clarify that his audience ought to discern the meaning of the signs here described. The fig tree loses its leaves each winter but regains them in the spring. The signs, Jesus states, will be clearly identifiable. Every person in history who has predicted an exact date for the final return of Christ has been wrong, so it would behoove believers to live in expectation of Christ's return as wars and natural disasters pile up, but also to live in humility, realizing Christ's return will be like a thief in the night (cf. Luke 12:33). Finally, Jesus maintains that these signs indicate that the end is “near,” not necessarily “arrived.” Christians ought to remain alert, careful to stay faithful despite upheaval or persecution.

Verses 32–33 give two brief, proverbial statements, the first about “this generation” not passing away

Homiletical Perspective

of Advent the Gospel text sets a very different tone than the cultural Christmas season that surrounds worshipers outside the church. Vincent van Gogh captures the mood of this Advent text in his most famous painting, *The Starry Night* (1889). The painting exhibits the bold colors that van Gogh is known for and the postimpressionist style that he helped to make famous. Van Gogh was the son of a Dutch pastor and for a time an evangelist to the poor himself, so he was likely familiar with texts such as this one from Luke 21. The painting depicts an apocalyptic sky, like that described by Jesus. There are swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars, described by one art critic as “rockets of burning yellow.”¹ In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature. In the foreground, a foreboding flamelike image connects earth and sky. Art historians take it to be a cypress tree, which in van Gogh's time would have been associated with graveyards and mourning. The famous painting elicits differing reactions from those who admire it. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, others as something bold and beautiful, others as a glimpse of God.

Like van Gogh's great painting, Luke's apocalypse elicits different reactions from those who admire it. Frightening, bold, and beautiful glimpses of God—this is what Jesus offers on this First Sunday of Advent. As difficult as it is to hear, as troubled as the text may make listeners feel, in it are treasures that help focus us on the true meaning and purpose of Advent. In it, Jesus challenges us, as he did his original hearers in the Jerusalem temple, to look up, pay attention, and be ready. Advent means “coming” or “arrival,” and this apocalyptic text from Luke offers the preacher the opportunity to remind worshipers that Advent involves preparing for two comings: God coming to earth in the infant Jesus whom we await at Christmas, and Christ returning to earth at a time we do not know. With this second Advent, it is not a matter of if, but of when, and Jesus wants us to be ready. We do so, Jesus says, by keeping alert, constantly preparing, and continuing to put our hope in our loving God, who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Some preachers and worshipers in our time emphasize its fearful tones, others its encouragement

1. Nicholas Pioch, “Gogh, Vincent van, The Starry Night” (Webmuseum Paris, 2002), <http://www.ibiblio.org> (accessed October 2, 2007).

Luke 21:25-36

Theological Perspective

us, Luke relates the frightening future to his readers more directly than other evangelists and adds the remark on the coming of the Son of Man with a promise. Furthermore, Luke ends this pericope with an encouragement and exhortation. While heavens and earth may pass away in the final eschatological transformation, the word of God stays firm, Luke reminds us. While judgment seems evident, “redemption is drawing near.”

The Gospel text for the First Sunday of Advent, cast in the form and using the content of apocalyptic eschatology, is neither a world-renouncing fatalism or despair nor an escapist withdrawal or paralysis, but rather a “theology of hope.” The church father Tertullian put it this way: “The kingdom of God, beloved brethren, is beginning to be at hand; the reward of life, and the rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession lately lost of paradise, are now coming, with the passing away of the world; already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude?”¹ The Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann makes a similar statement, with reference to the telling title of his first landmark book: “With *Theology of Hope* . . . I tried to present the Christian hope no longer as such an ‘opium of the beyond’ but rather as the divine power that makes us alive in this world.”²

The preacher, having opened this eschatological horizon to her or his listeners, may be in a better place to help the congregation see the wider historical and sociopolitical context of this Gospel as a frame for the text of the Second Sunday of Advent and the strongly ethical and eschatological text for the Third Sunday of Advent.

VELI-MATTI KÄRKKÄINEN

Pastoral Perspective

Harbingers of both progress and doom would give time differently. They would say that the future comes only when the hands of our clocks have moved to the right, and that the past is little more than fodder for a sense of superiority or fuel for hurt feelings—but there is a different story of time told here. It’s a story of a time bigger than our own life stories, and of a time that gives lives a meaning full of a promise that neither optimism nor pessimism can even begin to comprehend. It’s an *eschatology of eventfulness*—if one wants to name it—in which we live our lives, and see all creation alive, in a rhythm of reality and promise.

The reality is this: anything can happen at any moment—and in one way or another everything *is* happening in every moment. There is no present moment to which one can cling, and change is not limited by predictability and control. Here is an opportunity gently to challenge the kind of religion that turns faith into a sort of fee-for-service arrangement with the Divine. Yet, even as we *do* participate in our happiness, and even as there *are* indefinable connections between how we live and *what* we live, these connections are never exact. There are other realities at work that sometimes overwhelm—realities of brokenness and evil, of serendipity and grace—and so the present moment is itself an event *for* us, worth loving and worth living, because it is a *gift*. One can only accept it with thanksgiving, trust the promise that lies behind it, and pray for the strength to do what is necessary to fill it with faithfulness—waiting for God. No nostalgia here, and no pie-in-the-sky dreaming. No resignation to oppression or failure, either, and no overestimation of powers or virtues. *Real* hope, *real* knowledge, *real* love in Jesus. Faith is living in the *reality*, by virtue of the *promise*. There may lie the pastoral word.

WESLEY D. AVRAM

1. Tertullian, *The Treatises*, 7: *On the Mortality in Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 5:64, 69.

2. Jürgen Moltmann et al., *Love: The Foundation of Hope; The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 4.

Exegetical Perspective

before Jesus' words are fulfilled, the latter about the eternal nature of his words. Scholarly discussion concerning what Jesus meant by "this generation" is multifaceted, but this essay will consider two main solutions. The first holds that the "generation" means "those who oppose Jesus and his message," a meaning consistent in Luke and still available to our observation today. The second posits that "generation" refers to the generation in which the signs first appear, to whom the end also will be revealed, within one generation and not extending over decades or centuries. The term remains ambiguous. In contrast, however, in verse 33 Jesus equates his words to authoritative, enduring Scripture. Despite delay or confusion, Jesus' followers are not to doubt his words: things *will* come to pass as he has described. This affirmation grounds the injunctions of the final section, because the confidence to "stand" and "lift your heads" comes from trust in God's faithfulness to God's promises.

This last section resembles the practical injunctions ending Paul's letters, commands given based on the theology already presented. Jesus warns his hearers to "be careful" so that they are not surprised on the day of judgment. A favorable judgment is not guaranteed to all who claim to be followers of Jesus. Instead, while judgment happens to all, only those who have remained faithful and lived obediently—not becoming enamored with the world and all that is in it—will stand before Jesus. Here "to stand before" seems to indicate the same thing as "eternal life." Those who "make it" through judgment are those who remained faithful. This obedient living, however, is not done independently, as a "works-righteousness" to earn salvation. Instead, verse 36 reveals that it is done prayerfully, depending upon God to give strength to persevere despite temptation or persecution. This, indeed, is the point of the whole passage, which is as relevant to our latter-day selves and congregations as it was to our first-century brothers and sisters: be watchful and alert, prayerful and humble, trusting in God and awaiting redemption from the world's systems that only God can, and will, bring.

MARIAM J. KAMELL

Homiletical Perspective

and consolation. For over a decade at the turn of the twenty-first century, the bestselling fiction series *Left Behind* has captured readers all over the globe. The focus of the series is on the end times and the great turmoil that exists in the world as the forces of good and evil face off in preparation for Christ's second coming. The books foster fear and desperation for those who may get "left behind," and many pulpits feature this message.

Luke's painting of the apocalypse resists this fearful interpretation. Despite some frightening images, the Advent text from Luke offers not fear and damnation, but hope and expectation. God in Christ is coming because God loves us—because God wants to redeem us (v. 28). In the midst of the fearful specter, Jesus calls us to "stand up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is drawing near." We may not live as the Lukan community, on the margins of society, in a world riddled with disease and drought and despair. Nevertheless, we too find hope in apocalyptic writing about a better world that can break forth at any time. Famine, drought, war, disease, still plague our world, and closer to home people struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, and misplaced priorities. Christ's call to be alert and constantly praying for God's kingdom to break through into our world is as pertinent a call for us this Advent as it ever has been. Our broken and hurting selves and world need Christ to come, and we must take time this Advent to prepare to receive him.

The good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us. Just as the leaves on the fig tree offer hope in late winter that summer is coming again, so God's word, in Jesus, promises us new life. Advent offers us expectation and hope for something new. "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28). "Be alert at all times" (v. 36). May those who come to Advent worship leave with a commitment to use this season of Advent to prepare for God's kingdom breaking forth, as we await the radical, earth-shattering welcome of the Prince of Peace—the little baby, and the risen Lord.

KATHY BEACH-VERHEY

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Malachi 3:1-4

¹See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

²But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; ³he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Theological Perspective

Despite all of the ambiguities regarding the date and authorship of Malachi, most scholars agree that this minor prophet was speaking to a postexilic community of Jews who had returned to Judah. Much of the book is written as a series of *disputations*, and the prophet serves as an arbiter in these conflicts between the people and God. In response to complaints that God has failed to exercise divine judgment, the prophet delivers an eschatological rebuttal, which raises several points with significant theological import. This essay will address two broad themes, which the reader finds woven together throughout the lection: (1) divine judgment, the Day of the Lord, and the character of God's justice, and (2) the purification of the people.

Divine Judgment, the Day of the Lord, and the Character of God's Justice. The people, newly restored in Judah, are skeptical of God's justice, because their practices of piety have yielded neither divine retributive judgment against "evildoers" nor prosperity for the restoration community. Their challenges to the prophet smack of self-righteousness, and they seemingly have failed to notice that their compromised worship practices, marital infidelity, and social injustice dishonor God. They seek and desire the coming of the Lord,

Pastoral Perspective

Years ago I heard Elie Weisel, the Jewish writer and Nobel Prize winner, recall a childhood story. When he was a boy, his mother would greet him every day when he returned from school. Every day she would ask him the same question. She did not ask, "What did you do today?" or "Whom did you talk to today?" or even "What did you learn today?" She would ask, "Did you have a good question today?"

Malachi had some good questions for his day. How has God loved us? (1:2) "Has not one God created us?" (2:10) "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17) How shall we return to God? (3:7) Malachi poses twenty-two questions in just fifty-five verses. God's questions to the priests and the people are articulated; their responses to God are anticipated. Rhetorical questions emphasize the prophetic passion for integrity; direct inquiries evoke the people's questions and provoke impassioned response. The question-and-answer style opens prophetic deliverance to more of a prophet-and-people deliberation, edgy but candid, confrontational and engaging. They are now partners in critical reflection on the nature of God and self-critical reflection on the conduct of Israel.

Malachi has some good questions for our day. His very use of questions as a means of prophetic revelation counters the unthinking certitude of much

Exegetical Perspective

The short biblical book of Malachi hails from the Second Temple period, also known as postexilic times, and was written clearly after the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 BCE (see Ezra 6:15). Lamenting the corruption of the priesthood, its author must have lived long enough after the initial celebration and dedication to allow for the witness of discontent and questionable ritual practices (Mal. 1:6–14), somewhere in the first half of the fifth century BCE. Malachi, the Hebrew word for “my messenger,” may be the self-designation of a priest disgruntled with the practices of his colleagues and congregation, rather than a personal name; alternatively, it may be a pun on such a name. While some ancient sources assume that the messenger is Ezra (see Targum; also *b. Meg.* 15a), others have identified him as Mordecai (Rabbi Nachman). Yet others wonder whether this was a reference to the prophet Elijah (see Mal. 4:5–6). Prophecy from the center of religious (and by extension some social) power, this temple prophet identifies with divine first-person speech, calling other priests and the people to account.¹

1. See for example, Eileen M. Schuller, OSU, “The Book of Malachi: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 841–77.

Homiletical Perspective

The word of the Lord came to Malachi as a word of promise. That promise comes as good news to us; but there is also at least a degree of uneasiness in the promise. There are some elements of the promise that we would love to have fulfilled and other elements that we would just as soon leave unfulfilled.

This blend of joy and apprehension at the prospect of promise fulfillment is most clearly reflected in verse 2: “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap.” The believer responds to this promise by wondering exactly what is meant by the refining. What exactly in my life is in need of refining? And how much will it hurt? What might I have to give up (or what might be taken from me) before I would be refined like gold and silver?

In many ways, our response to this text is probably not that much different from the response of Malachi’s original audience. Like them, we want to stand and see that day. We want our offerings to be pleasing to the Lord. We want to see the restoration of the covenant. We want to see things made right, the way God intended—and yet . . . and yet we are not so sure. We do not want to go through too much change or pain to see it happen.

This tension between joy and apprehension could provide great fodder for preaching, as we try to hear

Malachi 3:1-4

Theological Perspective

imagining that it will be favorable for them. The prophet, however, reminds the people that the arrival of divine judgment rarely meets human expectations—it is sudden, surprising, and often as much a judgment against the ones yearning for it as it is a judgment against their enemies (Amos 5:18). When the Day of the Lord arrives, the prophet warns, all will be found guilty and all will be deserving of punishment. In particular, in verse 5 (curiously, not part of this lection), the prophet warns that God's swift judgment will be executed upon the perpetrators of social injustice.

God's judgment should not, however, be understood as solely punitive, even though the people seem to deserve punishment. God's justice is not the justice expected by the restoration community. Instead, in this text we find that the divine judgment to be exercised on the Day of the Lord has a more long-range telos, in that it will issue in a process of purification that makes a place hospitable for the abiding presence of God. In the end, God's schema of justice is restorative rather than retributive.

The Purification of the People. In two places in this short lection, we find references to the ways in which purifying preparations are made for God's presence with the people. In verse 1, the prophet points to the coming of a messenger who would clear or "prepare the way of the Lord." In verses 2–3, the prophet describes the Lord's coming as like the refiner's fire, whose purpose is to remove impurities and strengthen the substance being refined. John Calvin wrote this about the refiner's fire: "The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from their dross."

The refiner's fire has made a number of appearances in theological discourse over time. What is it that stands in need of purification? And what will be consumed by flames in the process? After purification, what is it that God reckons as precious metal? Calvin thought that the refiner's fire would serve to correct the corruption not only of the people, but of the Levitical priests also: "Such then was the contagion, that not only the common people became corrupt, but even the Levites themselves, who ought to have been guides to others, and who were to be in the Church as it were the pattern of holiness. God however promises that such would be the purifying which Christ would effect, and so regulated, that it would consume the whole people,

Pastoral Perspective

so-called religious conviction. "Who can endure the day of his coming?" (3:2) Who will be "pure and blameless" in the day of Christ? (Phil. 1:10) Who will prepare the way by repentance and forgiveness? (Luke 3:1–6) Advent questions! Advent questions our worthiness, readiness, and willingness for Christ's coming. "The descendants of Levi" are called to new "integrity and uprightness," a turning "from iniquity," and a renewed "reverence" for God's "covenant of life and well-being" with us (Mal. 2:5–6). Like the ancient priesthood, the contemporary priesthood of believers opens its life to the refining presence of God and offers its life in righteous practice.

A faithful hearing of this text will turn the church to some good questions about its worship life during Advent: Are prayers prophetic as well as personal, directed to injustice and corruption as well as seasonal anxiety and individual omissions? A prayer of confession for Advent admits, "We live casual lives, ignoring your promised judgment. We accept lies as truth, exploit neighbors, abuse the earth, and refuse your justice and peace." A prayer for the Second Sunday of Advent addresses the God of mercy: "You sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins."¹

Is the Word proclaimed through the sacrament of baptism? The baptismal liturgy poses some good questions. Malachi's indictment that "you have turned aside from the way" (2:8) and John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3) are echoed in the profession of faith. "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" Malachi's image of God's messenger as "fullers' soap" who "will purify the descendants of Levi" (3:2b–3) is reflected in the Thanksgiving over the Water when we praise God for giving us a "cleansing and rebirth . . . that we might . . . serve you as a royal priesthood."² The communal significance of baptism involves the entire congregation in reaffirming God's "covenant of life and well-being" in Jesus Christ. Baptism prepares the way, and it answers one of Malachi's most pressing questions: "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17). Today's text begins an answer. "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way." The sacrament of baptism is a sign that God is here, with us, in the world.

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 133.

2. *Ibid.*, 407, 411.

Exegetical Perspective

This lection follows Malachi's poignant questions of dysfunctional religion by means of rhetorical questions about the people's accountability to the covenant and the implied lack thereof, which ignorantly ask where to find the God of justice (Mal. 2:17). The prophet switches his tone in 3:1–4 while continuing the judgment oracle, which is the fourth of six oracles in the book (1:2–5; 1:6–2:9; 2:10–16; 2:17–3:5; 3:6–12; 3:13–4:3). Alternating between first- and third-person divine speech, the passage talks about a future time, characterized as a day of judgment (Mal. 3:5). Language reminiscent of Second Isaiah (see Isa. 40:3) proclaims the commission of God's messenger "to prepare the way before me" to usher in the sudden arrival of God in the temple. This staging of a grand entrance for YHWH at a time of discontent and disappointment, in the midst of struggles for direction among those who find themselves back in Judah, utilizes the memory of comfort and liberation from a century earlier to invoke the possibility of another change in direction.

The passage continues with *YHWH Zebaoth*, the God of hosts, promising the arrival of "the messenger of the covenant" with the attribute "in whom you delight" (Mal. 3:1b). This attribute is a formula used for both God and human beings throughout the First Testament (see Deut. 10:15; Gen. 34:19; 1 Sam. 18:22; Pss. 5:5; 34:13; etc.). While much more prevalent in its absence, its presence indicates a specially sanctioned event. So what is going on in this grand entrance, and who is really arriving? The text remains ambiguous as to whether the reference is to a messenger, who may or may not be identical with the messenger of the covenant mentioned in the following sentence, or to God, or to the "great king" promised in Malachi 1:14. Commentators through the ages have debated the identity of this messenger, including the possibility of a priestly messiah figure. Centuries later, in the New Testament the Malachi verse is merged with the verse in Second Isaiah to identify the messenger with John the Baptizer (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).

While the actual identity of this ominous figure remains vague, its impact is not. This messenger is to enforce the covenant with powerful means, "like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap" (Mal. 3:2). It is not just any fire and any soap, but very particular ones, resulting in a particular process of cleansing. Such purification will be characterized by extreme heat and strong lye; all possible uncleanness will be burned and washed away from the Levitical priesthood until the ideal of covenant faithfulness is

Homiletical Perspective

this promise anew and to reflect on our relationship to it. From a homiletical perspective, we ask how we can best approach the tension and gain some understanding. Two approaches lend themselves readily to addressing the tension in the promise of something new: we can reflect on the anticipation of a couple expecting a child, and we can reflect socially and culturally on what might really be changed when God's promised messenger of the covenant does come.

The culture of every people has stories about the anticipation involved in those nine months of waiting for a child to be born. Whether you retell a story from film or television or you tell your own story, the important point to make is that major events in life often come with very mixed emotions and mixed feelings. Even in the midst of joy at the prospect of this new life, this new person to love, there is often fear about the unknowns involved.

One story that reflects these ambivalences appears in the acclaimed 2007 film *Juno*. The title character in the film, a pregnant high-school student, wrestles throughout the movie, whose time frame is the nine-month pregnancy, with what this pregnancy and child mean for her relationship with friends, family, the baby's father, prospective adoptive parents, and herself. This story may help our parishioners reflect on our own feelings at hearing Malachi's promise. Juno wants to see this baby born and be healthy and have a good life. But what exactly does that mean for her? What does she have to sacrifice to get there? What will be changed in her life, regardless of the choices she makes going forward?

Another interesting layer of *Juno* for this text is the degree to which events are outside of Juno's control during the pregnancy. There are some choices she can make and some ways that she can affect outcomes, but there are many ways that she cannot. After hand-selecting adoptive parents for her as-yet unborn child, Juno comes to discover that nothing is guaranteed and people sometimes turn out to be different from what you at first may have thought. Events that have deep meaning for Juno and her child happen outside of her effective control. In the same way, God's promise of covenant restoration happens outside of our control. It is God's promise and God's restoration. It will happen, in God's way and whether we are ready for it or not.

Another approach to the same themes may come from some quite honest reflection on our church and our broader society. What might be refined and purified in God's promised refining fire? When

Malachi 3:1-4

Theological Perspective

and yet purify the elect, and purify them like silver, that they may be saved.”¹

Two things should be said about Calvin’s interpretation of verse 3 and the association he makes with the *doctrine of election*. First, Calvin’s commentaries on the prophets, not surprisingly, have a christocentric focus that sometimes crosses over into a supersessionist interpretation. We must always exercise a bit of caution, then, when consulting these texts, even when we do so in the context of Advent, a time in the liturgical year particularly set aside for the anticipation of the coming Messiah. Second, even as Calvin derives support for the doctrine of election in the Malachi passage, he also reminds the reader that election is not for privilege, but for a purpose. Once again, proper temple worship would be restored, and the people (Levitical priests, in particular) would make offerings acceptable to God.

Purification has another possible purpose, as well, in addition to the removal of impurities. When silver is refined, it is treated with carbon or charcoal, preventing the absorption of oxygen and resulting in its sheen and purity. One writer has suggested that a silversmith knows that the refining process is complete only when she observes her “own image reflected in the mirror-like surface of the metal.”² If this is the case, does the prophet also suggest that the *imago Dei* is restored in this process? Is humanity deemed good and righteous when once again the divine image is reflected in the human heart?³

JENNIFER RYAN AYRES

Pastoral Perspective

Do hymns and choral music express the messenger’s judgment as well as the joy? While many are eager to sing and hear the familiar Christmas carols, Advent hymn themes are discordant, unsung, and unpopular in many congregations. The notes of today’s lectionary texts are sounded in hymns like “O Day of God, Draw Near,” which sings of judgment and faithfulness, justice and security.³

The text of Malachi 3:1–3 appears in one of the signature choral works of this season, George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*. With his libretto, Charles Jennens raised Malachi’s faithful question about the nature of God’s love. He answered it with a catena of powerful Scriptures. A congregation blessed with the choral acumen to offer this masterpiece should hear the Malachi text in context. The recitative (“The Lord, whom ye seek shall suddenly come”), air for bass (“But who may abide the day of his coming?”) and chorus (“He shall purify the sons of Levi”) is answered by an alto, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us.” Music can sing the Word and proclaim the good news.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, music can sing the Word, proclaim the good news, and challenge both preacher and congregation. After the first presentation of *Messiah* in London in 1741, Handel wrote to a friend: “I should be sorry if I only entertained them. I wished to make them better.” The composer challenges the preacher to go beyond feeling good to doing good. At issue are some good questions about worship in our day: Entertainment or edification? Diversion or direction? Amusement or awareness? Handel himself provided an answer. Although by 1751 he was blind, until his death he conducted *Messiah* as an annual benefit for the Foundling Hospital in London, which served mostly widows and orphans of the clergy. The intent was not just to entertain; Handel’s hope was to make them just and better. His ear was open to the prophetic word: “Present offerings to the LORD in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3).

Malachi opens the church to some good questions for today.

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

1. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 5:573.

2. Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Bible Commentary 32 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 329.

3. Calvin famously likened the *imago Dei* to a mirror within the human soul, which is meant to reflect God’s glory (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 1.15.4).

3. *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 611; *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 452.

Exegetical Perspective

demonstrated by their performance of “offerings in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3). Righteousness (*tsedaqah*) is an essential quality of the covenant made with Moses and the people at Sinai (see Exod. 19:1–6). This covenant, the ideal of Torah living, is held up by the majority of the prophets. Thus, to these idealized times of the past, Malachi calls this Second-Temple people to return (Mal. 3:4).

Read thusly, the message of these verses is basically a conservative one, as it calls for a return to the idealized past to avoid the threat of judgment. The “good old times” are invoked and promised as a possibility, if only the people and the priesthood change their current ways: this is what a simplistic reading would suggest.

To arrive at a more differentiated interpretation of the present-past-future continuum in Malachi and other prophetic books of the Second Temple period, one needs to consider the sociohistorical context of the Judeans under the Persian Empire.² A mixed multitude of those who returned from the exile in Babylon, those who never left the land, and those who since had moved there and intermarried, these fifth-century-BCE Judeans are living together uncomfortably with competing messages as to what faithful living entails now (see, for example, Isa. 56:1–8; Ezra 9:1–2, 10–15; Neh. 5:1–5). Which of the rival leaders clamoring for power are they to follow? The Levitical purists? The Isaianic reconciliationists? The radical apocalypticists?

Malachi does not exactly take sides. Instead, he offers another possible direction, namely, to go back to the principles of the covenant so as to be rewarded (see Mal. 3:16–4:6). While sympathizing with the Levitical purists, the prophet upholds Moses as a model of righteousness and thus faithful living (Mal. 4:4). If those principles of the past are to be lived out in the present and future, then fundamental change may be possible. Even the possibility of the return of the prophet Elijah is promised. Though its details remain enigmatic, the result is a vision of intergenerational reconciliation (Mal. 4:5–6).

Analogies and allusions abound between the people addressed by Malachi and contemporary congregations in the United States. Competing voices proclaim the “right” direction; rival leaders clamor for power. What would constitute faithful covenant living during this season of Advent?

ANGELA BAUER-LEVESQUE

Homiletical Perspective

God’s promise, spoken through Malachi, is finally fulfilled, what will look different in our church? our world? our lives? A word of warning about this approach: this text is not an occasion to attack enemies or to point out all the things that some imagined “they” are doing wrong. Rather, *we* are the ones who are going to be refined. *We* are the ones in need of refining.

Look inside. Look inside yourself. Look inside your congregation. Look inside your church. What will God’s refining look like? Perhaps the faces in our pews will reflect the rainbow of pigmentation in God’s world more than they do. Perhaps there will be fewer luxury cars in the church parking lot and more beds for the homeless. What will our worship and our stewardship look like if “the offering of Judah and Jerusalem [and Chicago and Dallas and Tuscaloosa and Juneau and First Presbyterian and St. Martin’s Lutheran] will be pleasing to the LORD” (v. 4)? These would be worthwhile questions to ponder.

In closing a sermon prepared with either of these approaches, it would be very helpful to emphasize that the promise of this restoration and refining is sure. It will happen, and it will happen under God’s control and in God’s time. The refining is not waiting for us to feel good about it. God’s promise is sure, and it is good news. We will be re-formed in God’s image, and it will be good. No matter how we feel about it now. No matter what we may be afraid of now. When we are refined and purified as God promises, it will be good.

SETH MOLAND-KOVASH

2. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998).

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
 for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us
 in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all
 who hate us.
⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
 and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
 to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

Theological Perspective

Zechariah's canticle sits among six offerings of praise in the infancy narratives of Luke 1–2 (1:42–45, 1:46–55, 2:13–14, 2:29–32, 2:38). Unlike the other five, which focus directly on the birth of Jesus, Zechariah's canticle honors John's birth as a sign of what is done and what is to come. Presented as two distinct movements—praise (vv. 68–75) and prediction (vv. 76–79)—the song is both general and specific in celebrating fulfilled promises to the nation and in celebrating the meaning of an individual life. In this way, Luke's text paves the way for Advent reflections, both individual and communal.

Called the *Benedictus*, Zechariah's song is based on a hymn of "the poor of the Lord." Since Zechariah and Elizabeth were among the Jewish upper class (he was a priest and she was descended from Aaron), his use of a song of the poor signals the reversals of fortune interpreters traditionally identify as central to the book of Luke. Zechariah's celebration of salvation for the nation also captures the historic debate about whether Jesus was to be understood as a political or spiritual messiah. On one hand, references to a "mighty savior . . . in the house of his servant David" (v. 69) who rescues the people "from the hands of our enemies" (v. 74) and who promises "peace" (v. 79), in a text written shortly after the Roman-Jewish war, suggests

Pastoral Perspective

The ministry of the church is a complex and combustible concoction of fear and joy. Indeed, if I were to chart the heartbeat of the church, it would spike from fear and anxiety to joy and gratitude, with little resting in between. For example, if you want to see a spiking line in the church I serve, just ask about money. You see furrowed brows as storm clouds begin to gather, and you can almost feel the collective energy taking a precipitous drop. By contrast, ask about our Community Club tutorial program and you will get a big smile, and you can feel the group energy soar like an eagle.

The characters in the Gospel of Luke can also be described as vacillating between joy and fear. Let's sketch, for example, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Luke tells us that Elizabeth is barren and getting on in years (for Luke, a definitive line down). Then the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah to announce that Elizabeth will bear a son named John, who will be the forerunner of the coming savior of Israel (line up). At this news, Zechariah is terrified with disbelief, and so the angel renders him mute (line down). Then Elizabeth conceives and bears a son (line up). When it comes to naming the child, everybody questions Elizabeth's naming him John (line down). Then Zechariah confirms this name for his son, his mouth is freed, and he is able to speak

might serve him without fear,⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Exegetical Perspective

Our passage, called the *Benedictus*, after the first word of its Latin translation, has been beloved by the church for two millennia. Zechariah’s prophetic song separates neatly into two parts. In verses 68–75, he praises the God of Israel for fulfilling God’s covenant to God’s people; in verses 76–79, Zechariah gives his son a broad job description. Set into worship on this Second Sunday in Advent, our passage introduces the faithful words of Zechariah, whose journey of faith we follow throughout chapter 1.

Narrational prose brackets the song. Verse 67 carries on the discussion about John, a miracle baby and child of promise, by describing the upcoming speaker as “his father Zechariah.” This is important, for throughout the prophecy the speaker, Zechariah, remains secondary to both his message and his baby son. Verses 67–79 are distinctly Trinitarian: The God of Israel is praised (v. 68) and someone called “the dayspring” is coming from heaven (v. 78 KJV). Verse 67 has Zechariah “filled with the Holy Spirit” and verse 80, also in narration, sums up the child John’s early life and hints at Zechariah’s strong mentoring influence, for the child “became strong in spirit.”

The miraculous dominates. John’s birth is miraculous because his parents are past child-siring/bearing years (v. 18). Zechariah’s prophecy is miraculous because he suddenly speaks; nine

Homiletical Perspective

Advent continues; our ruminations go deeper. We wait, watch, wonder if we will ever know peace. Will we find peace in our own souls? Will there be peace on earth? Peace is the traditional theme for the Second Sunday of Advent—not just peace as the absence of violence, but peace that passes understanding, peace that heals and makes whole, peace that allows the wolf to live with the lamb and the leopard with the kid, peace that allows a little child to lead the people and bring them back into full communion with God, peace that ensures there will be no more hurting or destruction on God’s holy mountain because the whole earth will be full of the knowledge of God (Isa. 11:6–9).

The *Benedictus*, Zechariah’s great hymn of prophecy, praise, and blessing clearly moves us toward that unfathomable, whole, creation-healing shalom of God. Here we find ourselves waiting and watching for something that we deeply desire, wondering if it will ever come. We may long for peace but we know we live in a world in which there is much too little of it, both personally and politically.

In preaching on this text, it may be useful to give Zechariah’s hymn some literary context. Like Mary later in this chapter, Zechariah is surprised by a visit from the angel Gabriel. Like Mary, he questions the announcement of a miraculous pregnancy, that he

Luke 1:68-79

Theological Perspective

political/physical redemption. On the other hand, salvation “by the forgiveness of . . . sins” (v. 77) commonly is considered a spiritual reference. Some interpreters, such as Stephanie Buchanon Crowder and Alfred Plummer, overcome the tension of the two positions by affirming the importance of both dimensions. Crowder says that “Luke uses faith to speak to the contextual reality of believing readers and imperialistic leaders” to address “the holistic well-being of those who have such faith.”¹ Plummer says the text refers to “political redemption” that is “accompanied by and based upon a moral and spiritual reformation.”²

Among the first words he utters after at least nine months of silence, Zechariah’s song, like Advent, celebrates the new era to be brought by the incarnation. As a privileged male leader from the ruling classes, Zechariah’s character is in tension with an important reversal theme in the infancy narratives that focus predominantly on women and in the book that presents outsiders (such as women, the poor, and foreigners) as favored by God. In content, however, the Benedictus is consistent with celebration of divine work that characterizes other songs in the infancy narratives.

In this first movement of the song, Zechariah praises God for the favor indicated by the new era, since the coming incarnation means that prophecies “from of old,” promises “to our ancestors,” and the “holy covenant” with Abraham all are fulfilled. By making these announcements, Zechariah takes on the role of prophet, even as he points to fulfillment of prophecy. His relatively privileged status as a priest who understands his nation as being favored by God, but who nonetheless identifies with the oppressed circumstance of Jewish people whose homeland is occupied, captures the complexity of the situation of human beings, understood by some Christian theologians as being both friends and foes of God.

The reference to fulfillment of promises to ancestors (v. 72) brings this complexity into historic view, since by its story ancient Israel is implicated in the global legacy of conquest. The meaning of this fulfillment is framed as having both historical and contemporary dimensions. As the full fruition of promises anticipated by Jewish ancestors as far back as Abraham, the fulfillment relates to the entire Jewish history up to Zechariah’s time; yet

1. Stephanie Buchanon Crowder, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 158.

2. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, 5th ed. (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 40.

Pastoral Perspective

(line up), but the people are terrified (line down). On and on, the lines spike up and down throughout the rest of the Gospel—from John’s proclamation of judgment (line down) to Jesus’ baptism (line up) to the temptation scene (line down) to the call of the first disciples (line up) to the conflict with religious authorities (line down). So Zechariah’s song seems a bit disingenuous to me, when, as he is praising God for the coming Savior, he describes the ministry of those who will follow the Savior, suggesting that we will “serve [God] without fear.”

I have never served in a ministry that was completely without fear. Fear of failure or rejection, or something like this, seems to be a constant companion in ministry. To be sure, there is lots of joy that can be added to this mix, but I am also under the impression that fear is an accompaniment of any serious ministry. For while in Luke, Jesus, an angel, or a messenger is always telling us to not to fear, Jesus also tells disciples that if they want to follow him they must “take up their cross daily” (9:23) and that their ministry will be as sheep among wolves (10:3), which are not exactly comforting descriptions of the service of God! After all, the life of ministry is about confronting the principalities and powers that rule the world, and the prospect of doing so is understandably fearful.

I am reminded that the late psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen had a theory that there are times in any society when anxiety peaks. At such times, terrorism, fundamentalism, and toxicity infect all of society.¹ This sounds like the United States since 9/11, doesn’t it? And it is not likely to improve. In election years, political speech becomes more polarizing, and rhetoric within the church is often no different. Anyone who has attended a church judicatory meeting knows how fever pitched the debates can be, as conservatives stereotype liberals for their perceived laxity in morals and general disregard for the Bible, and liberals portray their conservative counterparts as puritanical and legalistic prigs. Will we ever get beyond the anxieties that produce these stereotypes? In such a toxic environment, how is it possible to raise our heads above collective, self-perpetuating fear?

A story about British philosopher Geoff Midgley might be instructive. By his own admission, Midgley tended to look on the gloomy side of life. In the early 1980s, one day as he was having tea with his

1. See Peter Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1993), foreword.

Exegetical Perspective

months earlier, the angel Gabriel decreed a punishment of silence (v. 20) and maybe deafness (v. 62) because of Zechariah's unbelief. The text groups the naming and circumcision of John and Zechariah's prophecy (v. 59–79), giving the impression they happened together. But this may not necessarily be so.

Zechariah's name means "God remembered." And God's remembrances dominate verses 68–75. Zechariah includes himself in the prophecy because of the pronoun "us" and possessive adjective "our." Zechariah prophesies that God has remembered God's holy covenant, the oath God swore to Abraham our father. God has remembered to show mercy and to rescue God's covenant people from the hand of their enemies. God has redeemed God's people. God remembers God's covenant promises.

God's character figures prominently in the song. God is strong; God has raised up a horn of salvation, a symbol of strength, for us. God saves us from those who hate us. God has shown mercy to our ancestors and now to us. God gives us the security to do what we want to do most of all: serve God with awe, and serve God the way God wants to be served, in righteousness and holiness. A keynote of God's character is God's tender mercy.

God has sent holy prophets throughout the ages, and the small son whom Zechariah now addresses (vv. 76–79) is the latest in that line. John will be called a prophet of the Most High. His job is to go before the Lord to prepare the way for him. John will do this by giving God's people the knowledge of salvation via the forgiveness of their sins (v. 77). Later, John calls people to repentance (Luke 3:3), and Jesus confirms he is a great prophet (Luke 7:26–28).

John's birth and calling come because of the tender mercies of our God (Luke 1:78). One of God's tender mercies is sending someone called the Rising Sun, the Dayspring, to us (Mal. 4:2). Zechariah's prophecy also outlines the job description of this Rising Sun, this Dayspring. The Dayspring will shine on those living in darkness and shadowed by death. It turns out that we, those to whom Zechariah speaks and those who hear his prophetic word, are those living in darkness and shadowed by death. The Dayspring will guide our feet into the path of peace.

Zechariah's prophecy exudes joy. This is amazing, because Luke introduces Zechariah as something of an old grump. Zechariah's response to the angel visitor is skeptical: "How can I be sure?" (Luke 1:18). He doesn't believe God's representative that this restorative miracle could happen to Elizabeth and

Homiletical Perspective

and his wife in their old age will have a child. As ancient Sarah laughed at such news, Zechariah challenges the angel's proclamation. Unlike Mary, he is punished for his incredulous response to the angel's announcement. Perhaps a man of his years and stature, a priest of the most high God, ought to be better prepared for such visitations than a peasant girl. Perhaps the elderly priest is, and ought to be, held to higher standards of accountability than a teenager still finding her way in the world. Perhaps there is a standard here by which the more seasoned and mature are expected to set examples, to lead the way for the young. Tom Wright says that "Often it's the old people, the ones who cherish old memories and imaginations, who keep alive the rumor of hope. . . . Zechariah comes across in this passage, especially in the prophetic poem, as someone who has pondered the agony and the hope for many years, and who now finds the two bubbling out of him as he looks in awe and delight at his baby son."¹

Because Zechariah is mute and deaf, a preacher might develop some sort of interior monologue in which Zechariah meditates on his fate and gathers the thoughts that culminate in this hymn of ecstasy and blessing. Surely Zechariah's season of being mute and deaf leaves him with time to wait, watch, and wonder. His physical state forces him in on himself to consider the entire course of his life—his faithful service as a priest, his faithful love for Elizabeth, his faithful belief that God would redeem God's people. He has time to consider the long arc of his life and how it has been disrupted by the sudden appearance of the holy at a time and in a manner he was not expecting.

Finally, Zechariah is faced with the hubbub surrounding the naming of the baby. The people of the village see that something out of the ordinary has happened to him, but they do not understand what he is going through. In the midst of the naming crisis he finds his voice. In response to people wondering, "What then will this child become?" the old priest breaks out in his ecstatic song of prophecy and blessing.

Who will this baby be? He will be called John, "God's gift" or "God is gracious." He will be integral to fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of how God will redeem God's people. He will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. In Luke's account of Zechariah's song, quotations from Israel's prophets

1. Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 18.

Luke 1:68-79

Theological Perspective

composition of the book in the shadow of the recent Roman-Jewish war (66–70 CE) and during ongoing occupation by Rome gives “being rescued from the hands of our enemies” (v. 74) immediate relevance.

The second movement relates specifically to the life of John the Baptist, whose birth is the immediate source of the song. Unlike the first part of the canticle, which offers praise by articulating what God is fulfilling, the second part of the canticle offers new promises by making predictions about John’s life. Here Zechariah continues in the role of prophet as he foretells John’s future. In the moment of the prophecy, Christians will see Zechariah as providing continuity between prophecy of the First and Second Testaments, since his words about John, his son, occur within the same song that memorializes fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. As a seer foretelling John’s future, Zechariah steps outside his parental role and addresses the infant objectively as “you, child.” He identifies John as one who makes way for the work of the incarnation by delivering knowledge about salvation and forgiveness. Offered because of God’s “tender mercy,” the forgiveness coming through the incarnation will make it possible to see differently. New sight, resulting from the dawn breaking in and giving light, insinuates possible paradigm shifts and the reversals identified with Luke’s Gospel. Perhaps those identified as enemies earlier in the song may become friends. In fact, Luke’s Gospel and Acts feature many such reconciliations—the conversions of Zacchaeus and Paul and the openness to Gentiles being typical.

Among other possibilities suggested by the new light and inbreaking dawn, the potential to overcome enmity is particularly implied in interpreters’ suggestion that “to give light” refers not only to new knowledge for Israel, but also to Gentile inclusion. The idea that both need light presents an element of Luke’s reversals, since by implication there is a leveling of everyone as “in darkness.” Christians will see the paradigm shift suggested here as a reflection of the newness annually anticipated in Advent. However, it is distinct from the ordinary “annual anticipation” when the shift is seen as a call for personal, social, and political *reversals* in our own time.

ROSETTA E. ROSS

Pastoral Perspective

landlady, they were talking about the dismal stories in the newspaper that day—stories about the cold war and the potential of nuclear holocaust. Suddenly he blurted out, “The world is too horrible! If we had a button we could press that would finally blow the whole thing up, which of us would be able to help pressing it?” “Oh I wouldn’t,” she said. “I’m terrified of electric things.” This, he reported, cheered him up considerably.² A little humor can reframe and give perspective to fear. In Luke 10, Jesus does something similar as he sends his disciples out on a mission with little more than the word “peace.” He tells them, if people accept this word, so be it; but if not, kick the dust off your feet. This is what you might call a lean or focused view of ministry that doesn’t get distracted with successes and failures, threatening circumstances, or finances. What Jesus describes is a ministry without fear that is focused on what we are called to be and do; it doesn’t get preoccupied with troublesome issues or people.

Peter Steinke, who is a church consultant, tells the story about working with a church that had been going through months of discontent. Steinke began by asking twenty leaders to redefine their problems without focusing on a person or issue as presented in the original problem. As they did so, they began to focus on their vision for their church and how each was accountable for that vision.³

And so we are back to Zechariah’s hope to “serve God without fear.” He undoubtedly had in mind oppression-free practice of Judaism. I find these stories instructive as I picture how to serve God without fear in a toxic society such as ours. By the grace of God, we can follow Jesus empowered with the gospel and the words he gave to the disciples, “Peace be with you.”

ROGER J. GENCH

2. Mary Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva* (London: Routledge, 2005), 202.

3. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 52–55.

Exegetical Perspective

himself. The angel, now introducing himself as Gabriel, takes umbrage and pulls rank. Gabriel reminds Zechariah that he, Gabriel, stands in the presence of God. As such, he has the authority to rebuke. And he does! Gabriel decrees Zechariah's speechlessness until his prophetic words come to pass. Perhaps Zechariah was too talkative, too enamored of his own opinions. Throughout decades of waiting for a child, perhaps these opinions had talked him into his present unbelief.

Now alone with his thoughts, unable to communicate except in signs and writing (1:22, 62–63), Zechariah's nine-month "time out" led to profound changes in personality and faith. Maybe he read the scrolls, for his prophecy relies heavily on earlier words from Genesis, Psalms, Ezekiel, and Samuel. Zechariah, in his incubation of silence, meditated on an upcoming great move of God. Domestically, he probably listened to his wife! When he next appears in the text (vv. 67–79), Zechariah, transformed, fairly bubbles with joy! Like an explosion after much pressure, joy bursts forth, cascading good words on all. Zechariah literally sings! This new, energized Zechariah, ready for fatherhood, tenderly talks to his baby boy.

Although Zechariah's is quite possibly the most endearing, heartwarming prophecy over a child in the biblical text, what makes the prophecy so compelling is that Zechariah is not primarily concerned about himself or about his miraculous son. Instead, Zechariah's prophecy exalts God, points to the dominant work of the Dayspring, and foretells God's tender mercies on upcoming generations of God's covenant people. Zechariah conveys a sense of wonder that he is part of it. He—with all his arrogance and unbelief—basks now in the love, forgiveness, mercy of God.

God in the silence of centuries has done preparatory work for Israel. God in the silence of nine months has done preparatory work in Zechariah. God saved Zechariah from his own unbelief. God can save Israel from enemies. Zechariah's prophecy looks forward. God moved on Zechariah and Elizabeth's behalf and linked their personal miracle of a son to wider miracles for Israel. Zechariah doesn't understand it. He doesn't have to. He rejoices and lets God manage the details. Zechariah will spend his remaining days a happy "praiser" mentoring this miraculous child.

ROBIN GALLAHER BRANCH

Homiletical Perspective

are interwoven with Zechariah's own words of commissioning and blessing for his infant son. John will be the bridge between the law and its fulfillment, the prophet who will proclaim the Messiah's presence, the voice who will call the whole creation to repentance in response to the promise of salvation.

This ancient hymn is set in two parts. The first deals with social redemption, salvation of the people; the second addresses more personal redemption, salvation of the soul. Repentance that leads to forgiveness is to be John's message, repentance and redemption that are both personal and corporate. The preacher may raise questions about the need for repentance in many ways and in all sorts of contemporary contexts. This is an opportunity to invite people to look deeply into their own hearts to see what changes may be needed, to understand where they must turn around and head in a different direction in their own lives. There are also many opportunities to ask where repentance and redemption are needed in the social and political realities of the world in which we live. What might Zechariah predict that his son John would preach to us in this Advent?

If, in the end, peace is the theme for the day, it is the preacher's challenge to make peace from Zechariah's ecstasy. Zechariah's hymn makes clear that true peace—in our hearts and in our world—will come only when we are right with God, when we have laid aside our own ambitions and passions, or at least turned them over to God. The condition of souls and the condition of creation is troubled by self-centeredness, self-absorption, and failure to understand what is available in true communion with God, what God has offered us in the ancient covenant and offers us still in the coming of Jesus, the Christ. Though we may live in between times, when we do not yet fully walk in the way of peace, Zechariah promises that his little boy, John, will prepare us to bridge those times as we live toward God's reign in hope.

RANDLE R. MIXON

Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Theological Perspective

The passage that opens the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Philippi is striking in its emotion and intimacy. It suggests a deep, and potentially enduring, relationship. The key theological themes are remembering, joy, and fellowship. Paul's recollection elicits thanksgiving, his joy is rooted in shared tribulation, and the longing for fellowship can only be fulfilled in Christ.

Collective Remembering. The early-twentieth-century French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs addressed the question of the social character of human memory. Halbwachs believed memory could function only within a collective context. Within this social context groups develop the memories that shape the reality in which they live. The memory to which the apostle Paul refers in this passage is of that order. His remembering is not mere reminiscing. It is the foundation of the reality that this Christian community celebrates—a memory centered in the person and work of Christ. The community of faith is a community of memory because the remembrance of Christ becomes real only in a social context. This is why the memory of his time with his readers elicits thanksgiving.

Friedrich Nietzsche is credited with developing the notion of memory as a social bond. He argues that “will to remember” is the basis for human social

Pastoral Perspective

As in last week's reading from 1 Thessalonians, in this Sunday's Epistle lection the apostle Paul prays that the faithful will be blameless before God. Paul raises the issue of blamelessness halfway through his letter to the church at Thessalonica. To the Philippians, he leads with it. By the tenth verse he is praying that they may be “pure and blameless” in the day of Christ.

To be “pure and blameless” is a status to which many likely aspire, but its reference in the text can present pastoral problems. Given the pervasiveness of discussions about blame, however, blamelessness is better addressed than ignored. The question is for what purpose are the hearers of the word to be pure and blameless—to look better or to live better? According to Paul it is the latter of course, to the end that a “harvest of righteousness” is produced—but will raising the issue of blame achieve such a harvest?

Who is confident, as Paul seems to be, that in the day of Christ, “pure and blameless” is how they will be found? Who has ever done anything that they knew, with hindsight at least, was just plain wrong? Who has been involved in a situation that turned out badly and, if honest about it, knew that the outcome was their responsibility, perhaps even their fault? Has anyone done anything for which they are to blame?

Exegetical Perspective

On this Second Sunday of Advent, as Malachi shouts from the mountaintop his prophecy that God is a refining fire, Paul whispers from prison his prayer that God will help Philippian Christians to become pure and blameless. But his depiction of these two virtues is hardly about avoidance of impurity. Rather, Paul begins in his prayer to paint a picture of active love itself, the starting point toward purity and blamelessness and the catalyst for unified community. These prayed hopes are not confined to antiquity, of course. Paul would desire them for us too, and so they reverberate through the two intervening millennia and whisper into our own twenty-first-century lives and churches.

Paul and the Philippians. In this brief opening interlude of thanksgiving, Paul previews his letter's main themes: his own joy and his hope for theirs (1:4 and 4:4); his gratitude for their "sharing in the gospel" through financial support (1:5 and 4:15); their dearness to Paul (1:8 and 4:19); his hope that their "love may overflow" (1:9 and 2:1–11); and their ability to discern what is truly valuable (1:10 and 3:2; 4:2). It is no accident that Paul uses his thanksgiving period as a table of contents. First, it is his custom. Each of his letters except Galatians features this kind of a paragraph, in which the author reestablishes his

Homiletical Perspective

A few years back a pastor wrote a letter in which he said:

During Advent the lectionary suggests what I call "John the Baptist/end of the world" texts. The stories surrounding the birth of Jesus are not addressed until Christmas. I think this is a huge mistake. If the community is known by the stories it tells, then the church following the common lectionary stands in some danger of losing the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. The ominous result might be that our children will grow up knowing more about the Grinch than they will know about baby Jesus. Therefore, during Advent I toss the lectionary out the window and preach the birth narratives, beginning with Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke's gospel.¹

The pastor has a point. The lectionary gives us birth narratives during Christmastide (like the resurrection stories we have during Eastertide). It expects us to *begin* celebrating Christmas on Christmas Day. That may make good liturgical sense, but unfortunately the culture has declared that on December 26, Christmas is over (with the exception of those few brave souls who celebrate Boxing Day instead of Gift Return Day).

1. My colleague in ministry shall remain nameless here for obvious reasons.

Philippians 1:3-11

Theological Perspective

relations. Society would crumble if we could not depend on one another to remember tomorrow what we promised yesterday. Nietzsche, in his typically pessimistic way, sees this memory as something that the heroic individual grasps by his own power. He argues that religion misuses memory as a place where human pain can be warehoused. This is why he states that “only something that continues to hurt remains in the memory.” For the apostle Paul the memory of his time with his readers not only contains hurt, but brings forth joy. That joy, unseen by Nietzsche, is not dependent on the heroic will of the individual Christian, but is something rooted in shared tribulation. In this way, it is the memory of Christ as seen in them that creates the unbreakable bond between Paul and his readers.

The twentieth-century political theologian Johann Baptist Metz is credited with developing the notion of a dangerous memory. He describes these memories as ones “in which earlier experiences break through to the center-point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for our present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh, steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with, and show up the banality of our supposed ‘realism.’ They break through the canon of all that is taken as self-evident, and unmask as deception the certainty of those ‘whose hour is always there’ (John 7:6). They seem to subvert our structures of plausibility. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitants from the past.”¹

The kind of memory to which Paul refers is dangerous to the extent that it continues to break in on the present of the Christian community. It is dangerous because the memory of Jesus renews itself in the life of the community. But not only does the memory of Jesus break in from the past; it is a forward memory that draws the community into a future that is already transforming the present. This is what Paul is referring to in the recurrent phrase “the day of Jesus Christ,” which seems to point to both the memory of the love they share and the hope for its fulfillment. This “day of Jesus Christ” both grounds and sustains the relationship between Paul and his readers.

A Letter of Friendship. Gordon D. Fee and others have found helpful analogies to Paul’s letter in the “friendship letter” genre of the Greco-Roman

Pastoral Perspective

If they have, is it possible for them to be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, whenever that may be? Might it be that in his enthusiasm Paul has gone overboard in his praise for the Philippians? Does this praise run the danger of producing the opposite of what such praise intends? If it is true that “no one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18), and “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), from whence comes Paul’s confidence with regard to the Philippians’ blamelessness in the day of Christ? Research suggests that being praised for a positive quality may encourage lying if praiseworthy behavior is not maintained,¹ and the reality of human sinfulness virtually guarantees that praiseworthy blamelessness will not be sustained.

Being pure and blameless is an admirable goal. The world would be a better place if there were a larger store of blameless behavior. But raising the specter of blame may not produce the desired end of fewer blameworthy acts, because of the dynamics of the blame game. Even mentioning the issue of blame may pull us into the blame game’s orbit. The difficulty in dealing with blame is at least as old as the story of the garden of Eden. God asks the man if he ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. The man admits doing so but blames the woman for his behavior. She in turn blames the serpent (Gen. 3:11–13).

Where does the blame game get us? When confronted with their blameworthy behavior, the man and the woman in the garden did not accept responsibility. They were unwilling to be held accountable. Likewise, if to be a good Christian is to be blameless, but despite our best intentions we are to blame at least on occasion and for some things, we may try to deflect or deny blame when confronted with our guilt. The desire for blamelessness can produce falsehood rather than righteousness. In writing to the Romans, Paul seems to have reached this conclusion. To the Romans Paul admits “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:19). If this is so, can Paul or any of us be pure and blameless on the day of Christ? In Romans, Paul rejects the works righteousness that might be read into this passage to the Philippians.

How do you react if you fear being blamed? Some have overactive consciences and succumb and accept blame when they are not to blame. Beaten down by messages of their unworthiness, they take the blame for things for which they are not responsible.

1. Johann Baptist Metz, “The Future in the Memory of Suffering,” *Consilium* 36 (1917): 15.

1. Claudia M. Mueller and Carol S. Dweck, “Praise for Intelligence Can Undermine Children’s Motivation and Performance,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75, no. 1 (1998): 41.

Exegetical Perspective

relationship with his audience and reveals the matters that he will address in the letter. Second, the apostle did not invent the technique. We learn from the papyri and inscriptions that this practice was common in more-than-personal-but-less-than-formal letters in antiquity.¹

The length of this thanksgiving—it is Paul’s longest—seems to reflect an especial intimacy with and enthusiastic love for the Philippian church. This impression receives strong support from the striking use of the Greek term *pas* (“all”) three times in a nine-word stretch: “I thank God *whenever* I think of you . . . praying for *all* (*pase*) of you *always* (*pantote*) in *all* (*pase*) my prayers” (v. 3). Paul backs up that overflowing prose with the specific language of love in verse 8, where he tells the Philippians that he cares constantly for them and cherishes them with the “bowels” of Christ (*splanchna*).

The Purifying Power of Agapaic Love. As pastoral prayers often do, Paul’s turns eventually toward exhortation. In verses 9–11, Paul reveals the content of his all-the-time-for-all-of-them prayers, and it looks like a call to growth. He wants the Philippians’ *agapē* to increase. And that increase should take a recognizable form in its intended outcome (*eis* used to signal purpose) of knowledge and insight. Once more, this new love-soaked cognition is not the end point in itself, but will reach its intended outcome (*eis* again to signal purpose) when the Philippians can discern what is very best. Then that sense of “true value” finds its ultimate fulfillment in a “pure” and “blameless” Philippian people. To summarize, Paul asks God for more love that produces more knowledge that produces a clearer sense of what is important that ultimately purifies these Christians. The end is purity. Love practiced in community sets off the chain of events that leads to it.

Paul’s prayer for an increase in the community’s love sets the table for the rest of the letter. *Agapē*, the first named hope of the prayer, appears verbally in 2:2 and is the overarching theme of 1:12–2:11. Paul surrounds an exhortation to other-oriented community (2:1–4) with the “visual aids” of his own example (1:12–26) and the example of Christ Jesus (2:6–11). Just as the imprisoned Paul looks not to his own interests but to the advance of the gospel (1:12–18) and the well-being of the Philippians’ faith (1:21–26); and just as the flesh-assuming and cross-

Homiletical Perspective

Why is our lectionary shaped the way it is? Early on, the expectation of the Messiah was a paschal event, but then it changed to an Advent theme, and the focus shifted from the coming of the Messiah to the *second coming* of the Messiah. This made sense in the early church that had an active eschatology (sleep in shifts!). The return of Jesus was palpable; Christians could feel it. How many Christians today wake up every morning and think, “This could be the day that Jesus comes back”? My grandmother was a member of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and that is the way she believed! She would run out in the face of an oncoming storm and look up into the clouds, just to check and see. How many of your people feel that way today and want to hear those kinds of sermons. Some? Yes. Many? No.

So we have a call to make. There are two possibilities if one chooses not to “throw the lectionary out the window”: (1) take the texts as they are, or (2) take the two major Advent themes for the first two Sundays (the coming reign of God and the exhortation to preparedness) and then move to the birth narratives.

Whichever choice is made can still engender useful and imaginative sermons grounded in the lectionary texts, even from those letters of Paul that almost never get preached during Advent. To that end, I suggest considering at least one of the Pauline texts provided for this Advent, especially if such themes as waiting, hope, expectation, God’s future story and ours, are rising in the congregation.

Today’s text from Philippians 1:3–11 is similar to the Epistle text from last week, 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13. Paul thanked God persistently for the churches in Thessalonica (night and day) and Philippi (constantly), longed to see them both, and prayed that both of them would be “blameless” when Christ returned.

There are several differences, however, in the two little texts. And at least two of them strike me as appropriate for the Advent pulpit. In verse 6 Paul writes, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” The day of Christ, Fred Craddock writes, “is a Christianized version of the Day of the Lord in the Old Testament and refers to the Parousia, the coming of Christ.”² It appears that Paul was affirming that God would bring the work of the little Philippian church to

1. Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: A. Topelmann, 1939), 10–39 and 142ff.

2. Fred Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation Series (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 20–21.

Philippians 1:3-11

Theological Perspective

world.² Aristotle's first-order friendship was based on virtue. These friendships carried such commitment and social significance, that to have friends was automatically to have enemies. Paul's care for his readers is also a watchfulness regarding the enemy. Paul refers obliquely to shared enemies when he says that "all of you share in God's grace . . . both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel." Paul's letter here is a quintessential example of a friendship letter of the highest order. Paul says, "I hold you in my heart" (v. 7, note), and remembers their "sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (v. 5). Clearly, this letter is one written to friends and carries little or none of the patron/protégé tenor of some of his other letters.

If there is a theology emerging in this "letter of friendship," it is a theology of friendship. The emerging literature on the theological and philosophical meaning of friendship may be enriched by looking again at this text. Glenn Morrison, in his article "Pastoral Care and Counselling: Towards a Post-Metaphysical Theology of Friendship," draws upon the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and illustrates the link between hope and friendship. Morrison outlines "a theology of friendship that finds its roots more in an eschatological future world (Isa. 64:4; 1 Cor. 2:9) rather than economics, politics, or utopia. . . . The poor and the suffering are not 'objects' of knowledge and nor are they 'objects' of mission. Before all thematisation, everyone has a face beyond the being of self-interest. It is particularly in friendship that the true and beautiful faces come to mind/consciousness." Morrison concludes that friendship is a "grave responsibility" and that "accordingly, if we want to be like the disciples, called to a life of superindividuation (expiation), then we have to allow our compassionate lives to be deepened by friendship."³ In an age of superficial relationships and impersonal communication, the friendship that is spoken of in this letter suggests depth and duration. When Paul talks about longing for you "in the bowels of Jesus Christ" (v. 8 KJV; "with the compassion of Christ Jesus" NRSV), it is clear that this friendship has a profundity that surpasses that of even the most passionate genteel aristocrats. This letter communicates the essence of both faith and friendship.

JAMES H. EVANS JR.

2. Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3.

3. Glenn Morrison, "Pastoral Care and Counselling: Towards a Post-Metaphysical Theology of Friendship"; dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_9/morrison.htm.

Pastoral Perspective

Others have underdeveloped scruples and refuse to take responsibility for anything, shamelessly shifting the blame to others, even when their culpability is undeniable. In either case, raising the issue of blame can be counterproductive.

The issues of blame can loom large especially in a season of preparation such as Advent. As we prepare heart and mind, home and church for the inbreaking of incarnation, as we ready ourselves for the good news of great joy that is Christmas, the pitfalls of the blame game are prominent. With pressure to produce a picture-perfect holiday, some will fall prey to the temptation to look for someone to blame if things don't turn out as well as expected. With the plethora of competing needs and wants that are fueled by consumer notions of what makes a good holiday, is it possible to meet the great expectations that abound? Amid assumptions of holiday cheer, is it possible to resist blaming self or others if relationships sour and happiness is not achieved?

In order to address the difficult dimensions of blamelessness, the preacher may preach against the text. Another option is to look for a way to understand Paul's prayer for our blamelessness that can help rather than hinder. The key to this approach may be found in the opening words of the prayer in verses 9 and 10: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best." To set blamelessness in the context of overflowing love and increasing insight, instead of judgment, sheds new light on blame. Seen from the perspective of love, blame can be associated with responsibility rather than affiliated with condemnation. From the vantage point of love, assessing blame can teach us how to step up and do better next time, rather than leaving us mired in guilt or ensconced in defensiveness and denial. The love we await in Advent is such a love—a love that will overflow and leave us, if not fully blameless, at least closer to it than we otherwise would be.

PHILIP E. CAMPBELL

Exegetical Perspective

bearing Christ considered not his own comfort but humanity's need (2:6–8)—so the Philippians should think of others as more important than themselves (2:3) and look not to their own interests but to the interests of others (2:4). Paul's concern about this stems from a threat of fracture in the community under some sort of pressure from outside the community (1:28). Later, the two church leaders Euodia and Syntyche are similarly summoned to think the same things (*ta auta phronein* in 2:2 and 4:2) in the Lord. The interconnectedness of love and group unity is implied throughout the letter.

Lest we imagine that the function of Paul's prayer in 1:9–11 is entirely hortatory, it is important to recall Paul's famous confidence in God's activity among the Philippians: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6). By way of reiteration, Paul follows up the examples and exhortations of 1:12–2:11 by stating his strong confidence that God will accomplish them: "It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure" (2:13). It is because Paul knows an active God that he can utter this prayer for divine enabling so confidently. Another reason for Paul's confidence is the Philippians' track record with him—the very active love for which he thanks God in 1:3 and thanks them in 4:10–20. By their generous material support for Paul's ministry, they have shown themselves altogether capable of considering Paul's interests over their own. It seems he wants them to apply that skill to the way they treat one another in Christian community. God has already accomplished their deference toward him; Paul prays for and awaits their deference to one another.

Twenty-first-century Western culture loves love, but holds an arm's-length disdain toward purity and blamelessness. We speak of Puritans with a superior sneer, and anyone who imagines that there could be no blame or blemish on a character is counted to be living in a bygone world. But in his opening words to these dear brothers and sisters, Paul envisions a deferential divine love that ultimately purifies those who embody it. In this Advent season of preparation, preachers may be able to rehabilitate Christian purification by removing it from its captivity to caricatures and placing it squarely in the middle of active love lived out in Christian community.

ALLEN HILTON

Homiletical Perspective

completion before Jesus returned, which Paul expected soon. If that is the case, then Paul was wrong. The day of Christ did not come and has not come in the shape he expected, and the work of the church—whether in Philippi or in Laramie, Wyoming—has not come to completion. Furthermore, none of us can claim to have completed all the good work assigned to us by God. My grandfather did not finish the house he was building. My teacher did not finish the book he was writing. My friend did not finish seeing her child through school. An old preacher once showed me a line he liked from a European writer. I do not remember the writer, but I remember the line: "All [people] fail, do they not, at what they want to do most."

But wait! I do not believe Paul was saying that each of us and every church will finish the good work God gave us in this lifetime, however short or long that life is. Many years ago a young couple asked me to do a memorial service for their stillborn child. The one thing I remember saying in that service was my conviction that "all life comes to completion in God." I still believe that. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope."³ Yes.

This passage may help our friend who wants to move the birth narratives forward. Advent puts our wait for the day of Christ into clearer perspective. Our wait is not for the arrival of one who may come tomorrow or ten thousand years from now. In Galatians 2:20 Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." This season reminds us of the "nowness" of the day of Christ, when the Parousia comes to us and is willing to stay. Prayer, love, knowledge, and insight, Paul says, will help us best to be prepared for his presence and for understanding that all life and all work will come to completion in God. Jesus is showing us how and doing so now. Pay attention.

JOSEPH R. JETER

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 63.

Luke 3:1-6

¹In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;

⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Theological Perspective

While it is unfortunate—both theologically and exegetically—that the lectionary divides in two the Luke 3:1–18 narrative, which really is one story, it is also fascinating to appreciate the dynamic in this pericope that, I believe, stands at the heart of the biblical message. In God’s salvific work, there is a mysterious interplay of divine and human, or ordinary and extraordinary, or regular and miraculous. On the one hand, the advent of the son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth was a function of long historical development culminating in the socio-political situation recorded in detail in the first verses of this passage; on the other hand, the “word of the Lord” concerning the advent of the Word made flesh (John 1:14) came miraculously to a lonely preacher in the wasteland without any human mediator.

This is the culmination of the narrative of the whole salvation history as presented in both covenants of the Bible. Christian faith—differently from, say, all the strands of Hinduism(s)—is firmly rooted in real history, not only in “salvation” history, but in “general” history with all its twists and turns. At the same time, the coming of the word of the Lord is in no way conditioned or limited by the preparation of historical events. Think of Moses with his proclamation of the exodus, or Jeremiah and his announcement of the return from exile, or

Pastoral Perspective

In his own commentary, John Calvin wrote that talk in verse 3 of this passage about John the Baptizer “proclaiming a baptism of repentance” should be taken as both a beginning theology of baptism and a caution to pastors to speak clearly when performing and explaining the sacraments. On the theology side, Calvin hears an affirmation of the centrality of repentance and forgiveness in baptism. On the public speaking side, he advocates no “murmuring of magic undertones by some exorcist but the effect of a clear and distinct voice proclaimed for the building up of faith.”¹ All this from “proclaimed”! Yet the rhetorical side of Calvin’s dual reading should not be dismissed too soon, for there might be pastoral insights in generalizing the idea of doing what’s necessary to get the message across. Removing barriers to communication might be as much a pastoral imperative in our day as any.

The warrant for John’s ministry, from Isaiah 40, reinforces this imperative in its own way. The voice in the wilderness cries out for the way of God to be prepared with relentless urgency. This urgency can be heard as a call to rhetorical sensitivity among those who proclaim the word of faith. Here is

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:116.

Exegetical Perspective

This week's reading depicts the beginning of the ministry of John "the Baptist." The reading, short as it may be, fills the important role of introducing a new prophet. First, in echoes of the OT prophets, Luke sets John's ministry in the political context of the time (cf. Isa. 1:1; Jer. 1:1–3; Ezek. 1:1–3; Hos. 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). This historical setting deserves more than passing attention. First, it serves as a reminder that God's promises come to fulfillment within the context of physical history. Both John and Jesus, unlike mythical heroes from Greek mythology, for example, existed in historical time and space and functioned within a specific cultural situation. Additionally, Luke makes very clear how convoluted and tightly wound this situation was: he includes a large number of Roman rulers scattered throughout Judea and the realm in his list, several of whom will make appearances elsewhere in Luke–Acts, as well as two Jewish leaders listed under the singular term of "high priest." In this way, Luke signals the tension between the Roman realm and the Jewish religion, a tension compounded by the ambiguity within the religious leadership itself.

Navigating Roman rule in Judea was complex. Religiously, the Romans encouraged emperor worship and even introduced images of the emperors

Homiletical Perspective

Advent is a season of preparation. At home people are cleaning, getting out their Christmas decorations, purchasing a tree, baking, hosting and attending parties, and simply getting ready for Christmas. But into our Advent "busy-ness" each year enters John the Baptist. He interrupts our schedules and demands that preparations of a different kind be made. John demands that we get ready for Jesus. Before we can bask in Christmas joy and the birth of a special baby, John forces us to examine ourselves and our world. In the style of the Old Testament prophets before him, John challenges Advent people with a message of personal and corporate self-examination. Advent, John reminds us, is a time to prepare to welcome Jesus and not simply our invited Christmas houseguests.

When I was a teenager, I used to tease my mother about some of her most particular preparations for company. She would get down on her hands and knees and comb the fringe of the oriental carpets in our living and dining rooms so that there were no knots and the entire fringe was perfectly lined up. It looked beautiful when she was finished—so neat and orderly. I tried to point out that one kick or shuffle of our guests' feet and the beautifully arranged fringe would all be in disarray again, but she would hear nothing of my analysis. She wanted everything,

Luke 3:1-6

Theological Perspective

any other Old Testament prophet: there is a mysterious, intriguing interface of “historical” and “suprahistorical.” This is a dynamic that belongs to the heart of a Christian view of history and salvation and should not be too cheaply eased by well-meaning homilists.

What makes Luke’s narration of the first Advent so intriguing is the pedantic attention to historical details. The first verse of the pericope lists no less than seven historical political figures. Why? To anchor the story of salvation history in the concrete, tangible history of the world. Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and others; what do they have to do with the gospel, the good news? Nothing, in their own estimation—they would not have been enthused to find their names in an obscure tract of a marginal religious movement of the time. Yet they have everything to do with it—in the estimation of this story’s narrator. Later Christian theology picked up Luke’s philosophy of history by including the name of Pontius Pilate in the creed. Oddly enough, the church pronounces his name in every liturgical gathering when the people of God remember and recall the great salvific events of the Triune God.

The one whom the Eastern Orthodox tradition regards as the last prophet of the Old Covenant enters abruptly onto the stage shared by the leading world rulers as if he were the culmination of the historical process and international politics. The Baptist comes from nowhere, and in the middle of nowhere he receives the Word of the Lord. Unlike the other Synoptics, Luke gives almost as careful attention to the annunciation of John as to the advent of the Savior, including the parallel narration of their birth and naming. Yet at the same time the evangelist is careful to place the prophet from the desert into a proper perspective: he is—as Irenaeus aptly puts it—the “little boy . . . who guided Samson by the hand” (see Judg. 16:26) and “who showed to the people the faith in Christ.”¹

The message of the last of the Old Testament prophets—and the first in the New Covenant—was but a continuation of the proclamation of his predecessors, namely, that of repentance, call for radical change, *metanoia*.

The invitation to repent, however, was not a legalistic stipulation but, rather, a door to forgiveness. In his remarks on this passage, Calvin

Pastoral Perspective

dramatic imagery for making connection, for finding available means to communicate so that God’s desire for creation might be known: straightened paths, valleys and mountains made into plains, rocky ways made even (Isa. 40:4–6).

A hundred years ago there were precious few paved roads. Now they are the landscape. Clear-cutting makes the way straight, and asphalt smoothes it. Bridges raise valleys and tunnels level mountains. We are now sped from here to there in ways that both illuminate and obscure the power of this passage. The imagery would be brought back to life by time spent in lands where roads are still rocky and sometimes impassable, where nature is less easily overcome and travel takes more planning than simply keying in one’s destination on a navigation screen. When I must discover my way from here to there through wit, endurance, force of will, good fortune, and the grace of those who might help, I may better understand how Luke imagines the scouting mission that is Christian preaching. There are challenging and circuitous paths on which to venture, high mountains to climb, and many valleys in which to tumble on the way between what must be said of God and how that can be heard. The work of speech in the church is arduous and complex, even as it is passionate and single minded. And the work requires different approaches for different terrains.

The imagery of leveling and straightening need not be taken as counsel to sameness or uniformity, as if the operative characteristic of flattening is the resulting plain. The imagery is best taken at a step removed, so that the prophet’s call is to the *action* of making, opening, and clearing the way for God, rather than to some fixed image of the *result* of that work.

What stands between, as impediments to preaching or noise to hearing? Paul Riceour wrote about the “pre-homiletic” work of the preacher, the work we must do, not simply to prepare a sermon, but to prepare a congregation to hear. This work is *global*, as interpretive work is done throughout the church to understand the gospel, but it is also profoundly *local*—in a time, in a place, with and among a particular group of people, against specific cultural pressures, and in favor of a particular relationship between speakers and hearers. Each preacher will develop her or his own understandings of impediments and how to respond to them, but a handful of themes might guide the way.

The classic question of *character* comes to mind, for each preacher must determine with others what

1. Irenaeus, *Exegetical Fragments* 27 (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0134.htm>; accessed November 24, 2007).

Exegetical Perspective

into the holy and iconoclastic city of Jerusalem. Politically, Herod the Great had been brutal to the people with his taxes, and his sons continued such a policy. The people of Israel were ripe for change, longing for God once again to deliver God's people and set them free from the yoke of oppression.

It was in this historical setting that God spoke again. When Luke announces, "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah," he is proclaiming the triumphal return of the presence of God among the people of God. Luke reiterates that John is the "son of Zechariah" (1:5–25) because he follows the formula for the call of an inspired prophet as seen in the OT. The setting also is important, the wilderness (*erēmos*) being a key place of activity in Luke, whether of testing (4:1, perhaps 15:4) or of prayer, withdrawal, and miracles (4:42; 5:16; 8:29; 9:12). The wilderness locale for John while he waited to begin his ministry (1:80), as well as his ascetic lifestyle, has even led some to speculate that John either trained with the Essenes in Qumran or was familiar with them.

Verse 3 gives us a brief summary of John's ministry upon receiving the word from the Lord. He appears to have been an itinerant preacher who confined his work to the region around the Jordan, never crossing the hills to Jerusalem or leaving the wilderness region entirely. Herod Antipas built up the city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, into and out of which the Jordan River flows, so he would have been in good position to hear the condemnation John spoke regarding him and Herodias his wife (vv. 19–20; Matt. 14:1–12), a message that led to John's imprisonment and death. Interestingly, though, after setting John in this political setting, Luke concerns himself very little with John's political interactions, focusing instead on the "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

What John means by "repentance" in this context will be explained further in next week's reading, in verses 7–18. But here we may note that John's baptism is not identical to that of the baptism commanded upon the resurrection of Christ. While both baptisms signify a commitment to a new life and repentance from the old, this baptism is one of preparation for the impending judgment, an acceptance that repentance alone—not status, blood, or ritual—can bring about forgiveness when the judgment arrives. In Luke's setting, then, John's baptism is the preparation for the ministry, life, and death of Jesus, because those who accept John's call show themselves humble before God and willing to submit to God's word, ready to acknowledge the

Homiletical Perspective

down to the fringe on the carpet, to be perfect when we were preparing for guests. She attended to every detail.

The advent of guests prompts the host not only to straighten up, but also to fix things around the house—a broken doorknob, a loose towel rack, the burned-out lightbulb, the leaky guest toilet. Preparing for company often causes the hosts to look at their home, to examine their surroundings with a whole new perspective. Suddenly the countertops are too messy, the broken chair inadequate, the silverware too tarnished. Preparing for guests demands self-examination as much as it involves a "to do" list.

John the Baptist does not seem like a character who would have likely understood all that is involved in welcoming company to our homes. He spent most of his time in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey, after all—hardly the place for a bed-and-breakfast. But if John wasn't thoughtfully straightening rug fringes, he did understand how a people ought to welcome their God. His bold preaching in the wilderness called people to preparation. His challenging words called people to self-examination, along with a "to do" list, if they were going to be ready to receive the one coming after him. John's prophetic message called people to get ready to receive Jesus.

The Advent preacher, quoting John the Baptist, will challenge people to a different kind of preparation, one that calls them to examine their lives, their values, and their priorities. If worshipers are rightly to prepare to receive the Prince of Peace at Christmas, they must be willing to go through the detailed preparation process just as they do when planning for company at home. Outside the church, people are drinking eggnog with their neighbors, singing along with Bing Crosby in the elevator, and hanging the popcorn garland on their Christmas trees. But, in worship, the people of God hear the challenging words of John the Baptist, calling for a different kind of preparation. John the Baptist and his message of repentance cannot be avoided. He appears in the Advent lectionary readings each year, causing the preacher, and thus the parishioners, to listen and to respond to his challenging words. John confronts us, commands our attention, and demands our responses.

John's challenge is to repent and prepare. True repentance (*metanoia* in the Greek) means literally, to change one's mind, turn around, reorient oneself. John calls all people to turn to God and from sin, to

Luke 3:1-6

Theological Perspective

took pains to convince his readers that they find the gospel rather than the law in the Baptist's message: "For John does not say, 'Repent ye, and in this way *the kingdom of heaven* will afterwards be *at hand*;' but first brings forward the grace of God, and then exhorts men to *repent*. Hence it is evident, that the foundation of repentance is the mercy of God, by which he restores the lost."² The North African church father Tertullian saw the same gospel truth: that call for "repentance should . . . prepare the home of the heart, by making it clean, for the Holy Spirit, who was about to supervene."³ Etymologically the word translated "forgiveness" comes from a Greek word meaning "to let go." Only God has the authority and power to let go of our sins; the humble and obedient response to the call to repentance is yes to God's reaching out to us to deliver us from evil.

The advent of the one who lets go of our sins is placed in this pericope in the widest possible salvation-history framework: with reference to the prophecy from the beginning of Second Isaiah (40:3-5), a key messianic and eschatological promise according to which all flesh shall see the salvation of God. In keeping with the apocalyptic expectation that underlies the texture of the Gospels, the imagery of mountains being flattened and valleys raised, crooked roads made straight and rough ways smooth, the Advent Sunday message is linked with the final advent of eschatological salvation, which includes not only the chosen nation but also the nations. At the day of Pentecost to which our text also points, the Spirit was poured out on "all flesh" as an anticipation of the final salvation. A key theological theme in Luke is the inclusion of all in God's salvific invitation and reaching out: both men and women, poor and rich, Gentiles and Jews. This Advent Sunday is a great place for us to be reminded of that.

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Pastoral Perspective

are the particular habits of pastoral and personal life that accomplish her credibility to name sin with compassion, to proclaim God's forgiving Spirit, and to invite others to respond to that Spirit. The character question may also be raised about the congregation. What practices of communal life are fitting to make a mere group into a people, an audience into a listening congregation ready to hear? How is a specific congregation's identity shaped through study, counsel, critical reflection on the world, sacrifice for the sake of mission, mutual care and forbearance, encouragement, celebration, prayer, and more?

What of *circumstance*? Here is a biblical mandate to pay attention to material things—comfort of worship space, effectiveness of amplification, accessibility for the disabled, and more. What of poverty, violence, distraction, and other cultural realities inside and outside the sanctuary that rise as if a jagged climb between a freeing word and folk's ability to hear it? How might strength and wisdom to address such challenges be found?

What styles of *perceiving and thinking*, whether concrete or abstract, random or sequential, affect how a message is shaped and how it is heard?² How can we craft messages that fit ways in which hearers grasp ideas? We must be open to a variety of speaking styles, both as speakers and hearers, and take the time necessary to learn about them.

What *spiritual and theological formation* is required to keep people in the conversation long enough to hear the Spirit speak? And how do bringers of Christ restore in hearers abused by modern media the ability to receive rightly ways of communicating characteristic of biblical witness: narrative, symbolism, rhythm, irony, mystery, and metaphor? In a culture in which messages are consumed instantly and tomorrow forgotten, where battling sound bites of crafted deception parade as discourse, and where distraction abounds, the prehomiletic work of recreating a rhetorical environment in Christian worship and Christian witness worthy of the nonviolent, liberating, Christ-glorifying word we carry might be the most urgent pastoral task we have. Preparing the way. Making paths straight.

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2. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* [1558], vol. 1, on Matthew 3:1-6/Mark 1:1-6/Luke 3:1-6 (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.xxvii.html>); accessed November 24, 2007).

3. Tertullian, *Considering Repentance 2*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:658.

2. Distinctions between perceiving and ordering the world here are based on the work of Anthony Gregoric.

Exegetical Perspective

Messiah of the Lord. The first step in preparing for the coming of the Lord is repentance from sins, a message that reverberates from the Hebrew prophets and is highly relevant to the Advent season.

John prepared for his ministry and proclaimed his message in the wilderness, so Luke can see John as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of a voice proclaiming in the wilderness (*erēmos* again) to prepare the way for the Lord. Isaiah 40:3–5 was originally a word to the exiles in Babylon and so brought comfort to the people of Israel, that their time of oppression would end with God's rescue—that God had not forgotten them and would not neglect them. By using this text from Isaiah, Luke skillfully plays upon the messianic hopes of the Israelites; hearing these words, they would understand John was the voice that was to prepare them to receive the promised redemption. Thus John's message really is "good news" (v. 18), for his message of repentance *is* the one that prepares the way for the Lord, while those who accept and act upon it show themselves ready for the Lord to enact his comfort. Luke uses Isaiah's words to show the continuity between the ministries of John and of Jesus: John's coming was not only predicted, but his message was the one that truly began the good news. Although Luke contains John's entire ministry separate from and prior to that of Jesus, despite the overlap of their ministries and the fact that John baptized Jesus (Matt. 3:13–17, a detail Luke omits from his account of the baptism in Luke 3:21–22), Luke presents one seamless message proclaimed by the two, first prepared for by John and then embodied by Jesus.

As our congregations enter worship on this Second Sunday of Advent, what current realities of state and church, of sin and repentance, will Luke's words summon? There are many to choose from. They span the pages of our newspapers and diaries. Whatever they may be, Luke's lection delivers a timeless word: to accept John's message of repentance is to be ready for Messiah.

MARIAM J. KAMELL

Homiletical Perspective

seek God's forgiveness, and to prepare the way of the Lord. Later he will give very specific and practical examples of what this rightly oriented life will entail (3:10–14), but this week we live in the poetic world of the prophet Isaiah, who called all people to prepare for the Lord by making crooked paths straight, lifting up valleys, and making rough places plain. The punch and promise of the poetry is saved for last: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Prepare the way of the Lord! If that is the central message of our passage, there is meaning in God's choice of John, the wilderness-dweller, as messenger. In Luke, the word of God comes neither to the Emperor nor to the governors, and not even to the high priests. It comes to simple John, son of Zechariah, whom Luke introduces in the first chapter of his Good News. John the Baptist is to us a great prophet who prepared the way for Jesus, but compared with the political and religious leaders of his day, he was just an ordinary guy—and yet, God chose John, and not the luminaries of his time, to be the messenger. God sent the message to John, not in Rome, not in Jerusalem, but out in the wilderness. Not the seat of political or religious power, but the wilderness, the often scary and confusing place where God had spoken to God's people in the past and through which God had led God's people to a new and promised life. God's choice of John and where God spoke to John are indications of what God expects from us. Our repentance, our turning around, will likely involve us looking at the structures and the systems and the people of the world around us in new and different ways.

"Prepare the way this Advent," the prophet John cries out. John makes us uncomfortable. Maybe this is the Advent preacher's job as well—to make us uncomfortable enough truly to repent and prepare for the coming of Jesus.

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