Feasting on the Word

Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary

Year B, Volume 2

DAVID L. BARTLETT and BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

General Editors

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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. But 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 Jack Keller and Don McKim of Westminster John Knox Press, who conceived this project, and to David Dobson and Jon Berquist, who worked diligently to bring the project to completion. 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, John Schuler, and Dilu Nicholas 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

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

[1]Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
[2]a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
in ages to come.
. . . . . .
[12]Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
[13]rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.

'Where is their God?' "

Theological Perspective

Two trumpets sound in these verses. The first raises an alarm (vv. 1–2), and the second calls the people to respond to a natural disaster with apocalyptic implications (vv. 15–17). The verses that lie between the two give the theological basis for the response, which is repentance (vv. 12–14). The emergency is an environmental disaster created by a locust plague introduced in chapter 1. In chapter 2, Joel blends this insect invasion with the future Day of the Lord by a pastiche of traditional prophetic allusions. The prophet's call to repentance is an effort to relieve the ecological warfare. The prophet's hope is based solely on God's merciful nature. These texts raise enduring theological tensions regarding God's wrath and natural disaster; humanity's place in creation in light of ecological suffering; and the interplay of mercy and guilt in repentance, particularly where guilt cannot be directly ascertained.

God's wrath and natural disaster are clearly linked in Joel's prophecy. God sends the locusts. The destruction in their wake is, in the parlance of modern insurance policies, an act of God, an "unusual, extraordinary, or unforeseeable manifestation of the forces of nature beyond the powers of human intervention" (*The American*

Pastoral Perspective

A trumpet is echoing through the land. It is sounding an alarm, calling to the people, "The day of the Lord is coming!" "Rend your hearts and not your garments!" "Return to the Lord!" "Fast and weep!" These words may sound antiquated to contemporary ears. They echo through the centuries from the lips of the ancient Hebrew prophet and his alien social context, bouncing off the sermons of tent revival preachers, ricocheting from the cries of those who proclaim dire predictions of the end time. How can they possibly resonate with a twenty-first-century mainline Christian congregation?

Let us consider the context in which a twenty-first-century congregation hears these "antiquated" words. The liturgical context is Ash Wednesday. The Ash Wednesday service, with its imposition of ashes and its intonation of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust," has served for centuries of Christendom as a reminder that we are frail and flawed creatures, in need of repentance and dependent on the grace of God. We come from God, the Creator, and we return to God. Ash Wednesday begins Lent's invitation to look inward, examining our souls and our relationship to the Creator.

The global context for the twenty-first-century congregation is complex, fraught with conflict. The threat of global warming with its ecological and

[14]Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD, your God?

[15]Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
[16]gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.
[17]Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,

Exegetical Perspective

The first reading for today consists of two sections from the book of Joel. The first section (vv. 1–2) is a cry of alarm; the second (vv. 12–17) is a call for repentance.

The cry of alarm (vv. 1–2) opens with the directive to blow the trumpet or shofar. Fashioned from a ram's horn, the shofar was used to summons people to arms and to call them to worship. It is clear from the context of these first verses that something close to the former meaning is intended here. The parallel construction of the poetry indicates that the directive is meant for Jerusalem:

Blow the trumpet in Zion
sound the alarm on my holy mountain

Though the specific enemy is not named, the consequences of its approach is characterized as "the day of the LORD." This unique manifestation of God is first referred to in the writings of Amos (see Amos 5:18–20). Originally the Israelites had looked forward to this mysterious "day" as a time of blessing for themselves and adversity for their enemies. Amos turned this expectation upside down by proclaiming that, because of their own unfaithfulness, that day would be one of darkness and gloom for the Israelites as well.

Homiletical Perspective

This passage from Joel, and the day of Ash Wednesday itself, is about the unexpected, the counterintuitive, the reversal of expectations. In this passage, the reversal takes place in three places in particular.

First, Joel promises that the coming of the Lord will not be like anything anyone expected. Tradition held that on the Day of the Lord, God would come to vindicate Israel, to judge the nations that had opposed and oppressed her, and to reverse the status quo in favor of the people of Jerusalem. Like Amos and Zephaniah before him, Joel sounds the unexpected, even heretical, and manifestly unpopular view that the Day of the Lord will not be a day of celebration and vindication but of judgment and destruction. The people of the covenant will themselves be held accountable and will not be spared, precisely because they *are* the people of God and so have enjoyed God's favor. The Lord is surely coming, Joel prophesies, and this is definitely *not* good news for Jerusalem.

The second reversal regards the kind of repentance expected. Repentance, we should remember, is not a new concept to God's people. The whole cultic structure that surrounds Jerusalem and the temple is premised on the notion that God's people will and do fall short of their covenantal

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Theological Perspective

Heritage Dictionary, Third Edition). By conflating images of the locusts with representations of the future Day of the Lord received from prophetic tradition, Joel links natural disaster with God's impending judgment against the nations. The suffering inflicted by God's vast army, covering the earth like a thick darkness, afflicts all creatures great and small (vv. 2, 11). All creation groans: the seeds within the earth wither, domestic cattle and sheep starve, the wilderness is devoured, and wild animals cry out for mercy to God (1:17–20).

The trumpet sounded in 2:1 alerts its hearers to a comprehensive crisis involving creation, humanity as a part of that creation, and even God, whose reputation is at stake. The priests implore their God to save face by lifting the plague (v. 17). All living creatures, the land that nourishes them, and their Creator are interwoven in this environmental disaster. The theological world of Joel is one where God, humanity, and the earth interact as a single ecological system. Alarm is sounded because this interrelational environment shows signs of failing from unnamed causes, and all will suffer the consequences unless unity is restored. Only when balance is restored in the divine/created ecosphere will the people again rejoice in abundance, the soil be glad, the animals be without fear, the wilderness and its trees be green and fruitful (2:21–26), and God's goodness be vindicated (v. 27a).

Joel does not seek reconciliation by playing the blame game. The prophecy does not call for restoration by removal of sin or name the cause(s) of the pestilence, though it does not deny they exist. Scholars and others have long speculated on what sins might have prompted God to send the locusts, but such efforts miss the point entirely. They are as misguided as the disciples' question in John 9:2, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Joel is *vitally interested* in the responses called for by present natural calamity and by the future catastrophic Day of the Lord; the prophet is *silent* about moral causality.

In these texts, the ethical roots of natural disasters may remain as mysterious and unavoidable as the apocalyptic Day of the Lord, but the proper response to them is perfectly clear: radical repentance as a return to God (v. 12). The repentance is to take place within individual hearts and public solemn assembly, where everyone—aged and infant, priests and honeymooners, men and women—are called together to mourn the gap natural calamity reveals between God and humanity and to cry out for God to bridge it.

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economic consequences looms large. The First World is warring with the Third World over nonrenewable energy resources. Terrorism is the preferred strategy of competing religious and political ideologies. Poverty with its accompanying issues of hunger and homelessness continues to grow across the globe, as the gap between rich and poor grows ever wider.

In this global context we are invited to hear the prophet's words from a vantage point beyond the cleansing of our individual souls. The Christian community is challenged by the ancient words of the prophet to consider its communal soul as well. It is all too apparent that in the web of life on this earth we are connected globally, economically, politically, and spiritually. We are dependent on one another for our survival. Here the global context connects with the liturgical context. In the intonation of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust," we are reminded that all creation comes from the hand of the same Creator and from the same particles of energy. The universe is truly one and connected within all its parts.

Joel's word from God in this passage begins with the prophetic cry, "The day of the LORD is coming!" While each Hebrew prophet who invoked this phrase had something specific in mind to challenge the people of his time, this "day" involved God's intervention in history both to save and to judge. In the second chapter of Joel "the day of the LORD" is equated with a great and powerful army spreading like "blackness over the mountains." Some scholars have speculated that perhaps this was not the army of a conquering nation, but a plague of locusts destroying the people's crops and their livelihood.

Whichever it may have been, a plague of locusts or a conquering army, could the threat of destruction in the ancient text be analogous to the impending threats on our global community? The effects of global warming, of the violence and greed of our times, of our inability to seek peace with our neighbors are spreading across our land like "blackness spread across the mountains." Could the twenty-first-century church be called to be a modern-day Joel, crying out, "The day of the LORD is coming," in the face of the global need of God's judgment and salvation?

If the church is to play Joel's prophetic part, it will behoove us to hear the words of challenge and repentance that he gave to his people. "Rend your hearts and not your clothing!" Through "rending" our hearts we are called out of the provincialism and isolationism of our faith communities. We are called to break open our hearts, to allow our hearts to be

Exegetical Perspective

In describing "the day of the LORD," Joel piles negative characterization upon negative characterization. This will be "a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness." Such language portends final judgment and destruction. Some commentators believe that the prophet was using this eschatological language to describe hordes of locusts ("the great and powerful army") that plagued the city. Others hold that the infestation of locusts was perceived as divine judgment for the sinfulness of the people. This explains the prophet's employment of "the day of the LORD" motif. Regardless of the sequence of actual historical events, the terrifying prospect of a threatening "day of the LORD" does not change. The prophet is alerting the people to an impending calamity.

The call to repentance (vv. 12–17) opens with the phrase "Yet even now," which links the destructive force of "day of the LORD" with the possibility of some kind of reprieve. It is the Lord who utters these words, and so their trustworthiness is assured. This is followed by the exhortation: "Return!" In Hebrew, this verb means "to arrive again at the initial point of departure." Here it suggests that one had been originally with God, had moved away from God, and was now returning to God. "Yet even now" there is an opportunity to "return." This returning implies a turning away from what separated one from God, and it requires total commitment: "with all your heart." A commitment of the heart is not simply an emotional response. Since the heart was considered the seat of thinking and willing, it implied total dedication.

The conditions laid down for a reprieve are clearly stated: "fasting . . . weeping . . . mourning . . . rend[ing] your heart." This fasting, weeping, and mourning may be somewhat public in nature. However, purely external performance is not enough. The injunction to rend one's heart rather than one's clothing, a characteristic sign of mourning, makes this clear. If, as stated above, the heart is the seat of thinking and willing, God is asking that one's mind and will be open to divine promptings. The repentance that God desires must touch the innermost recesses of one's being.

The summons to "return" is repeated (v. 13), this time by the prophet. He then employs an ancient Israelite confessional formula to explain the primary reason for returning to the Lord: "for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." This solemn formulation is found first in the account of the reestablishment of the

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responsibilities. What shifts in Joel's announcement is that the usual cultic and ritual symbols of repentance—the tearing of one's clothes, for instance—are insufficient. God desires the people to rend their hearts, rather than their garments; to approach God in sincerity, rather than by ritual; to beseech God's mercy through genuine mourning for sin, rather than by cultic rite. Joel calls for true repentance, the complete turning away from destructive patterns, selfish inclinations, and self-righteous expectations. God wants the whole person, not some outward sign, and God will get the whole person, whether through genuine repentance or divine retribution.

The third reversal plays upon the second. God wants not only the whole person, but the whole people, the whole city of Jerusalem, indeed, the entire nation. This is not a call to the pious, or to the willing, or to those who are expected to make offering to the Lord, but to all. For this reason Joel calls to assembly even those who are usually exempt from communal calls—the very young, the very old, and the newlyweds. God comes not to forge a personal relationship but a communal one, not to treat with the religious leaders of the people, but with the whole community.

According to Joel, the people of Zion are in desperate straits. If, as scholars perceive, they enjoyed a reasonably high level of security as part of the Persian Empire, this message would have been particularly difficult to hear. No less difficult, though ultimately hopeful, is Joel's rationale for their petition: the God of Israel, the God of Jerusalem, the God of the covenant *is*, ultimately, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Though clearly good news, this will nonetheless be difficult news to hear, because it means accepting the fact that *if* God should relent from punishing—and the prophet does not remove the disturbing possibility that this is no sure thing—it will not be on the basis of Israel's righteousness or merit, nor even because of Israel's covenantal relationship with God. Rather, if God turns to Israel in mercy, it will only be because it is in God's nature to do so, and so Israel's best—indeed only!—hope is that God will be true to God's own nature rather than respond to Israel as Israel deserves.

Joel's message is unexpected, counterintuitive, and radically contrary to the expectations of his hearers, and for this very reason speaks to North American Christians. Buoyed by our own relative sense of stability and security, we also tend to take

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

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The form the solemn, public ritual of repentance takes indicates its true meaning. It is composed of sincere individuals (vv. 12–13) acting in community (v. 16). Fasting, weeping, and mourning are signs of a people beyond self-help (v. 12–14). Humility is the issue, not guilt or innocence. Even getting repentance right does not guarantee liberation from suffering, for "Who knows . . . ?" (v. 14). In the *Life of St. Severinus* by Eugippius, a plague of locusts descends on a village. Severinus advises the villagers to repent according to Joel's model, adding one word of advice: "Let no one go out to his field, as if concerned to oppose the locusts by human effort; lest the divine wrath be yet more provoked" (chap. 12).

The penitents in Joel weep for the land's suffering rather than for themselves or their guilty past. Such grief is appropriate in response to all suffering, whether deserved, innocent, or mysterious. Like Ash Wednesday participants reminded that from dust they came and to dust they shall return, Israel's people are called by Joel to see themselves in solidarity with all mortal and dependent-upon-God created beings. It is a repentance recalling the ancient common Indo-European root underlying the words human, humility, and humus—a root meaning "ground." Earthlings suffer on and with the earth. Owning this reality is the first step in finding reconciliation with the Creator and the creation. Augustine, in *City of God*, book 18, chapter 32, likened the penitents in Joel to the blessed mourners of the second Beatitude (Matt. 5:4).

In Joel, the hope present in reconciliation, realized if God leaves a grain and drink offering, is founded solely on the character of God (v. 14). Joel specifies the people's repentance not as a ritual cleansing from guilt, but as an admission of their hopeless state and dependence upon God, even for the gifts they offer God. Humanity may be unreliable, but God is forever gracious, merciful, "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (v. 13). Gregory of Nazianzen in *Oration* XVI.14 describes the repentance called for in Joel's prophecy as "a mercy upon ourselves" and "an open road to our Father's righteous affections," for though God may at times be forced to anger, mercy is the Creator's natural inclination. By virtue of who we are, we will sow in tears; by virtue of who God is, we may reap in joy.

WM. LOYD ALLEN

Pastoral Perspective

broken for the good of the whole world, as we see how First-World Christian communities are connected to Third-World Christian communities and how Christians are connected to brothers and sisters of other faiths.

With hearts broken open and vulnerable, we can "return to the Lord!" God's mercy, grace, and steadfast love comprise the healing cauldron where the sins that human beings perpetrate against one another and against creation can be cleansed. God knows we do not need God's punishment, for when left to our own devices we mete out enough anger and punishment upon one another. In right relationship with God we recognize our implicit and complicit cooperation with the sins of the world without the paralysis of guilt and self-pity. Then our inclinations to "fast and weep" are transformed from lifeless ritual into true and vital action.

"Fasting" can become our search for simpler lifestyles, along with practices that decrease our faith community's ecological footprint. Our tears of repentance can lead us to search for ways to deal with conflict constructively within church communities, instead of allowing it to create political and divisive bickering. We cannot hope to call for change in the world without examining our communal souls and seeking the changes of repentance within ourselves.

Bill McKibben, naturist and lay minister, called the church to task on the issue of global warming in the February 20, 2007, issue of *The Christian Century*. "The church—which can still posit some goal for human life other than accumulation—must be involved in the search for what comes next."[1] McKibben's words extend to the church a challenge that is larger than involvement in eco-justice issues. The Christian community has been given not only the wake-up call through the prophets, but also the promise of resurrection in the Gospels and the apocalyptic prophet's vision in Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth. The good news of Lent is that the church is called to heed the trumpet call of repentance on Ash Wednesday as we anticipate the glad trumpets of Easter morning announcing God's ultimate defeat of death in Christ Jesus.

JANE ANNE FERGUSON

[1]Bill McKibben, "Meltdown, Running Out of Time on Global Warming," *Christian Century,* February 20, 2007.

Exegetical Perspective

covenant after the people had sinned by worshiping the golden calf (Exod. 34:6–7). It further appears in various other places in the biblical tradition (Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Neh. 9:17). This characterization of God contains two of the most prominent divine covenantal features: *rachamîm* (mercy) and *hesed* (steadfast love). These suggest the reestablishment of the covenant bond. The same citation as found in Exodus clearly underscores divine forgiveness, a theme that would have instilled hope in the hearts of the people to whom Joel was speaking. To this formulation, Joel adds that God "relent[s] from punishing" (cf. Jonah 4:2), which reinforces the notion of divine mercy.

The prophet called the people to "return" and assured them of God's merciful nature. He then held out the possibility of God turning to them and, rather than lashing out in punishment, granting them the blessing of a fruitful harvest. This clever play on the meaning of "turn" suggests that if the people will "turn" and repent of their sins, God will "turn" and relent in punishing them. Joel is not initiating a quid pro quo proposition; God is free. The text clearly states that there is no human surety: "Who knows" what God will do? The blessings of grain and wine are not simply for the sake of nourishment and good cheer. Here they are intended as elements for cultic offerings and introduce a cultic theme.

The final verses develop this cultic theme (vv. 15–17). The introductory phrase, "Blow the trumpet in Zion," here calls the people to a public fast, a solemn assembly, and a communal rite of sanctification. The entire congregation is summoned to participate. No one is excused, not even the children or those recently married, who under normal circumstances would have been exempt from any penitential obligations. The liturgical leaders have a designated role in these devotional practices, performing mourning rites and pleading that the people be spared the wrath of God. The prophet ends this entreaty with an appeal to divine repute. If God did not step in and rescue this people, the other nations might question God's care of Israel or divine power itself. The passage ends on a note of hope, for the people are referred to as "your people, O LORD . . . your heritage." Surely God will care for what is God's own possession.

DIANNE BERGANT

Homiletical Perspective

God's favor for granted, to assume our church attendance or charitable contributions should be enough, or to conceive of our relationship with God primarily in individualistic terms. Like Joel's original audience, we may find Joel's message difficult.

This is even truer on Ash Wednesday, which is also about overturning expectations and the call to true repentance. Some of the expectations we have for Ash Wednesday that run afoul are cultural. Every advertisement for wrinkle-removing cream bolsters our deification of youth and our accompanying denial of our own mortality. The imposition of ashes and the reminder that we came from and one day will return to dust has a sobering effect. Others are more universally human—the assumption that we can and should secure our future for ourselves and then look to God to bless our arrangements. To these, Ash Wednesday and this passage from Joel demand a recognition that apart from God we are nothing, can expect nothing, and deserve nothing.

But perhaps the most widespread and subtle expectation this day's reading calls into question is neither cultural nor universal, but instead is peculiarly religious: the expectation that God is ultimately predictable, or that our religious activities make God predictable. Yet to this, Joel counters that the Day of the Lord is not cause for celebration but anxiety. To be the covenantal people of God is not merely to enjoy God's favor but also to merit God's judgment. Similarly Ash Wednesday inaugurates that season of the church year where we anticipate God's unexpected, even offensive appearance: not in glory but in shame, not in power but in weakness, not to triumph for us but to suffer with us and even on account of us.

As we once more commence our journey to Jerusalem and the cross, we must be prepared to meet the God who always defies our expectations. Caught off balance and unawares, we may once again recognize that our best and only hope for blessing in this life—and salvation in the one to come—rests in God being true to God's own nature, even to the point of taking on our lot and our life to die on the cross that we might live with hope. In response to this wildly unpredictable God we may find the courage to turn, to repent, to start anew.

DAVID J. LOSE

Psalm 51:1-17

[1]Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
[2]Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

[3]For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
[4]Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
[5]Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

[6]You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
[7]Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
[8]Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Theological Perspective

Wring this psalm out, and theology will fill your bucket! From that bucket, one could dip out insights into a number of doctrines: the character of God, human nature, sin, forgiveness and salvation, to name the most obvious. The attractiveness of the psalm derives from the deep and honest reflection on the poet's own relationship with God. That reflection has led to genuine soul-searching, moving the theological meditation away from abstractions and toward refreshing candor about the deepest things of life.

The poet is not explicit about what prompted this existential crisis. That reticence has led to much speculation, starting with the scribe who attributed the psalm to David. Using the psalm to reflect on the David-Bathsheba-Uriah episode can be fruitful, but does not tell us much about the psalmist's motives. The possibilities of the threat of illness (crushed bones of v. 8) or enemies (bloodshed of v. 14) are so understated and subject to interpretation that they do not help us understand the poet's predicament. The psalmist might have written in response to the exile, but, again, the poem does not mention this event explicitly. The psalm was written well before Daniel's affirmation of resurrection, so the poet is not concerned to avoid punishment in an afterlife. We have the possibility, therefore, of a sensitive

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The Fifty-first Psalm is one of seven penitential psalms that have been used in connection with Ash Wednesday (the others being Pss. 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143). It is a prayer for inward and spiritual renewal (v. 10) in a time of illness or incapacity (v. 8). A pastor may wish to explore ancient beliefs about the connection between illness and sin or moral impurity, and their modern manifestations implied in the question "What did I do to deserve this?" Whatever we say we believe, most of us have a functional theology that has not yet been informed by reflection in light of Scripture. However, in the context of an Ash Wednesday liturgy, it is more likely that Psalm 51 will be part of speaking to the nature and character of penitence, sacrifice, and ascetic discipline.

In addressing *penitence*, it may be useful to recall the story of discovering that your dog and your cat have recently finished eating the beef tenderloin that you had let stand on the kitchen counter for ten minutes. When you discover the sin of your pets, you will be presented with dog repentance in the form of Fido approaching you with tail wagging, pleading, "Love me, love me, love me." Socks, on the other hand, will keep licking her paws and looking up occasionally as if to say, "Do we have a problem here?" Neither dog nor cat really repents. And

[9]Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

[10]Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
[11]Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
[12]Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

[13]Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
[14]Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

[15]O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
[16]For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
[17]The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Exegetical Perspective

Psalm 51's *canonical context* transports us back to a time when God had yet to "build up the walls of Jerusalem" (1 Kgs. 3:1; as at Ps. 51:18 NIV). At that time of beginnings, when the monarchy was still enjoying its youth, David, son of Jesse, underwent a moral meltdown. David, a paradigm of humanity, with whom we all identify, came to despise the God he loved, "to do what is evil in his sight" (2 Sam. 12:9; as at Ps. 51:4). If it could happen to David, it could happen to any of us.

The faithful have always identified with David. We empathize with his familiar weaknesses, his primal drives, and his compelling human feelings, which lie shockingly open before us. We gravitate to his story because it genuinely rings true to our experience. At the same time, it surprises us with its penetrating spiritual revelations, stretching us to ponder how David can say he has sinned against God alone when he has plainly victimized both Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 12:13; as at Ps. 51:4).

The David of history, of course, was not the actual author of Psalm 51. Strong clues betray the psalm's prehistory as a temple rite of aspersion, well illustrated by a bronze amulet from ancient Assyria. The tablet's image attests that priestly experts once used hyssop to purify suppliants just as in verse 7 of our psalm. In Israel's temple chambers and sickrooms

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Psalm 51 holds a permanent place in today's readings, and for good reason. While it shows up again in the lections, this is its natural habitat—with the cross-smeared foreheads and raw holiness of Ash Wednesday. Of all the penitential psalms, this is the one that most passionately witnesses to the pain of sin and the hunger for salvation. This psalm is not for reading; it is meant to be wailed. It outlines the paradox of the Lenten journey: our liberation will come through our suffering, not in spite of it.

The fact that it is traditionally connected to a specific sin of David's only makes it that much more potent as a preaching text. In my mainline Christian upbringing, the notion of sin is most often relegated to the subjective and abstract. David's "indiscretion" with Bathsheba, and the way that choice spirals into the second-degree murder of Uriah, will not allow for such an arm's-length approach, however.

Conventional Christianity, whether or not we like to admit it, understands sin as action, and little more: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Had David been a member of First Church, the psalm might read a bit differently, more like a laundry list than an existential crisis. A lot of "please forgive this and that" and very little "let the bones that you have crushed rejoice." In the popular approach to sin, we

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writer who longed for a renewed relationship with God for its own sake. Putting that much value on one's connection to God, apart from any secondary gain, is an intriguing avenue for proclamation.

From the opening verses of the psalm, the poet interprets estrangement from God comprehensively. The words used in verses 1–2 carry the familiar connotations of transgression (crossing a boundary), rebellion, and missing the mark. The psalmist's confession is not halfhearted. Verses 4–5 have considerable potential for insight into human sinfulness, as long as one reads them in the context of the canon. Verse 4 does not suggest that the psalmist has sinned exclusively against God, through idolatry, for example. Verse 4 speaks to the wide-ranging damage that sin does. Our sinfulness ripples out beyond the person or persons we think we have harmed, expanding to the community and reaching up to offend God.

As the poet acknowledges in verse 3, sin even affects the emotional state of the sinner. In the context of the canon, verse 5 cannot mean that the process of reproduction itself is sinful or that it passes along a transferred "original" guilt to an infant. God instructed the human race to be fruitful and multiply. Scripture consistently affirms romantic love and reproduction as inherently good. Nevertheless, the psalmist accurately recognizes that human nature gravitates toward sin, and that sin is not a temporary or episodic thing. The psalmist certainly is not trying to escape responsibility for sin by locating its origin in infancy. The psalmist accepts full blame, with no attempt to make excuses.

The psalmist is so relentless in confession of sin that proclamation based on this psalm should be careful to avoid potential pitfalls. Excessive and morbid fascination with guilt can be a symptom of depression. The psalmist offers frank but healthy acknowledgment of shortcomings, weaknesses, and willful disobedience. The psalmist does not wallow in despair, but recognizes potential for service, instruction, and proper worship (vv. 13–17), anticipating and expecting to feel joy again (v. 8).

Frustration over sinfulness and the inability to rise above it gives way in the psalm to confidence in God. The psalmist's vocabulary for the character of God is even richer than the terminology for sin. The reading from this psalm begins and ends with affirmations of God's mercy, steadfast love, and willingness to accept a contrite, repentant sinner. Although the poet recognizes God's judgment (v. 4), the emphasis is on God's actions on behalf of the

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humans emulate them on a regular basis. Both dog and cat are attempting to restore good feelings to a relationship without addressing the real brokenness that has occurred.

Early baptismal liturgies would mark repentance when the candidate was brought into the baptismal pool. After the renunciations of evil, the candidate would be turned to face the east and the sunrise. (The basic meaning of the word repentance [*metanoia*] is "turning.") After being turned, the candidate would make his or her affirmations of Jesus as Lord and Savior. Penitence involves turning away *from* darkness, from the past, from the old Adam (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:22), from the works of the devil, sin, and everything deathly. Penitence also involves turning *toward* the light, orienting ourselves to what is of true and ultimate worth, toward life in union with Jesus Christ, and consequently toward meaning, purpose, and ministry.

This same movement *from* sin and *toward* meaning is reflected in Psalm 51. From an acknowledgment of iniquity (v. 2), even from the womb (v. 5), comes a desire, at least, for a clean heart and a right spirit (v. 10). There is also an acknowledgment of a teaching purpose for the psalmist in the future (v. 13), and recognition of the true nature of sacrifice (v. 16f.) as one who has come into the light.

It can be pastorally useful and even liberating to be clear that while penitence is, in part, remorse for wrongdoing, it is not first about confessing wrongdoing. Repentance is recognizing that we are not God. Wrongdoing is a consequence of our acting as though we were. The psalmist points toward such an understanding in saying that a broken spirit and a contrite heart (v. 17) are acceptable to God.

Psalm 51 also points to questions, beliefs, and practices around *sacrifice* (v. 16) that may be related to the godly counsels of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving (Matt. 6) and also to the proclamations about right sacrifice found in Joel 2. Sacrifice needs to be bound up with what is going on in our hearts. It cannot be considered a mechanical device for manipulating God or achieving righteousness. A pastoral perspective on sacrifice will emphasize the reality that we are more free when we are able to be generous, perhaps recalling the belief commonly expressed throughout Africa that "we are rich when we can make a gift." We might point out that in the sacrificial system of the Second Temple, whether the sacrifice was a sheep, goat, dove, or portion of grain, the one making the offering was giving up

(as in Assyria's), pilgrims were constantly seeking ceremonial purging, using prayers such as Psalm 51.

This reconstruction is illuminating, but not as helpful for preaching and teaching the psalm as a canonical reading. A canonical reading of Psalm 51 attends to its superscription (not printed above with the psalm), which functions to draw out the theology of the poem by pairing it with 2 Samuel 11–12.

To read Psalm 51 theologically and *biblically*, as the Bible now presents it, we must imagine David uttering the psalm before God. We must picture him on his knees, as the superscription says, "when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

The core plea of Psalm 51 precisely fits David's need in the aftermath of the Bathsheba affair. Only an act of God could address David's awful situation of having turned himself irreversibly into something abhorrent. At verse 10 the psalm uses the radical Hebrew verb "create" (*bara'*) to petition just such a divine act.

According to 2 Samuel 11, David's initial selfishness with Bathsheba compounded itself, binding him ever tighter in his own web of treachery. There was a massive cover-up, and finally a murder. All human persons, like David, are free moral agents—free to entangle ourselves in this very sort of inextricable web! Mercifully, our webs present no obstacle to God.

God can extricate us from our human entanglements, our webs of deceit, and make a completely fresh start in us. We are trapped and isolated, but God's grace breaks through to us in genuine immediacy. Through the miracle of this immediacy, David becomes a new creation.

God's miracle of immediacy is nowhere clearer than in Psalm 51:6. English translations are inadequate to express the Hebrew, which emphasizes the power of God's reach. Bursting through all the layers of experience and guilt cocooning us, God encounters us in our hidden interiority (Heb. *tukhot*). God penetrates through to our inmost being (Heb. *satum*), where we stop up our darkest secrets. God gets in and gets things right, renewing our spirits, establishing truth and wisdom.

Dare we use the church's rubric "original sin" in interpreting Psalm 51? Verse 5 stares us plain in the face: "I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." The verse fits well with the ancients' attested recognition of sin's universality. A Mesopotamian suppliant has no trouble exclaiming, "Who has not sinned? Who has not committed

choose to address symptoms rather than endure surgery.

This psalm, however, asks for more than forgiveness. It is an all-out plea for re-creation. Using words such as "cleanse," "restore," "wash," and "blot out," this pleading prayer is tired of cheap crutches and temporary balms. While it begins rooted in a particular sin, the psalm sees David's act of violence against Uriah as the tip of the iceberg. Sin is a brutal and undeniable aspect of the human condition, and we have as much say about that as we do about our genetic makeup. But hidden in the psalmist's desperation is the key to healing—God's is a creative mercy, a grace that can take the dust of our broken hearts and generate abundant life.

A young woman came up to me following a Bible study on the campus where I pastor. She introduced herself, told me a little about her relatively new Christian faith, and then thanked me for leading the Ash Wednesday service. It was the middle of October at the time, and I assumed she had her novice liturgical wires crossed. But sure enough, she was talking about Ash Wednesday, almost seven months after the fact. Explaining herself, she said, "A friend made me go—I had never been to an Ash Wednesday service before. My church back home never did anything like that, with the ashes and all, and at first I was pretty freaked out about it. I was surprised at how ashamed and embarrassed those ashes made me feel. I found myself avoiding public places—I almost did not go to class the rest of the day.

"But that whole day was so powerful for me, walking around with that big black mark on my forehead. The more I thought about it, and still think about it, I began to feel so . . . hopeful. I know that sounds strange, but that service felt so honest. I am *not* the person I want to be, and deep down I know that, but most church services just feel like strung-out apologies. But since that day, I just feel like God can change me. That God *wants* to change me. And that feels hopeful."

Our Lenten journeys must be about more than making New Year's–type resolutions to give up chocolate, and our talk about sin must do more than simply punish or forgive. As Barbara Brown Taylor has reminded us, Christians are called to "understand God's grace as something more than the infinite remission of our sins. If we want to take part in the divine work of redemption, then we will also understand God's grace as the gift of

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sinner. No angry, vengeful God is portrayed here. The most devastating thing God can do is to cut off the poet from the divine presence (v. 11).

The psalmist asks God for two benefits. The psalmist wants God to forgive sins and to make the psalmist a new person. Theologians refer to these two acts of grace as justification and sanctification. With creative imagery and probing introspection, the psalmist explores what it would mean for God to work within. To effect forgiveness, God must cleanse and blot out the sin. The emphasis in the psalm is on God's actions within the person. The language for forgiveness and renewal tend to merge, so that the psalm does not clearly differentiate between one and the other. Certainly, when God hides from sin, that is forgiveness (v. 9). Are purging, washing, and blotting out justification or sanctification? By verse 10, the actions of God are clearly regeneration. Employing a verb that one can use only of God (as the author of Gen. 1:1 uses it of God's creation), the psalmist asks God to create a new heart, the locus of the will in Hebrew thought, and a new, right (or perhaps "steadfast") spirit that will not waver. At least two factors stand out in the psalmist's petitions to God about regeneration.

First, the psalmist is utterly dependent on God to become a new person. The psalmist does not promise to do better, but asks God to create the inner conditions that will enable better behavior and true relationship. Second, the psalmist asks for a thorough remake, going deeply within the human psyche. With felicitous terms—inward being, secret heart, broken spirit, contrite heart—the psalmist yearns for a renewal that invades deeply and causes change from the inside out.

This psalm is assigned to Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, a time of reflection and spiritual renewal leading to Holy Week and Easter. It is useful for individual devotion and corporate worship. Both individually and collectively, we can learn from the psalmist's honest confession and desire for a thoroughgoing change, leading to a more intimate relationship with God. God can forgive and work within individuals and communities.

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something that he and his family needed for life. Those making a sacrifice were placing their trust in YHWH for life. They were affirming that trust in God or right relationship with God was more important than any other apparent source of their livelihood.

Psalm 51 points toward the godly counsels of *ascetic discipline* when the psalmist prays for holiness (v. 10) through being purged and bathed (v. 7). In a sense the godly counsels invite us to make a practice of sacrificial discipline. The root of the word "ascetic" is found in ancient gymnasia. It referred to sparring in the form of shadowboxing. Ascetic discipline in the form of purging, bathing, fasting, kneeling in prayer, journaling, pilgrimage, almsgiving, or any of the many practices especially urged upon us in Lent is a matter of training our wills and our spirits that we may better focus on that toward which we turned in baptism. Such discipline is not only training for a contest, but participating in that contest as we take on the shadows in our lives. We seek to live in the light that we too might be restored to the joy of God's salvation and find sustained within us a willing spirit (v. 12). An ascetic practice is part and parcel of discipleship, or following Jesus, and so may be called ascetic discipline.

A pastor preaching on any or all of the themes of penitence, sacrifice, and ascetic discipline will call to mind the central message of Psalm 51, namely, that there is nothing we can do to conjure an experience of *the grace of God*. We do not express our repentance for any other reason than that we have glimpsed the reality of God. We neither make a sacrifice nor engage in ascetic discipline for any purpose other than to place our trust for life in God's mercy and grace. The psalmist acknowledges this when declaring the righteousness of God who is justified in passing sentence and blameless in passing judgment (v. 4), and who knows that a broken spirit is the beginning of cleanliness, holiness, forgiveness, freedom, and restoration (v. 17).

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offence?" Let us allow verse 5 to stand. Of course, we must stand guard against pressing its poetry toward any suggestion of a biological transmission of sin. There is nothing sinful whatsoever about conception and birth.

Sin's universality and ineradicability is demonstrated early on in Scripture in Genesis 1–11. Pride and fear so overtook earth's first population that by the time of Noah, "every inclination of the thoughts of [people's] hearts was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5; cf. Gen. 8:21; Ps. 14:3). Their painful ordeal represents nothing other than David's story in 2 Samuel 11 writ large. Genesis and 2 Samuel present the same truth. Both alike know the power of human sin to compound itself and build up to a crescendo of forlornness.

The sweetness of God's grace shines brilliantly, once we come to grips with human forlornness. "To understand sin properly," Martin Luther wrote, is "to understand the nature of grace properly." So too, Augustine of Hippo discovered that to truly understand sin is to taste God's sweetness, "a sweetness that is not false, a sweetness happy and secure."

Psalm 51 reveals the magnificence of divine grace in its ruthless honesty about sin. Sin, the psalm bears witness, is that which impels each of us to throw ourselves upon God's mercy. The one who murdered Uriah can indeed legitimately exclaim, "Against you [God], you alone, have I sinned" (Ps. 51:4; cf. 2 Sam. 12:13), because sin, first and foremost, is about how humanity, blinded by self-interest, has cut itself off from God's sweetness.

Sin, unlike *crime* or *injury*, is a theological concept; it is a description of our relationship with the transcendent. Luther wrote, "A lawyer speaks of [the human person] as an owner and master of property, and a physician speaks of [the person] as healthy or sick. But a theologian discusses [the person] as a sinner. In theology, this is the essence of [the human person]."[1]

Psalm 51:4 is spot-on: to be aware of sin is to be aware of one's radical accountability before God. It is to find oneself in David's shoes, entrapped in a web cocoon of guilt, realizing that restoration will require an incalculable miracle from the Beyond. Thanks be to God that God breaks through to us, as only God can, and restores to us the joy of God's salvation.

STEPHEN L. COOK

[1]Martin Luther, "Psalm 51," trans. J. Pelikan, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 12, *Selected Psalms I*, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 310.

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regeneration . . . complete with new vision, new values, and new behavior."[1]

Ash Wednesday is a time for even the mainline preacher to be honest about the power of sin, and to reclaim Christianity's unique vocabulary for the human condition. "My sin is ever before me," sings David, while simultaneously reminding us that our brokenness is no match for God's grace. In fact, it seems that acknowledging our helplessness is the very path to God's mercy.

When we gather and rub ashes on each other's foreheads, we are participating in an act of re-creation. Like the dust that God first breathed life into, the ashes smeared across our foreheads are a visible reminder that we were created from nothing. Another way of saying this is that the only barrier standing between us and nothingness is God. That may sound fatalistic to some, but in truth, it is the most liberating gospel of all.

In the same way, the dramatic language of the psalm gives flesh to the deepest hurts of those in the pews, calling on the Almighty to wash, purge, and recreate these broken lives. The preacher must not lessen the power of the language in the interest of being polite. The Christian calendar, despite our best efforts to tame it, provides for the range of human emotion; from anger to alleluia, from weeping to wonder. Let this day tell the truth it must: grace does not come without grief. For our hearts to heal, we must first be honest about their brokenness.

Ash Wednesday dares us to live each moment as if we belonged to God, to take each breath as a gift, and to give up the foolish notion that our salvation lies within ourselves. Let the pulpit proclaim that the church is a place for those who are desperate. Let the pulpit proclaim a God who leaves a fingerprint on our foreheads, a God who breathes life into our dust, a God who will not rest until we are transformed.

BRIAN ERICKSON

[1]Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2000), 5.

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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

6 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. [2]For he says,

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

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

Theological Perspective

The early-twenty-first-century church in North America struggles with the question of leadership. What are the marks of a faithful leader? The congregation at Corinth struggled with similar issues.

Paul had founded the Corinthian congregation with his apocalyptic gospel. However, superapostles preached another gospel centered in visionary, ecstatic experiences. The superapostles denigrated Paul and urged the Corinthians to view the difficulties of Paul's life as evidence that Paul was not reliable.

Paul reminds readers that through Christ, God has reconciled them to Godself (2 Cor. 5:18). Preachers have often taken this motif psychologically to mean that God and humankind felt alienated, and that God replaced feelings of estrangement with those of acceptance. Paul, however, evokes a larger framework. In antiquity, the term "reconciliation" usually refers to restoration of property and relationships to their intended purpose (e.g., 2 Macc. 1:5; 5:20; 7:33; 8:29). Through Christ, God restores the purposes God had at creation. The congregation should represent the new creation in the midst of the old. In this way they are ambassadors for Christ.

In today's reading, the apostle explains why his integrity as evidenced in his behavior in the difficult circumstances of his life demonstrates his reliability and that of his message. At this point in the letter,

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When celebrity couples split, they usually cite as the cause of the divorce "irreconcilable differences"—a curious term that covers a multitude of sins, from infidelity to chemical dependency, from career envy to boredom. Tabloid readers are left to fill in the details, but the story is the same: some rift has occurred, and the relationship cannot be put back together. Human relationships are fraught with irreconcilable differences.

One of the themes in 2 Corinthians is the theme of reconciliation. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). This is a radical message of good news, for God surely had cause to cite irreconcilable differences and divorce God's self from humankind. But instead, God bridged the chasm of human sin by making "him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (v. 21).

While this is an amazing gift God has given us, it is no small thing to allow ourselves to be reconciled to God. That is why, on Ash Wednesday, we face the difficult task of naming what separates us from God—our corporate and individual sin—and embracing God's ministry of reconciliation.

Credit counselors know that the first and most difficult step toward getting out of debt is figuring

Exegetical Perspective

By deciding to begin this lection in the middle of a sentence, the shapers of the lectionary have also decided what its subject shall be, at least on this first day of Lent. The subject will not be Paul's "royal we" status as ambassador of Christ, through whom God is appealing to the Corinthians to complete their collection for the church in Jerusalem (5:20a). The subject will be Paul's "royal we" entreaty, on behalf of Christ, to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God (5:20b).

The verses selected for this occasion belong to what is commonly called "Letter D" in the Corinthian correspondence (2 Cor. 1–9). Although no evidence exists that the letter ever circulated independently from the rest of 2 Corinthians, the shift in both theme and tone at the beginning of chapter 10 has led a variety of scholars to suppose that Letter D may have had a life of its own before Paul took up his defense against the superapostles in chapters 10–13.

In chapter 1, Paul mentions a painful visit to Corinth that apparently occurred between this letter and Paul's last—so painful that he cancelled a second visit he had planned (2 Cor. 1:23–2:1). He also refers to a letter he wrote the Corinthians "out of much distress and anguish of heart" (2 Cor. 2:4), which may be partly contained in 2 Corinthians

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Before you get too far into sermon preparation this week, you might want to save this text for when you need to argue that the trials and tribulations of ministry have worn you down so much that it is time for your congregation to think seriously about creating a sabbatical policy. Sticky note: "sabbatical policy," and move on with your Scripture choice.

That is one reason *not* to preach it now. Here is another: these are good verses to save for when your mission team members have returned from their summer exploits and are reporting to the congregation about the travails they faced: "we slept on church floors," "we worked in scorching sun," "we fed hundreds of hungry people in less than an hour," "the poverty we encountered was unbelievable," "being a missionary is hard." Sticky note: "mission trip," and move on.

But if you choose to take inspiration from 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10 for your Ash Wednesday proclamation, you'll find it an "acceptable time" (v. 2). The themes of punishment, dying, endurance, holiness, and hardship (vv. 4–6) are most fitting for Lent. And what better way to kick off the Lenten season than with an honest scouting report on the challenges ahead for disciples?

J. Barrie Shepherd wrote a poem called "Ordination" about the hardship of ministry:

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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Paul appeals less to the truth of his message as reason for the Corinthians to trust him, and more to his character. By implication Paul invites the Corinthians to consider their character as community. This could be a suggestive theological point for preaching.

Paul beseeches the community to "be reconciled to God," meaning that they should respond appropriately to the reconciliation that God graciously makes possible. In Corinth, this response means again becoming a covenantal community.

When Christ was preexistent with God in heaven, Christ knew no sin. For Paul, sin is a power that deforms God's purposes. But when God sent Christ into the world, Christ became sin, that is, he suffered and was put to death by the powers that seek to deform this age. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Christ are a single unit of meaning, and they occur so that the community "might become the righteousness of God." A reconciled community demonstrates that God is righteousness, that God can be trusted to do what is right. Paul implies that the nonreconciliation of the Corinthian community shows that the congregation is not embodying its role as ambassador of the new age.

Of course, a preacher cannot assume that unity in a congregation is a sign of faithfulness. Congregations can be unified around theological and ethical mistakes. Paul has in mind congregational cohesion around a truthful gospel.

Paul pleads with the community not to accept the grace of God in vain, that is, not to continue giving serious consideration to the community-destroying gospel of the superapostles. In verse 2, Paul cites Isaiah 49:8, an oracle of salvation from the Babylonian exile, which God describes as the "favorable" or "acceptable" time when God remained faithful to Israel and rendered Israel as a covenant to the nations (that is, as a sign of God's promises to Gentiles as well as to Jewish people). When Paul asserts, "See, now is the acceptable time," the apostle means that God is even now acting to complete the reconciliation of the world. Today is the day the Corinthians need to prepare for the coming world.

Given the fact that the apocalypse has not yet occurred, Paul's urgency here may seem out of place. However, Paul's underlying point is that a person and a community can begin to live as new creation *today.* Given the fractiousness of the old creation, why wait?

The superapostles were unimpressed with Paul's life and ministry. However, in verses 3–4, Paul declares that he has placed no unnecessary obstacles

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out how much you really owe. A counselor once told me he had a client who had not opened a credit card bill in two years. When asked why she did not do this, she said, "I didn't want to feel like a loser." Another time, a couple on the verge of divorce finally asked me for the name of a good marriage counselor. When commended on their courage, the wife said, "Thanks, but seeing a counselor still feels like an admission of failure." No one likes to admit mistakes—or confess sins. Unfortunately, there is no possibility of healing until we know the exact extent of the illness. And when it comes to our relationship with God, we cannot be reconciled unless we first understand the source of the estrangement. Confessing our sin is essential to reconciliation.

Once reconciled to God, we become part of God's ministry of reconciliation. As Paul says, "we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain" (6:1b). In other words, when it comes to good news, the point is to pass it on. Some people sitting in the pews these days are polite and passive Christians. Having found a spiritual home where they feel comfortable and comforted, they are content to let the world outside the sanctuary muddle on in sin and sorrow. We do not want to risk being labeled or ostracized, so we treat our faith as a private affair. But as Christians, we are more than simply members of a religious group. We are "ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (v. 20). Ambassadors work on behalf of others, representing not their own interests but the interests of the one they serve.

Rightly understood, being ambassadors for Christ is not a burden but a privilege, for it provides us with a way to love God—and a way to experience God's love for us. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner understood it this way. Because God is not some target-sized object that we can love, we can express our love for God only by loving other people. Furthermore, Rahner believed, we do not feel the love of God when other people love us, but only in the act of loving others.[1]

From a pastoral perspective, this passage is also useful because it opens the door to talk about another kind of reconciliation that needs to take place: reconciliation with the church. Many congregations are full of refugees from other congregations or denominations, people who have been injured or excluded by other Christian

[1]Shannon Craigo-Snell, "Redeeming Silence: Resources in Rahner for Contemporary Questions," PhD diss., Yale University, 2002.

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10–13, if it has not been lost altogether.[1] While efforts to reconstruct the history of the Corinthian correspondence will be outside the scope of an Ash Wednesday sermon, they underscore the urgency of Paul's theme. As he urges the Corinthians to be reconciled to God, he hopes they will be reconciled to him as well.

The occasion for writing the letter is Titus's return from Corinth, bringing news of that congregation to Paul and Timothy in Macedonia. While the news contains much to justify Paul's boasting of the church (7:13–16) Paul's response suggests that some in Corinth accuse him of vacillating (1:17) while others found his painful letter harsh (2:2) and others question his credentials (3:1). Since Paul is counting on the church to give generously to his collection for Jerusalem, he wastes no time addressing these concerns. Thus these eloquent verses on Paul's ministry of reconciliation are set within the larger context of an urgent stewardship letter.

Verse 21 contains Paul's case statement for reconciliation to God: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." If such righteousness is not immediately apparent, either in the quality of the Corinthians' congregational life or in their relationship with Paul, then Paul will present grounds for distinguishing between apparent and divine reality. But first he wants to make sure that the Corinthians understand the urgency of the situation.

Citing Isaiah 49:8a, Paul declares that both "the acceptable time" and "the day of salvation" have arrived (6:2). The first phrase is used nowhere else in the New Testament; Paul uses the second nowhere else in his correspondence. While the first day of Lent may not be *the* day of salvation, it is still an "acceptable time" for the faithful to remember that the Christian calendar has an end time. No matter how many times Ash Wednesday rolls around, it remains the day when church members contemplate their own end times ("from dust you came, and to dust you shall return") in light of God's ultimate purposes for all creation.

Preachers who take up this text will look beyond their own understandings of salvation, which Paul uses variously to describe something that has already

[1]Bart Ehrman argues for 2 Cor. 10–13 as part of Letter C (*The New Testament*, 2nd edition [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 302), while Victor Paul Furnish defends those chapters as part of Letter E (*II Corinthians,* Anchor Bible 32A [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984], 44).

Homiletical Perspective

This cross
and preacher's gown
you take today
will wear you down
near to dust
smoothing away
all jagged edges
'til you must
reflect God's love
because you may.[1]

In contrast to a cross, our society is hell-bent on filling our lives with happy entertainment, new and improved products, and more effective remedies to combat whatever ails us. It often feels as though we are being suffocated with particle board, plastic, pavement, franchised food, and electronic gadgetry. In America, the self-storage industry is one of the fastest growing. We keep in our possession a lot that we do not use, but from which we refuse to be parted. We're better with quantity than quality. Little that we have or do has the primary intention of commending the gospel. Can you not appreciate the critique of our faith that quips, "I have met the redeemed and so do not care to meet the redeemer"?[2]

My brother Van and I wrote a song that several Pennsylvania public radio stations have enjoyed playing:

Stuff, stuff, I'm drowning in stuff.
Stuff, stuff, I'm surrounded with stuff.
Stuff, stuff, where'd I get all this stuff?
I said my whole life is full of too much stuff.[3]

Paul witnesses to another way. It is a costly, self-emptying, faithful way that commends the gospel (v. 4). It is the way of the cross. It is not a new way, but an ancient one. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (Isa. 53:7). A life of faith that makes an appeal for God and commends itself to the world is one that would rather bear unpleasant obstacles than put them in another's way. It would rather risk the hard work of reconciliation than take the easy road of "irreconcilable differences." It understands the sin of "worship without sacrifice,"[4] gladly assumes poverty to make others rich, and will even risk death to give others life.

[1]*Presbyterian Outlook* 186, no. 17 (May 10, 2004): 7.
[2]Attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche.
[3]From the compact disc "The Pickle Barrel," www.vanwagnermusic.com, 2003.
[4]One of Mohandas Gandhi's "Seven Deadly Sins" (source unknown).

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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in the way of the Corinthians' embrace of his gospel. Paul has commended himself to the Corinthians in every way. Paul then lists some of the difficulties of his life, such as affliction, hardship, calamities, and imprisonments (vv. 4b–5). Apocalyptic theologians expected such conditions to intensify immediately before the end. By enduring (i.e., remaining faithful) through them, Paul demonstrates his credibility as a leader. According to verses 6–7a, in the midst of such circumstances Paul not only endures but manifests qualities that demonstrate he operates on the basis of the new creation, even as the old creation is collapsing.

In the midst of difficult circumstances, Paul has maintained integrity (vv. 8–10). Such behavior is easy to manifest when people ascribe to the apostle honor and good repute. But the real proof of Paul's trustworthiness is that he maintains integrity when he is treated as an imposter, as if unknown to the congregation, as dying, and when he is unjustly punished. Though written off as dying, he is manifestly alive in anticipating the new world. Though others think him sorrowful because of his difficult life, the apostle rejoices because of the hope of the apocalypse. Though poor himself, Paul makes others wealthy by providing them the knowledge of the gospel. Though he has nothing (an itinerant missionary), the apostle possesses everything, because he will be included in the new age.

Paul has preached the message of the turning of the ages. His gospel looks difficulty and suffering in the eye while urging hearers to live with hope and confidence in the coming new world. Paul's life demonstrates these qualities.

On the one hand, Paul's emphasis on character is provocative for preaching, especially in our age, when we see so many headlines of leaders who violate integrity. Preachers could use this theme to evaluate their own lives and those of the leaders of the congregation. Do we live in ways that are consistent with the gospel? That would be an appropriate question for the congregation to have at the center of its Lenten reflections. On the other hand, a message can be true when the character of the messenger is compromised. I am sometimes guilty of dismissing a message out of hand because I distrust the messenger. A preacher needs to reflect critically on such matters.

RONALD J. ALLEN

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communities. They long to reconnect with God, but they are wary and defensive of the institutional church. During a new members meeting, when I asked a young woman what she was looking for in a church, she replied, "A place where I won't feel invisible." Another man described being kicked out of a youth group after he was arrested for underage drinking. "I was looking for forgiveness, but all I got was judgment." Before some people can be reconciled to God, they must first be reconciled with the church. For this to happen, the church and her leaders must name and confess the ways we have failed to be true ambassadors for Christ, or else we are guilty of putting obstacles in the way of sinners.

Paul finishes this passage with a rhetorical flourish that reveals why he was such an effective evangelist. His subject is endurance, the steadfastness of faith that is required of anyone who is going to be an ambassador for Christ. He begins with a list of generalized hardships, including beatings, imprisonments, hunger, long days, and sleepless nights (v. 5). Then he lifts up the spiritual gifts that have allowed him to persevere: purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God (vv. 6–7).

Notice how the last three verses form a dramatic litany of contrasts that builds to a thunderous conclusion. In Paul's world, Christians were seen as people who had lost everything—defeated frauds who sacrificed wealth and status in return for nothing. While modern Christians appear to have status and power, and some certainly claim it as their own, many people in this age think the church has become a lifeless institution without a future or a purpose. But Paul does not regard the situation from a human point of view. Instead he writes out of his steadfast faith that God has made us rich beyond our wildest dreams through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, work that is rooted in and carried out in the church.

SHAWNTHEA MONROE-MUELLER

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happened (Rom. 8:24), something that is in the process of happening (2 Cor. 2:15), and something that will happen very soon (1 Cor. 5:5). The far reach of these verb tenses offers preachers an opening to speak of salvation as something that happens in time and transcends it, even as the Ash Wednesday liturgy happens in time and transcends it.

Having made his case and stressed its urgency, Paul goes on to re-present his credentials to the church in Corinth. While self-commendation is not unusual in his culture, Paul chooses surprising "accomplishments" for his vita, including calamities, beatings, and sleepless nights (preachers may decide whether *akatastasiai* in verse 5a means riots inside or outside the congregation!). Verses 4b–5 constitute one "hardship list" among many in Paul (Rom. 8:35; 1 Cor. 4:9–13; 2 Cor. 4:8–9; 11:23–29; 12:10), followed by a list of the virtues that such hardships produce (vv. 6–7a; for other virtue lists, see Gal. 5:22–23 and Phil. 4:8).

Ambidextrous with righteousness, "in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute," Paul focuses on the difference between apparent and divine reality. Like the Christ whose ambassador he is, Paul has been mistreated, punished, sorrowful, and poor; yet like that same Christ, he is also true, alive, and rejoicing to have made many rich. Those who are reconciled to God can tell the difference between these two realities, Paul suggests. They know that Paul's suffering is not God's chastisement of him but God's validation of his ministry. Are the Corinthians on board or not?

In the minichiasm of verse 8 (honor-dishonor-ill repute-good repute), Paul presents the flight path of all God's faithful ones, who are equipped as few others for the ministry of reconciliation. As Paul Sampley points out, "5:20 is the only place in the Pauline corpus where the reconciling is to be done by people."[2] The rest of Letter D will spell out Paul's logical conclusion: those who are reconciled to God (5:20–6:10) will be reconciled to Paul (6:11–7:3), and give generously to the saints in Jerusalem (9:1–15).

In the context of Ash Wednesday, this passage offers preachers rich opportunity to explore the widest possible dimensions of reconciliation, inviting their congregations to be reconciled with God, with one another, and with those in great need elsewhere in the world, and all for Christ's sake.

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

[2] *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 95.

Homiletical Perspective

Our world, and particularly our world leaders, would be as astonished as intrigued (who knows? maybe even inspired) to learn from the church that the way of Christian leadership is not one of power but one of weakness, not one of security but one of vulnerability, not one of self-aggrandizement but one of sacrificial service. Discipleship commends Christ. The best witness we can give to the gospel is a life of purity, honesty, patience, kindness, faithfulness, forgiveness, and love (vv. 6–7). God acted for our sake in Christ. Now for Christ's sake, we act for others. Reconciliation: pass it on.

Would that the individual Christian, the congregation, and denomination who seek to share the good news would do away with the slick advertising and give-the-people-what-they-want worship services (seeker services often omit the offering so as not to offend those in attendance), and instead do that which has both integrity and effectiveness: call for and demonstrate lives of servanthood.

The economics of the church household are simple. Self-giving will always satisfy demand. Advertising is hardly necessary, because compassionate deeds speak loudly in the marketplace. Best of all, ministry that reconciles is never out of fashion, but is always in vogue and in demand. Therefore, there is no better time for God's salvation to be claimed and proclaimed, lived and shared, than now.

When disciples live sacrificially, we help not only others, but ourselves. Because life fills us with pleasures that initially delight, but ultimately saturate, we need the cleansing season of Lent to be emptied of the unnecessary and unhelpful possessions, pleasures, and obsessions we hold. Self-emptying (Phil. 2:7) helps to clear up cloudy vision that we might better see and follow the suffering Messiah whose sacrifice makes us right with God.

We have a word to offer the world as we report on summer mission trips, as we keep Sabbath rest and sabbatical, and especially as we initiate our Lenten journey. Ours is to be the way of the suffering Messiah, the silent sheep, and the fatigued volunteer. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Without cost and hardship, without affliction and sacrifice, without suffering and Lent, the grace of God, like the good news of Easter and the refreshment of each Lord's Day, will be accepted in vain. What is more, without cross-shaped living, our witness will make a poor recommendation for the gospel we profess.

G. OLIVER WAGNER

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

[1]"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for
then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.
[2]"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the
hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised
by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. [3]But when you give
alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4]so that
your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will
reward you.
[5]"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to
stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be
seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. [6]But whenever

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We have heard it said that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pits "inner" against "outer." We have heard it said that Christian ethics must take a decidedly inward turn. We have heard it said that Christians should be suspicious of material piety and dramatic liturgical practice. Such judgments deem Ash Wednesday liturgies theologically unsupportable. Don't the rubrics call on us to read out Jesus' injunction against sackcloth and ashes on fast days (Matt. 6:16–18) and then proceed immediately to disobey it by smearing a cross of ashes on worshipers' foreheads?

Matthew's Gospel generally—the Sermon on the Mount in particular—does sound the theme of inner/outer. But it identifies no single, simple relationship between them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus one-ups the scribes and Pharisees by setting higher hedges around the law. Sometimes Jesus declares outward acts to be necessary but not sufficient: one must not murder or commit adultery; one should make a pledge to the church. To make sure we never get close to murder or adultery, kingdom righteousness goes further, to demand a reform of inner attitudes: no anger and contempt, no lust in the heart. To keep us from substituting church contributions for personal reconciliation, kingdom righteousness forbids us to bring temple

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This familiar passage from the Sermon on the Mount can easily be read—and misunderstood—simply as a moral condemnation of hypocrisy. It is, however, certainly that; and hypocrisy deserves condemnation. There is something deeply offensive in hypocritical displays of piety or moral rectitude. As the word's etymology (from the Greek for play-acting, pretending, concealing the true self) suggests, hypocrisy means lacking in integrity. Hypocrites think they can deceive us about their true motives and character and implicitly assume superiority over us. Not surprisingly, therefore, our typical reaction is a sense of offense, righteous indignation, and condemnation. For this reason it is a common, if seductive, temptation for preachers to interpret Jesus' attack on false piety from this angle—to "play to the house" by giving voice to their listeners' feelings of righteous anger while scolding them for their own hypocrisy.

However, there is much more in Jesus' sayings than a moral critique of hypocrisy. These verses record some of Jesus' most spiritually perceptive and profound utterances. The operative word here, repeated six times in these three sayings, is "secret": "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (v. 6; cf. vv. 3–4, 17–18). This insight forms the

you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. . . .

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

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

Exegetical Perspective

The Gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday focuses on three foundational practices of "piety" (6:1, NRSV): almsgiving (6:2–4), prayer (6:5–15), and fasting (6:16–18). These teachings frame the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13), the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. The NRSV use of the term "piety" to translate the Greek word for "righteousness/justice" in verse 1, however, obscures the fact that Jesus is still addressing the main topic of chapter 5: right relationships in the reign of heaven. "Righteousness/justice" is to be the defining quality of life among Jesus' disciples. But there are risks associated with the quest for righteousness, especially when one's actions are conducted where others are watching, where the appearance of righteousness may mask self-interest and ultimately prove destructive of relationships.

In verse 1 Jesus articulates the principle that will govern his discussion of these three practices: "Beware of practicing your righteousness so as to be seen by other people, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (my trans.). As he addresses in turn each of the three expressions, Jesus reiterates the importance of not pursuing righteousness in order to draw attention to oneself (vv. 2, 5, 16). His warnings take on particular definition against the background of the first century,

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Ash Wednesday is the day Christians attend their own funerals. Whether or not worshipers receive ashes on their foreheads in the sign of the cross, the liturgy reminds them of their own demise: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Even in traditions where ashes are not imposed, the name of the day remains. Everything else that is said or done in the service happens in the presence of ashes, which offers the preacher a rare opportunity to speak of death before death, to listeners who are not preoccupied with mourning the loss of a particular friend or family member.

The daring preacher may choose to compose a funeral homily for the gathered body of worshipers, preparing them for their six-week journey toward Easter. What caused this congregation's death? For what will this body be remembered? What hope does the resurrection offer a people whose flesh is grass? Preachers who choose this option will want to avoid both cleverness and mawkishness. The goal is to strike a tone that invites listeners to contemplate their own deaths in light of God's loving-kindness.

Ash Wednesday's focus on human mortality sets the penitential language of the service in a softened light. The service certainly speaks of sin and calls God's people to turn from sin. Yet the prominence of the ashes makes human frailty at least as much to be

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gifts until we have confronted anyone we have wronged and made amends (Matt. 5:21–32).

Sometimes Jesus declares that the outward act is counterindicated: taking vows signals flimsy integrity, indicating that there is not enough to us to keep our word apart from outward sanctions (Matt. 5:33–37). Other times, Jesus commands extravagant outward actions—turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, handing over cloak and coat. But then he goes on to enjoin even more extravagant inner attitudes—love of enemies—as fit expressions of that "higher righteousness" that imitates the heavenly Father's perfection (Matt. 5:40–48).

The refrains of the Ash Wednesday Gospel—"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them!" "Practice your piety in secret, so that the heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:1, 4, 6, 18)—are almost liturgical in their rhythms, identifying *hypocrisy* as a root perversion of discipleship. Turning outward gestures that signify reverence for God into currency for enhancing human reputation betrays our deepest loyalty by breaking the first and great commandment to love God with all we have (Matt. 22:37). Dividing loyalties between God and human regard also erodes our ability to carry out discipleship's duties. Disciples are to love Jesus more than life (Matt. 10:39), to expect persecution (Matt. 5:11–12; 10:16–25, 34–39), and to become the kind of people who can weather it. Fixation on human reputation pulls in the opposite direction; it will make us ashamed to confess Jesus before others and make Jesus ashamed to acknowledge us before the heavenly Father (Matt. 10:32–33). Here is another high hedge around the law. One way to make sure that we are not using our religious exercises to show off is to practice them in secret. Shutting out our interest in who else is noticing makes it more likely to be God that we are trying to honor and God we are trying to please.

Does this mean that Matthew's Jesus is against the outward acts of material piety and public liturgy? Are we to give up temple cult and communal liturgies in favor of private prayer? It is true that outward things, once turned into signs, can be divorced from their proper significance. Smiles and hugs and kisses meant to signal goodwill and affection can be false (see Matt. 26:49 for Judas's betraying kiss). Words can be used to lie as well as to convey information. True, an all-knowing God does not need our words and gestures to find out about us: God is the One to whom all hearts are open and

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positive foundation for Jesus' attack on false piety and hypocrisy. True spirituality, he seems to be saying, is *intrinsically motivated.* It has fundamentally and solely to do with one's existential, personal relation to God—with the *intrinsic* value of relating to God—and is categorically distinguishable from any extrinsic or instrumental desire to gain social recognition or to achieve ends other than relationship with God. Relationship with God—and the enjoyment of God—*is* an end in itself, an "intrinsic good." Hence we must pray, fast, and give alms, literally and spiritually, "in secret," where relationship with God is its own "reward."

This is a truly difficult saying if one takes seriously the depth, power, and pervasiveness of the human tendency to engage in religious practices for social effect. Jesus' perceptive insight anticipates recent social and psychological understandings concerning how much of *everyone's* piety is tied up, consciously or unconsciously, with a deep need to be recognized in community and thought well of by others, however cleverly we manage to conceal our meanings and motives. Depending on which theories one subscribes to, even individual religious practices like private prayer and worship, personal religious experiences, and religious ideas and beliefs like God, spirit, and soul are integrally related to significant interpersonal and family relationships. They are also related to the religious communities and cultures from which we come and in which we are continually immersed. In this deep and fundamental sense, we all wish—and need—to be "seen by others." Religious practices are intimately connected to and important for all kinds of social and psychological needs and functions, which they influence, and which influence them, for better or for worse.

Thus when Jesus counsels us to pray, give alms, and fast—to engage in ascetical religious practices—*in secret,* he is challenging our deepest social and psychological instincts. He is calling us not to define the aim or purpose of our religious practices in social or self-centered terms, but to *transcend* our need and desire to be "seen by others" into an *intrinsic* form of spirituality, into a true, unadulterated desire for God—"to love God for God's own sake," in Augustine's words. When faith is practiced for extrinsic or instrumental benefit (i.e., hypocritically)—to obtain something other than God, like "to be seen by others"—it is implicitly idolatrous, substituting a desire for created, finite goods (e.g., social recognition or status) for a genuine relationship with the

Exegetical Perspective

Mediterranean cultural values of social honor and patronage. Giving and receiving "gifts" provided the framework in which relationships were negotiated and social status was displayed. Every social interaction in the public sphere entailed incurring or being relieved of debts and obligations. Members of households constantly sought ways to enhance and manifest the honor of the "house," especially by ostentatious display of their householder's status and wealth. Thus, "being seen by others" while giving gifts, praying, or fasting was precisely what one wanted to have happen. If no one was watching, acts of benevolence and piety were wasted. Jesus' teaching addresses precisely these dynamics by removing acts of righteousness for the sake of God's reign from the playing field of human self-interest.

Almsgiving, or the sharing of material resources with those in need, provides the first specific case. The word we translate as "almsgiving" is a cognate of the word "mercy" in 5:7, but almsgiving with the strings of patronage attached is anything but merciful. Jesus warns his audience not to sound any trumpets in order to gain notice and praise when engaging in such acts of "mercy," as do the "hypocrites," that is, people who play roles in theatrical productions (v. 2). In contrast, Jesus' disciples are to give without letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing (v. 3), so that the gift will be in "secret" (or "hidden")—known only to "the Father who sees in secret," which becomes the refrain for all three cases in this section (vv. 4, 6, 18). Acting secretly effectively removes almsgiving from the realm of public display and personal honor.

Jesus then focuses on prayer, attacking those who pray in the synagogue and the intersections of streets in order to be seen by others. Again, the "hypocrites" who seek attention and honor from human beings will receive just that—nothing more. In contrast, the disciples are to go into a "hidden, secret room," close the door, and then pray to "your Father who is/sees in secret" (vv. 4, 6, 18). This way of praying suggests a deep intimacy in the relationship between disciples and God, nurtured where there is no need for pretense, where no one else is watching. Those who seek God in this way will be rewarded in kind—not with honor among humans, but with right relationship with God and humans. The claim that God "knows what you need before you ask" (v. 8) confirms God's closeness and trustworthiness in prayer, as well as God's omniscience.

Fasting, a traditional practice associated with penitence and atonement, provides the third case

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mourned as specific acts of rebellion against God. If the preacher chooses a topical sermon over a textual one, then both senses of the word "sin" deserve treatment. Sin is a condition as well as an act. We suffer from being made less than God, as well as from holding ourselves apart from God. Our separation from God is not all our fault.

Yet, as the passage from Matthew details, there are still things we do to dig our own graves with God. Jesus homes in on the motivation for giving alms, praying, and fasting, contrasting righteous acts that are done showily, in hopes of gaining reward from onlookers, with those same pious acts done quietly, so that no one sees them but God. Personal reward is the motivation in both cases, yet Matthew's Jesus knows better than to argue with his self-interested listeners about that. It is enough for him to suggest that God's reward will be more valuable in the end than the human kind, so that his listeners at least shift their treasure hunt heavenward.

When Matthew mentions "hypocrites" who disfigure their faces when they are fasting, the literal meaning of the word he uses is "stage actors." This may leave the congregation wondering if it is really a good idea to wear ash crosses on their foreheads. Isn't that showy? The moment someone notices such a cross in the grocery store after the service, won't that take the place of God's reward? These questions point up one of the most cogent differences between Matthew's culture and our own. Where he presumably wrote for a culture in which religious observance was common, obligatory, and relatively uniform, many Western Christians today inhabit a culture in which religious observance is peculiar, optional, and decidedly pluralistic.

For this reason, the preacher may choose to imagine what Matthew's Jesus would say to disciples in a markedly different situation. In Matthew's world, keeping one's religious practice to oneself would have been countercultural. What kind of religious behavior might be equally countercultural in ours? The preacher may even wish to imitate Matthew's literary style, coming up with a contemporary list of contrasting behaviors more easily recognizable to present-day disciples.

The word "hypocrite" also bears reexamination. It once meant a person who made a great show of his or her religious practice; detractors of religion now use the same word to describe someone whose practice appears to be nonexistent. In such a changed cultural context, might there be something to be said for wearing an ash cross to the grocery store?

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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all desires known, the One from whom no secrets are hid.

Nevertheless, such observations are not altogether decisive. God is Spirit, but we are embodied persons, who express ourselves and connect with one another through embodied gestures. Even if Godhead is incorporeal, why should David's enthusiasm for YHWH not take the form of a dance? Even Reformed services stripped of "smells and bells" use spoken words and prayers and songs of praise. Divine purposes are social. How can God bind us into a people if we never join in common prayer?

Matthew's Jesus did not confine his symbolic communications to words alone. Jesus proclaimed kingdom-coming in dramatic public action—with exorcisms and healings, with Palm Sunday parade and temple cleansing, with crucifixion and rent temple veil. Nor does outward action without inner attitude always constitute hypocrisy. There is some evidence that spiritual formation can move from the outside in: over time, incense and holy water can turn us into believers; liturgical participation helps form children into Christians. It is a matter not of insincerity but of pedagogy. Because we are embodied persons, outward actions can work to change the heart.

This last observation suggests another interpretation of the Ash Wednesday liturgy as neither contradictory nor hypocritical, but ironic. Lent is a season focused on self-examination and repentance. Lent grapples with the fact that human denial mechanisms are very strong. Most of the time we need to think, and we need others to think, that we are decent persons. Most of the time we consciously abstract from our own mortality. The Ash Wednesday liturgy stage-manages us into public exposure: we are not what we seem. Hearing and deliberately disobeying the gospel by receiving ashes is a way of coming out of the closet to ourselves and to others as dust-to-dust-returning, as people who are not pure in heart, who do not love God with all we have, who still equivocate between merely human aspirations and kingdom goals. The purpose of Lent is to let that public confession and outward humiliation work from the outside in, toward genuine repentance that receives the forgiveness of sins.

MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS

Pastoral Perspective

living God. True spirituality, however, allows no other gods. Thus the sole outward sign of ascetic, Lenten spirituality in the tradition is the ashen sign of the cross on the forehead, the mark of inward identification with the One who refused all outward, self-serving, idolatrous religiosity for the sake of obedience to the one true God.

How can such a profound transformation to authentic spirituality come about? This is the question that Ash Wednesday and the whole ritual process of Lent poses for Christians and, through its ascetical practices, presumes to answer. Of course there is no simple, mechanical method that can achieve such a transformation of mind and heart. However, underlying all of the traditional ascetical practices of Lent is an ancient wisdom: spiritual transformation requires, in the context of a sense of divine grace, a definite, intentional, ascetical effort. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, the great trinity of spiritual disciplines, have in common the practice of detachment and saying no as a way of discovering anew that God is not simply an extension of ourselves or a means to our own ends. Through these practices we seek to experience and listen to God as *God*, and to be transformed from our self-centered, instrumental, manipulative, idolatrous religious existence to the true life of faith and the genuine experience of the God who exists in freedom and comes to us in freedom as authentic Other. For this reason, we must perform our ascetical practices in principle, and in fact, "in secret."

There is hiddenness to our existence before God, just as there is to God's existence, and Lent is the ritual season for focusing on this hiddenness, this transcending mystery of God and ourselves. Or perhaps, for most of us, it is better to say that Lent is the time for *beginning to learn* what it means to be transformed, to let go of our idolatrous desire to make God a means to our own ends. It is a time to seek the face of the living God "in secret," even as we put oil on our heads, wash our faces, and try again to discover what it means to live in authentic, unpretentious relationship with others and with God, and to receive afresh the world itself as God's good creation and gracious gift.

RODNEY J. HUNTER

Exegetical Perspective

study. The warning against practicing in order to "be seen by others" (v. 16) is by now familiar. Jesus highlights the ways people "dress up" in order to make their fasting evident to others: "looking dismal," "sullen," and "disfiguring their faces." As a form of social theater, fasting serves none of its real intentions, such as cleansing or atonement, and thus is incompatible with God's call to righteousness that gathers, restores, reconciles, and loves. The right approach to fasting, according to Jesus, is to put oil on the head and wash the face—that is, to dress normally—so that one's fasting remains hidden, except from "your Father who is in secret" (v. 18; cf. vv. 4, 6).

"Storing up treasure" (vv. 19–21) presupposes insecurity and greed, and is thus symptomatic of the failure to trust God to provide what we need (vv. 24–34). The pursuit of worldly treasures, in whatever form, can become all-consuming, causing one to lose sight of both God and other people, even those closest to us. In the households of Jesus' day, slaves, children, and even wives were considered property. But earthly treasures, including people turned into possessions, are subject to decay and theft. Jesus' contrasting call to "store up treasures in heaven" refers not so much to "salvation" or to future, otherworldly rewards, but to the "goods" associated with God's rule, especially the transformed relationships that attend the "reign of heaven," enduring treasures that satisfy our foundational human needs. The goods we treasure in life—whether material possessions, financial security, power, or right relationships—reveal where our "heart" is (v. 21). A heart attuned to heavenly treasure stores up mercy, grace, and justice, and is revealed in relationships made right.

On Ash Wednesday many Christians wear publicly the mark of the cross on their foreheads and, during Lent, embrace disciplines of renunciation that may distinguish us from others, aim for self-improvement, or project a sense of self-righteousness. The piety to which Jesus calls us is realized, however, not in self-aggrandizement or in drawing distinctions between ourselves and others, but in the kind of righteousness that restores relationships and manifests both humility before God and solidarity with the humiliated people of this world. Such righteousness bears most truly the mark of the cross.

STANLEY P. SAUNDERS

Homiletical Perspective

On the subject of hypocrites, the preacher needs to bear in mind that the term is neutral in Greek and is not used as a synonym for "the Jews." As a Jew himself, the writer of Matthew's Gospel uses the word to set up a stark distinction between two kinds of religious behavior, the same way he sets up stark distinctions between wise maidens and foolish ones, wheat and tares, or sheep and goats. Similar teachings can be found in Jewish writings of the time, so that Matthew's derision of hypocrites cannot be construed as pitting Jew against Christian, but only as discouraging disciples from doing what they do for human approval.

In the last three verses of the Gospel lection (vv. 19–21), Matthew's Jesus gets down to business by including treasure-management in his teaching on religious practice. The accumulation of possessions is a spiritual matter. Those who store up treasure on earth are in the same category as those who blow trumpets before they give alms. They already have their reward—albeit one that is vulnerable to every kind of loss—while those who lay up their assets in heaven risk no such assault, either on their stuff or on their hearts.

A poorer congregation with few treasures on earth may hear this teaching differently than a moneyed congregation will, just as a well-paid preacher may approach it differently than one on a tighter budget. In the context of Ash Wednesday, the verses offer a preacher the opportunity to explore what constitutes lasting treasure, in this life and the next. It is important to note, however, that there is no future tense in these three verses. Matthew's Jesus does not seem to conceive of heaven as some place the disciples are headed later on, but as a treasure house they may visit anytime they choose.

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

Genesis 9:8-17

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

Theological Perspective

In the biblical flood story, God un-creates the Edenic world, preserves a remnant of that original creation, and reestablishes the cosmos under a new order (Gen. 6:5–9:17). The narrative ends with the first biblical covenant (9:8–17). Prior to the flood, humanity had trespassed across the boundaries established in the beginning. Ensuing violence (4:24; 6:11) increasingly corrupted God's "very good" creation (1:31), sending it spiraling down toward the disordered void from which it was formed (1:2). The celestial "sons of God" adulterated the proper relation between heaven and earth by taking and impregnating the daughters of earthlings (6:1–4). Seditionists in the animal kingdom went against their given herbivore nature (1:30), turned bloody, and rebelled against and preyed upon their human stewards (6:12, 9:5). Violence polluted the earth itself (Gen. 4:11; 8:21; Num. 35:33). Grieving over the ruined original, God resolved to destroy the destroyers (Heb. *shachath*, trans. "corrupted" in v. 12, and "to destroy" in v. 13). God determined to drown in watery chaos the earth and all that breathed upon it, except a remnant (6:5–7:24). God remembered and rescued the chosen few preserved in the ark (8:1–8:19), provided for them a Plan B for creation (8:20–9:17), and sealed it with a covenant (9:8–17).

Pastoral Perspective

One day a young mother was taking a walk with her small son and they saw a rainbow. The four-year-old boy looked up in wonder and said, "Mommy, can we take that home and put it in our house?" His awe-struck question prompted the mother to write a poem she titled "A Rainbow in My House." She took her son's question literally, imagining what it would be like to have a rainbow in their house, on their walls, emanating from the windows and doors, coming out the chimney. The house was transformed, and it could not contain the glory of the rainbow and its colors.[1]

What does the body of Christ look like in the light of the rainbow? What would it mean for a Christian community to put God's "rainbow in their house"?

God's bow in the heavens is the sign of the first covenant that God makes with humankind and with all creation. It is a sign that God is a changed (and changing) God. God's grief over the resistance of the human heart to God's ways first results in destructive anger, in a worldwide flood. God seeks to wipe out creation and start over with the righteous remnant that could be found in Noah, his family,

[1]Personal story used by permission of Michelle Sisk, student at Iliff School of Theology and candidate for ordination in the United Church of Christ.

Exegetical Perspective

This reading is an account of the covenant that God entered into with the created world after the flood. It was made through Noah, with his descendants, with all the living creatures that were in the ark, and with the earth itself. The covenant itself was promissory, God pledging that never again would unruly waters destroy the world and its inhabitants. In the ancient Near Eastern world, turbulent water was the symbol of ultimate, even mythological, chaos. A vast and terrorizing flood was viewed as a return to the primordial chaos out of which the world had been created in the first place (see Gen. 1:2). For this reason, the promise in this tradition carried far more than meteorological implications. It had something to do with control over primordial chaos itself.

Many ancient Near Eastern civilizations preserved a story of a major flood that enveloped the entire world. The biblical tradition may have originated out of the memory of an actual deluge that came to be regarded by many as the primordial flood. In such mythic accounts, the individuals saved from this disaster were considered the few survivors from whom the human race began anew.

The ancient stories of creation frequently included some kind of cosmic battle between the forces of chaos and a youthful warrior god, a battle that encompassed all of the celestial beings. The bow

Homiletical Perspective

What is surprising about the story of Noah and the flood is *not* that God despaired over humanity and decided to eradicate us from the earth. Called to being out of chaos and nothingness at creation by the breath of God, humanity seems at every turn bent on returning to chaos and nothingness. Simply open any major newspaper or turn on the evening news, and you will find story upon story of corruption, violence, greed, and environmental degradation, all of which provide ample evidence for the judgment that opens the story of the flood: "The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5).

Nor is it surprising that God relents from eradicating everyone by saving righteous Noah and his family, as well as male and female representatives of every living thing upon the earth. While God is without a doubt just, God is also, as Scripture regularly attests, gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. It is in God's nature to save. Further, it is in God's nature to create. And so, rather than destroy all things, God determines instead to wipe the slate clean and start again with the survivors on the ark.

What is surprising about this story, however, is the detail presented in today's reading. After first

Genesis 9:8-17

Theological Perspective

This covenant is the divine response to a theological irresistible force paradox: God's unstoppable purpose to create a peaceful cosmos collided with God's immovable compassion for destructive, recalcitrant humanity. The aftereffects illuminate key aspects of creation, humanity, God, and redemption.

A covenant, according to Gerhard von Rad, clarifies an "opaque legal situation . . . in that it puts the relationship of the partners on a new legal basis."[1] God committed to new, postflood relationship rules in covenant with Noah, his family and descendants, all animate life, and the earth itself (vv. 9–10, 13). The text of the new agreement requires nothing whatsoever of creation. It sets limits only upon God, who forswears a repetition of the devastating flood against the still corrupt creation. Noah never says a word. Neither the flood nor the covenant restored antediluvian creation: postflood humanity remained continually inclined to evil (8:21); the law of tooth and claw was not repealed (9:5–6); and the earth continued to be polluted by the strong overpowering the weak.

God accepted self-imposed and unilateral boundaries. "'As for me . . .'" (v. 9), God vows, "'never . . . never . . . never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth'" (vv. 11, 15). As a celestial memory aid, God pledges to set in gathering clouds his war bow, unstrung and pointing away from earth, where, God says, "I will see it and remember" the covenant (vv. 13–16). God places a restraining order against God's self to defuse brutal retaliation upon unrestrained, violent creation and sets a sign in the sky to see and remember the vow.

This covenant also reveals the unity of all creation, the intractable sinfulness and undeserved blessedness of humanity, and all creation's total dependence upon God's active compassion. Creation, including humanity, is one. What affects part affects all. The deep purpose of nature is diversity in unity under God's ownership. Yet humanity consistently fails to accept its given limits and attempts to take possession of life into its own hands, contaminating the cosmos with violence and fear. All creation suffers the consequences (9:2–6), but this is not the first or the last word to Noah's kind. The first and last words are, "abound on the earth and multiply in it" (9:1, 7). In spite of all evidence to the contrary, humanity and creation are

[1]Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 133.

Pastoral Perspective

and the animals in the ark. Now that the flood has subsided God discovers that retribution has not resolved the issue. God's heart is still grieving, still broken over humankind's hard-heartedness. Punishment has not coerced humankind into changing its ways. If God wants to stay in relationship with creation and with humankind—the creatures made in the image of God—then God must change. God repents, turns from vindication to forgiveness, patience, and steadfast love for creation and for humanity, despite the knowledge that the human heart may (will?) never change. The creatures made in God's image may always resist God. Yet God lays down God's weapons against creation, against humankind. God puts the undrawn bow in the clouds as a personal reminder "never again" to destroy creation with a flood. In the light of that bow, the rainbow, humanity can see God as "One Who Remembers," even the midst of chaos, even in the midst of rebellion by creation and its creatures.

The story of God's rainbow covenant was recorded by the people of Israel in the midst of exile from their homeland, in the midst of chaos for their community. Chaos is, of course, not an ancient phenomenon. Corporately, we know chaos in our twenty-first-century world through terrorism and war, through ecological and natural disasters, and through the gross inequity of the distribution of resources and wealth among the world's many peoples. Individually, chaos comes into our lives through relationships broken by death, estrangement, and divorce, through illness of body or mind, through addictions of all kinds. Much of this chaos we bring on ourselves, through our resistance to God's ways. To see and know God as the "One Who Remembers" us, corporately and individually, with love and forgiveness in the midst of life's chaos with all its pain and suffering, is to discover redemption. Hearing this story on the first Sunday of Lent we begin our walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem, understanding in a deeper, fuller way the God who sent him and whom he served.

The rainbow bending over Noah's ark with its doors wide open and spilling out pairs of animals into a new world is an image painted or hung on the walls of many a church nursery. We offer this story as a central message of God's love and hope to our children, starting at the earliest ages. It is telling that we want them to know that, even in the midst of the worst chaos, God will never forget them. But why relegate this message to the nursery in the church

referred to in this particular narrative (v. 13) may well have referred to the archery weapon of the divine warrior who was victorious over the forces of primordial chaos. This interpretation of the bow is supported by several Mesopotamian artifacts depicting a vigorous young warrior god with arrows in his quiver. Hanging the bow in the sky would be a sign that the primordial war was over and that all of creation could rest secure. Similar to the rest that the creator God took in the first Genesis account of creation (see Gen. 2:2–3), the act of hanging up the bow heralded the establishment of order in the universe. As the sign of this cosmic covenant, the bow would be a reminder of the pact made with all of creation. The bow in the sky served to control divine power, lest God, the fearsome warrior who fought and shackled the forces of chaos, lash out once again. This sign was meant to act as a reminder to God not to allow chaos to reign, not as a reminder to humankind.

The literary style of this account has led scholars to ascribe it to the postexilic Priestly tradition. The most obvious example of such style is seen in the repetition found in the passage, a characteristic of Priestly style: "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you" (vv. 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17).

Identifying an object as a tangible sign of the covenant is also a Priestly trait (the bow in Gen. 9:12; circumcision in Gen. 17:11; observance of the Sabbath in Exod. 31:13). These signs also designate the nature of the covenant. For example, the meteorological bow in the sky denotes a covenant with the entire created world; circumcision is a bodily mark identifying those men who belong to the family of Abraham; observance of the Sabbath is a cultic indicator of observant Israelites. Finally, in the Priestly tradition, all of the covenants are permanent or everlasting (Gen. 9:16; 17:7; Exod. 31:16).

The exilic people would have been comforted by these tangible signs of their relationship with God and the promise of an everlasting covenant bond. They had already experienced the demise of their secure government and the upheaval of their religious structures and practices. Though their world had been destroyed, God provided them opportunities to start over, and assured them that they were still bound to the compassionate and merciful God.

Another feature of this covenant should be noted. Unlike the covenants made with Abraham and with

inflicting this cataclysm of judgment and then saving representatives of humanity and all living things, God makes a promise in these verses never again to destroy the earth and all its inhabitants in this way. Most of us, perhaps lulled by pictures of Jesus with the children around him, simply assume God's kindly, even somewhat permissive, nature. But this is not the conception of divinity possessed by the ancients who wrote our sacred texts. Far from it. The ancient world had a keen sense of both God's omnipotence and God's justice. The One who created all things also stands as judge over all things and is entitled to destroy all things when they prove so disappointing. A single or even repeated act of mercy may be accounted for by God's gracious nature, but to forgo for all time the right to destroy is an unheard-of surrendering of divine power.

Think about it. In the scene depicted in today's reading, God binds God's own self to humanity, and indeed to all the world, in a new and different way. God is no longer only the creator; God is now also the protector, committed to refrain from punishing humanity or destroying the world. This is the import of God's choosing to hang his "bow" in the heavens as a sign of this covenant. Ancients, including the Israelites from whom we inherit these Scriptures, conceived of lightning as God's arrows (Ps. 7:12–13) fired from a mighty bow. Thus the rainbow serves as a reminder not simply of the beauty of the earth after a rainstorm but of God's refusal ever again to take up the divine bow against humanity or the world.

Further, by binding God's self to the fate of humanity, God becomes inherently invested in the fate of humanity and in this way keenly vulnerable, even exposed. God cannot simply sit back oblivious to the fate of humanity, much as the Greek or Roman gods might. Rather, God's fortunes are now bound up with those of humanity, as God is not simply committed but deeply invested in the fate of God's creation.

This act of self-limitation and investment introduces a new and distinct facet into the character of God as portrayed in Scripture. Along with power, justice, patience, and love, the ancient Hebrews also perceived that God was inherently self-giving, willing to enter into a relationship that put limits on even God's prerogatives. This is, of course, the way it is with all genuine relationships. Parents bound in love to their children make all kinds of sacrifices that would have been difficult to imagine prior to having children. What is novel is applying such a conception to the Divine. But if we are to take seriously the

Genesis 9:8-17

Theological Perspective

blessed, for God remains loyal to the disloyal. Humanity proves intractable in its sin, so God changes strategy. Since humanity does not end the downward spiral of violence, God covenants to do so. Humanity and the cosmos are ultimately dependent for survival upon a life force beyond creation, a God willing to initiate an intervention.

The God revealed here is adaptable, touched to the heart by creation, and willing to accept hurt to keep hope alive. Often, Christian redemption is associated with mutable humanity fitting itself to an immutable God. The God of this covenant is unchanging only in refusing to give up on creation. God keeps the future open by self-limitation when humanity threatens to close off hope by unlimited repeat offenses. God takes this risk because God's heart is touched by creation's suffering. The God declaring this covenant is not an objective judge meting out a just sentence, but a lover grieved to the heart at the beloved's violence, yet still seeking reconciliation (6:6, 8:21). Readers will find divine regret throughout this covenant, but will look in vain for anger.

The covenant of Genesis 9:8–17 is a stopgap measure. Though creation is granted a reprieve, God's purpose for a unified, harmonious cosmos remains in conflict with humanity's corrupting influence. Lent recognizes this imbalance, giving us a means to seek restoration by embracing our sin and mortality. Will we repent, accept our finitude, and stop grasping for control, or will we continue the violence? This tense cosmic drama continues in the scenes presented by Mark 1:9–15. In them, Jesus comes up out of the waters of baptism favored by God and enters a wilderness world inhabited by Satan, wild beasts, and angels. The phrase "he was with the wild beasts" (Mark 1:13b) is ambiguous with danger and promise. Will Jesus fall prey to nature's ancient violent pattern; or will he lead the angels, the earth, and even the wild beasts in a return to primeval harmony under a restored, peacemaking humanity?

The answer is found by those who follow him into present wilderness temptations and come face to face with their own wild natures. Only those who travel the rocky way of Lent through the chaos of Good Friday and the silent void of the grave can hope to see Easter dawn, whose light will reveal a rainbow in the dark western sky behind them.

WM. LOYD ALLEN

Pastoral Perspective

basement? Why not let the rainbow colors emanate from the nursery up the stairwells and into worship and committee meetings, into youth group, adult education and mission projects, into choir rehearsal and church potlucks?

What an extraordinary promise for the body of Christ! Taken seriously and intentionally, it would profoundly change a faith community. Not into a utopia, but into a place where people were willing to let their hearts be remade in the image of God's heart; a place where people would let their hearts be broken open, with grief over their own hard-heartedness and the hard-heartedness of the world and its chaos. And when their hearts were broken open the people would be moved to partner with their Creator through patient, forgiving, loving, and prophetic action for the renewal of all creation.

In the light of God's rainbow promise, the church can become a place where conflict is taken seriously and respectfully and not "swept under the rug." Methods of nonviolent conflict resolution and restorative justice can be explored for the health of the congregation, as well as in reaching out to a world of conflict and violence. The church can become a community that seeks transparency in its corporate and individual relationships and clarity in its internal and external communication. The church can respond to God's call to be a place where "all the colors of the rainbow" were welcome and equal in God's sight, in terms of race, age, gender, and sexual orientation. The church can seek constructive dialogue with communities of other faiths or communities on the other side of denominational or doctrinal divides. Previously unimaginable partnerships may be formed, and reconciliation may blossom. The patience and forgiveness spilling forth from hearts broken open by God's love may paint the walls of the church, color its people, and emanate from its doors and windows into the world. We simply need to ask the question with wonder like that of the child: "Can we take that rainbow home and put it in our house?"

JANE ANNE FERGUSON

Exegetical Perspective

the people at the time of the exodus, this was a unilateral agreement. In other words, obligations were placed on only one covenant partner. Such agreements were not uncommon in the ancient world. However, what made this pact so unusual is the fact that God was bound by it, but the human members were not. God promised to refrain from future destructive activity, but the other covenant partners were not required to adhere to any specific norms. The character of this covenant demonstrates divine compassion and magnanimity. Such divine dispositions seem extraordinary, since the broader narrative explicitly states that it was human sinfulness that set the chain of tragic events in motion. (In the previous section of this chapter of Genesis, eating flesh with its lifeblood in it is forbidden [9:3–6]. However, this dietary regulation is found not in the account of the covenant, but in the commission to propagate and to survive with other animals.)

Several important aspects of this covenant should be noted. First, it was made with all of creation (vv. 10, 13, 15, 16, 17). Second, it was multigenerational, made not only with Noah and those present, but with all who would come in the future as well (vv. 9, 12). These are yet other examples of Priestly concern for a future.

The biblical flood narrative is not merely a story of the return to primordial chaos; it also contains a story of deliverance and of relationship with God. God directed Noah, the only one who found favor with the Lord, to build an ark so that he and his family and some of the animals might escape the punishing waters of the flood. From this small community God then fashioned a new human family and established a covenant with that family and with the world as a whole. This is a story of deliverance and new beginnings.

DIANNE BERGANT

Homiletical Perspective

biblical covenants—established here with Noah and later with Abraham, David, and through baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection with all who call upon God's name—then we must recognize that God has indeed entered into a genuine relationship with humanity and is therefore now subject to the hope and disappointment, joy and grief that attend all relationships.

Here is the significance of this passage for the beginning of Lent. The self-limitation and willingness to sacrifice divine freedom that this passage describes reach their climax in the passion of Jesus Christ for which Lent prepares us. Lent, in this sense, is a journey to the other side of God, a venture not to the familiar terrain of God's omnipotence and omniscience but instead into the weakness and vulnerability of the cross, where we confess God in Jesus consummated the relationship with humanity most fully by embracing all of our experience, even death.

This passage from Genesis not only presages this development but also invites us to reconsider our relationships with each other and, indeed, all creation. If God, who alone has the right to despair, judge, or destroy, surrenders the divine prerogative from covenantal commitment, might not we who have tasted this mercy look upon all persons and all things as inherently worthwhile, that is, as those things that God has called worthy?

It is a long journey, of course, from our usual preoccupation with self and our related tendency to view others in relation to how they may meet our needs, to viewing them instead as those who deserve our respect and support because God has called them worthwhile. It may be a long journey—one that begins in Lent, passes through the passion and the cross, and ends up somewhere on this side of the resurrection—but it is a journey worth taking, and today is a good day to get walking.

DAVID J. LOSE

Psalm 25:1-10

[1]To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
[2]O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
[3]Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
[4]Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
[5]Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

Theological Perspective

Because the Hebrew text of this psalm is an acrostic, the structure of the passage is not designed around theological development, but around a literary device. The reader must sift out the theological coherence of the poem, because the author has scattered ideas throughout the piece. Although the lectionary committee has cut off the reading at verse 10, the interpreter can still proclaim a unified message, because the poet has introduced the main theological ideas by that point. This essay will concentrate on the first ten verses, but refer to the rest of the psalm.

The author describes in general terms the situation behind the prayer. The poet faces affliction and trouble (v. 18), enemies (vv. 2 and 19), and guilt from youth (v. 7). The poet prays in response to these problems. What the psalmist prays for, and does not pray for, is significant from both a theological and devotional standpoint. The psalmist does not express hatred toward the enemies (see Pss. 137 and 139). The psalmist does not pray for the destruction of the enemies, only that they will be ashamed, another way of saying that they will be proven wrong. The focus of the psalmist's prayer is for teaching and guidance to avoid wavering in the midst of distress. In the act of lifting up the soul to God (v. 1), the poet directs the inner self toward God, and perhaps away from

Pastoral Perspective

The first Sunday in Lent recalls Jesus' baptism and subsequent testing in the wilderness (Mark 1:9–15 and parallels). The pastor knows that those listening to a sermon on this day, as often as not, will have missed worship on Ash Wednesday and will only now begin paying attention to Lent with any degree of seriousness. Psalm 25 underlines that the season is a sustained process in relationship with God. The struggle against enemies (v. 2) is bound up with hearing and appropriating the teaching of the Lord over time (vv. 4f., 8–10).

The language of the psalm recalls the time that Israel spent in the wilderness after their liberation from bondage in Egypt. The psalmist begs God for leadership in the paths of righteousness (vv. 4, 9), recalling not only the stories of YHWH's leading by pillars of cloud and fire (Exod. 13:21), but also the whole formation of Israel as a people. They were given identity as a gracious gift in the granting of Torah at Sinai (Exod. 19:16–20:21) and were taught the paths of righteousness over forty years before they were able to enter the promised land. We may presume that this did not escape the notice of those who assigned this psalm for the first Sunday in a wilderness season.

A number of features of wilderness time are suggested in Psalm 25. They are the reality of

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!
8 Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Exegetical Perspective

The love of learning is central to making progress along God's paths, as Psalm 25 makes plain. With its pleas to God to "teach me your paths" (v. 4), to "lead me in your truth" (v. 5), the psalm is all about the soul's desire for God's instruction. The Hebrew verb "learn" appears three times in Psalm 25; the verb "instruct" appears twice; and the verb "make known" also appears two times. This psalm is a great choice for Lent's first Sunday, when we knuckle down to education in God's truth.

Psalm 25's very structure (an acrostic poem) encourages a *studious* form of discipleship. One by one, its poetic lines begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, inviting us to approach the psalm as students, with dictionaries open. What is more, the Hebrew letters of the psalm's initial, middle, and final lines spell out the Hebrew verb *'alaf*, which means "learn." This psalm is about *learning* from beginning to middle to end.

Do not be surprised to discover the book of Psalms offering learned instruction, rather than merely pious prayer and spiritual groping. Like all Scripture, the psalms school us in knowing God truly. The psalms, wrote Richard Hooker (1554–1600), the brilliant Anglican theologian, are a veritable "celestial fountain," showering us with

Homiletical Perspective

The psalms are intimate and invading, which can make them particularly difficult texts to deal with from the pulpit. They read more like monologues than conversations, exercises in spiritual eavesdropping. The psalmists do not filter their emotions, be they positive or negative, a fact that has led more than one Christian to wince while reading them. The songs of the Psalter seem more at home in the personal piety of Christian devotion than in the public proclamation of corporate worship. Their focus can be so inward that it becomes difficult to find room for all the pews, the homiletical equivalent of pushing a camel (or a congregation) through the eye of a needle.

But something changes during Lent.

Traditionally the season of preparation for new converts to the faith, Lent looks nothing like our modern new member classes. The early Christians used the same evangelical strategy that Jesus did: brutal honesty. And so rather than entice prospective recruits with the many benefits of the Christian path, they highlighted the great costs. God's ways are not our ways. Following Christ cannot be a part-time hobby. Faith is more than dogma and discipline; it is also direction.

While we have forgotten much of that early sensibility, the Lenten season has managed to retain

Theological Perspective

the afflictions and enemies. By waiting for God (vv. 3 and 21), the psalmist develops patience and serenity. These acts of devotion frame the psalm. Theologically, they affirm trust in God's goodness and willingness to act.

One particular distinction of the psalm is its combination of the wisdom tradition of the OT with covenant theology. In the midst of distress of enemies and afflictions, the poet petitions for teaching and guidance in God's way. The request to know God's ways (v. 4), truth (v. 5), what is right (v. 9), and the paths of the Lord (v. 10) derive from the character-building terminology of Israel's sages. The psalmist does not want the current distress to impede development in wisdom. The psalmist also recognizes that God's character is marked by steadfast love, mercy, and goodness. God has graciously entered into a covenant with the community of Israel. Both individually and on behalf of the community, the psalmist wants to remain faithful to the human obligations of that covenant. Giving into despair or temptation would jeopardize both development in wisdom and covenant keeping for the poet.

The church has selected this psalm for the First Sunday of Lent for obvious reasons. This period of preparation for Holy Week and Easter is a time to seek to learn God's ways and God's paths. To read of the psalmist's troubles is helpful to the contemporary church. The psalmist sought to learn of God's ways, not in a time of comfort, but in the midst of difficulties. The poet's depiction of God as a God of salvation (v. 5) is a reminder of the roots of that concept in the OT. The word originally had a concrete, this-worldly connotation of God's intervention in danger and distress. That emphasis enables the contemporary Christian to understand God as active in life now. The poem's use of the wisdom tradition is an important correction to much contemporary piety that assumes God grants a believer's every impulse. The poet realizes that discipline and moral development are part of the means by which God intervenes in our lives during times of distress. The psalmist does pray for a change in circumstances (v. 17), but also that God will act within, enabling patience and integrity. Use of this psalm in Lent encourages trust in God and the willingness to learn from God, even in times of trouble.

This psalm has considerable value for the theological reflection of the contemporary church. If one starts with the psalmist's concern with enemies, many analogies present themselves. The conflict

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enemies (v. 2) and treachery (v. 3), the wilderness as a time and place of instruction in the counsels of the Lord (vv. 4f., 8), where we become mindful of our need for forgiveness (v. 6f.) and are humbled before the steadfast love of God (v. 9f.).

Whether we choose to enter the wilderness or are in some sense driven there, we will surely encounter enemies. Our *enemies* can be found outside us and within us, but for most of us, most of the time, the real danger lies within. Even someone we perceive as an enemy—someone with whom we are at war and who is trying to kill us, someone at work who is trying to force us out, someone at school who is cheating and getting ahead of us, or someone with whom we are entangled in legal conflict—can tempt us to forget who we are as beloved creatures of God. When we forget who we are, we become subject to all kinds of thoughts and behaviors that make us less than we were created to be: vengeful, mean, scared, depressed, murderous, or otherwise inclined to self-destructive or addictive behaviors.

These enemies are within us, and we pray with the psalmist that they not "exult over me" (v. 2). As we choose forty days in the wilderness, we will forgo many of the things that keep our attention outside ourselves and will look for resources within. When we make such a choice, we soon will be reminded of the reality and power of the demons that beset us. *Treachery* is contrasted in this psalm with waiting for the Lord (v. 3). It is one of the ways in which we will seek to crawl or climb past others, out of fear for our own livelihood. When we are treacherous we make enemies, not peace. Enemies are what we renounced at baptism, among all those things that draw us away from God's love and grace.

In the wilderness we will learn or learn again the paths of the Lord. This *teaching* in the way of true knowledge is granted us in part because we ask for it, waiting for and longing for God (v. 4f.). Knowledge is granted us in part because God is "upright" and "therefore . . . instructs sinners in the way" (v. 8). This instruction follows a common pattern of liturgy in many churches. After placing ourselves in relation with God through prayer, we listen to one or more readings from Scripture. What follows the readings amounts to our response. We hear the word interpreted for our community and respond, perhaps reciting the Nicene Creed and offering various forms of intercession and petition. In the act of praying we realize again the absurdity of our importuning the Lord of the universe to ask anything for ourselves or others, and so we humble ourselves to confess our sins.

Exegetical Perspective

"exact wisdom, repentance unfeigned, unwearied patience," and, indeed, "the mysteries of God."[1]

The formal structure of Psalm 25 encourages the love of learning and so does its language. Its terms and phrases draw readers in by offering them rich allusions and intrabiblical cross-references. As they track down resonances and echoes, readers find the psalm comes alive in their hands.

Verse 11 points us to the sin of the golden calf. When Israel had almost done itself in (Exod. 32:10), had committed its one great sin (Exod. 32:30–31), Moses beseeched God to "pardon our guilt" (Exod. 34:9). With Moses' famous prayer in mind, Psalm 25:11 implores God to "pardon my guilt, for it is great." The prayer is foundational. God's people are able to move forward only because our God commits to love and teach us, despite our being hardheaded.

Verse 11 lies dead center in the psalm, and that tells us something. Our central problem is not treachery, enemies, or distress (though all are well represented in Psalm 25). Our focal need is to receive God's pardon and to begin again under God's renewed schooling. God's uncanny forgiveness of us is what gives us a future in the midst of our jeopardy.

By referring us to the golden-calf story, Psalm 25 connects us with God's history of salvation. It invites us to receive God's forgiveness along with the exodus generation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, a psalm such as this is ours "when we regard all that God does once for his people as done for us, when we confess our guilt and God's grace, when we hold God true to his promises on the basis of his former benefits and request their fulfillment."[2]

Psalm 25 connects us with salvation history (see v. 6), and it reminds us never to let the crises of the moment subsume us. God is fulfilling age-old promises, just as Bonhoeffer says, and we must reframe our personal struggles in terms of God's larger work. God is guiding God's stubborn people toward the promised land (a telos). We have a promised future to orient us, for which we should *wait* securely (see vv. 3, 5, 21).

Verse 3 speaks with confidence of our "waiting." It knows this stance of courage based on what God has in store for the world. It echoes Isaiah's book: "Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame" (Isa.

[1]Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, vol. 2, bk. 5 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1954), 145.

[2]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, trans. J. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 35.

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a peculiarity all its own. Lent has its own intimacy, as we bear our ash crosses on our foreheads and parade the skeletons in our closets. As has always been the case, the choice to follow Christ on the path to Golgotha cannot be made by a congregation; it must be made by an individual. Even as we gather for public worship, the texts and the general aura of the season can feel isolating. While the community's support is never more evident, the season of Lent makes it clear that no one else can make the decision of faith for us.

This means that even those of us who shy away from preaching the psalms may experience a change of heart during this season. The psalms' modeling of discipleship, in all its breadth and complexity, provides a road map for spiritual discernment and growth. Their calls for trust, their frankness about the empty places, and their range of emotion all serve to keep preachers honest during this season of honesty. In perhaps the most countercultural and prophetic time of the Christian year, the pleas of the psalms are manna for those who earnestly seek to make it all the way to the cross. Precisely because they speak to the faith of the individual, they speak with unique authority during Lent.

Psalm 25 casts a vision for the season: we lift up our very souls to God—everything we are—trusting that this is the road to life. For the psalmist, though, as for many of us, this is an uneasy trust. The prayer of the first few verses sounds tentative, if not altogether reluctant: "I have lifted up my soul, my all, to you—don't let it be for nothing." It is a plea for balance, for the world to make sense. Let good things come to those who are good, and bad things to those who are bad. People rarely pray for maintenance of the status quo, so the very fact that the psalmist expresses this hope indicates that things are not going that way.

The simplistic philosophy that proclaims life is basically fair, that goodness is always rewarded and evil is consistently punished, is alive and well in many churches. But the Christian vision is much more complex than this, and while being empathetic with the desire for right living to be rewarded, the preacher has an opportunity to challenge oversimplified theologies. Trust in God cannot be based solely on a sense of pending reward. Lifting up one's soul to God is not a commercial exchange; it is a rendering of what is due. The psalmist does not ask to prosper, but to avoid shame.

Verses 4–5 echo the Lenten call to choose God's way despite the many easier paths available. As

Psalm 25:1-10

Theological Perspective

between Middle Eastern culture and Western culture—whether defined politically or religiously—will affect the world for a long time. We struggle even to identify the group(s) with whom we are in conflict, much less how to define the conflict, or to establish the goals for ending it. What is the role of the church in bearing witness to the nation as a whole in the midst of this conflict? Certainly, the psalmist's refusal to return "violent hatred" to enemies is part of that witness. For the church to lift up its soul to God, directing its energy to God is part of that witness, so that it can model a rejection of despair in the midst of problems that are global in dimension and seemingly intractable. Trusting in God and waiting for God are part of that witness, exhibiting a serenity that recognizes God's work in creation, even in the midst of dehumanizing brutality.

Waiting for God does not derive from timidity. Apart from the wars and the threat of terrorist attacks, conflict abounds in society. One may not want to use the word "enemy" to describe those with whom groups and individuals compete for goods and services, jobs, slots in higher education, and even romance, but certainly palpable tensions exist. With the increasing ethnic diversity of North American society, one hopes that groups would not use the word "enemy" to describe one another. Nevertheless, cultural differences and competition can lead to a sense of "otherness." If one adds in the hardening of ideological differences, one must concede that the psalmist's confrontation with enemies is not far from the contemporary situation. The church can indeed learn from the psalmist's prayer for guidance, instruction, and forgiveness in the midst of tensions with other people. In the midst of the inevitable conflicts of life, individuals and the community of faith can exhibit wisdom, maturity, and love. Surrounded by grief, rage, and fear, we can trust in a God of steadfast love and mercy.

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

Pastoral Perspective

As we seek consciously to enter the presence of God, or to choose the wilderness, we will soon find ourselves *pleading for forgiveness* along with the psalmist (v. 6f.). In some communities, where Lent is understood as a season in which we live particularly mindful of our own struggles of faith and our own need for God, worship will begin with a call to confession. Either way, we are led to *an attitude of humility*, sometimes expressed through the act of kneeling. In communities that invite kneeling, it is common then to stand following a declaration of forgiveness or absolution, as we recall both our past experience of grace and our eschatological hope that we will be raised up into the nearer presence of God. Frequently what follows will be a passing of the peace, itself a prayer that others may also know the presence of God in the community and in their own lives. This serves as a reminder that we are already participants in the new humanity and the reign of God.

Psalm 25 suggests some aspects of what happens in the wilderness and therefore what we might either expect or seek during Lent. Those who study trends in churches point out that along with our longing to know and be known, we also have a desire for spiritual practice. When we call our communities to the observance of a holy Lent, asking them to consider the season a wilderness season, we invite them to attend to spiritual practices. We do not therefore need to consider this only a season for the private, individual, interior life, but also an overt evangelical appeal to people who often know already the pain of the psalmist.

GEOFFREY M. ST. J. HOARE

Exegetical Perspective

49:23). No doubt about it—we are waiting on God's promises.

A whole community of faith awaits God's promised future. Thus verse 3 speaks collectively on behalf of *all* who wait. So too our psalm's final verse makes *all* Israel—the whole people—its subject: "Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles" (v. 22). Since God leads us forward together, our slogan in prayer must be all for one, and one for all. Moses modeled such a stance of solidarity. He had nothing to do with the golden-calf debacle, but nevertheless put his own life on the line in interceding for the community (Exod. 32:32).

Psalm 25 voices its prayer out of "troubles," out of wilderness conditions. As far as it is concerned, God's promised land lies some distance ahead of us. As we wait on God's triumph, we must contend with dark forces: wanton treachery (v. 3), loneliness (v. 16), and violent hatred (v. 19). For now our prayer to God must remain, "Do not let my enemies exult over me" (v. 2).

Fortunately God's long-range work cannot fail. As our psalm's central stanza teaches us, God's very nature ensures its triumph (vv. 8–14). Verses 8–14 return us to the golden-calf story, and particularly to Exodus 34:6–10, the Bible's closest revelation of God's character.

Our God is named "the LORD," as both Exodus 34:6 and Psalm 25:11 poignantly highlight. For Israel, the name "LORD" signified how God is with us and for us. Just so, Psalm 25:10 and Exodus 34:6 both emphasize God's *steadfast love*, which includes God's resolve to sustain relationship with us, even when we renege on our commitments. Likewise, they both speak of God's *faithfulness*, assuring us that we can rely on God's loyalty. Psalm 25:10 and Exodus 34:10 both stress moving forward with the *covenant* and its instructions on true discipleship. That is what God's *pardon* (Ps. 25:11; Exod. 34:9) allows to happen.

When God revealed the divine character, Moses quickly bowed in awe and humility (Exod. 34:8). Likewise, Psalm 25 bids us embrace true reverence and a disciple's attitude. The Hebrew poetics of verse 9 drive this home. May God surround our humility with God's leading and teaching, just as the Hebrew root for "lead" frames the noun for "humble" in this verse. Let us embody verse 9, approaching Lent as humble apprentices of God.

STEPHEN L. COOK

Homiletical Perspective

Frederick Buechner writes, "If you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are."[1] Lent is a time to choose who we will be and whose we will be. Our identity will not be defined by what we claim to believe, but by the road we take. We would rather bypass the cross for the empty tomb, but the wisdom of Lent proclaims that Easter Sunday will not make much sense unless we are able to stay the course to and through Golgotha.

The call for patient trust, for keeping to the road, is a powerful judgment on all forms of Christianity that promise comfort and quick results, and is especially appropriate in the context of Lent. Patience is more than mere virtue when dealing with an elusive God. In a culture that lusts after quick fixes, patience is one of the most difficult things that can be asked of us. It can also be a message of grace, however, because it validates dry spells within the Christian life. Faith is more than mountaintop moments; it also encompasses times of solitude and struggle. The right road will not always look like the right road.

This portion of the psalm ends with, of all things, a sermon. It sounds almost like an answer to the earlier prayer: "God's goodness will be shown to the sinners and the humble, and it will be shown with a road—a way through—a path that leads to love and faithfulness, for those who are willing to walk it."

Lent asks us each to choose our path, to make a decision about who we are and whose we are. Here at the beginning of this strange season, we answer God's call not with words, but with our steps. Watch your feet.

BRIAN ERICKSON

[1]Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Harper, 1970), 25.

1 Peter 3:18-22

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

Theological Perspective

This passage raises three important theological issues: suffering as a part of Christian community, the salvation of those imprisoned in the underworld, and baptism as an ark of salvation.

The letter of 1 Peter was written to a congregation of Gentiles who had come to believe that through Jesus Christ, the God of Israel would end the present evil age in an apocalypse following which God would judge all people, a judgment that would "begin with the household of God" (1 Pet. 4:17). The saved would be welcomed into a replacement world that is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you . . . ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:4–5). Members of the congregation perceived themselves to be suffering as a result of their conversion to God and their participation in the church. For example, some members of the congregation were slaves and suffered at the hands of their masters. Many scholars think that members of the community suffered through being harassed by unconverted Gentiles (e.g., 1 Pet. 3:16).

Suffering in this letter does not refer to suffering in general, such as the suffering that comes with illness, but refers specifically to the suffering that results from living according to Christian values in the midst of a culture that looks down on those

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During Lent, my Catholic elementary school classmates earnestly discussed what they were going to "give up." As they debated the relative merits of denying themselves candy or soda, I tried to figure out what the point was. Why would you stop eating candy if you really liked it? One junior theologian explained that "Jesus died for our sins, so we aren't supposed to happy. We're supposed to suffer."

The epistle reading for the first Sunday of Lent begins with a word about suffering. Before we get to verse 18, the writer entreats the community to be good and do good, even to those who persecute them, for by this example, they might avoid suffering. "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?" (v. 13). Then, as if recognizing the foolishness of these words, he adds, "But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed . . . For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil" (vv. 14a; 17).

We do not know who wrote 1 Peter, but we can surmise from the language and the content that the letter was addressed to Christians in Asia Minor who were suffering for their faith. The author offered words of encouragement and hope to people who were being persecuted, entreating them to remain strong in the faith, unified in love, and humble of

Exegetical Perspective

As one of the General Epistles, 1 Peter addresses readers across a wide swath of space and time. "To the exiles of the Dispersion," the epistle begins, naming five provinces that accounted for most of the landmass of Asia Minor in the first century. Right away, the language of the letter reaches deeper into Israel's history than the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Identifying his primarily Gentile Christian readers as "exiles," the author links them to those Jews exiled from Israel to Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple in 587/586 BCE. He will follow this tack throughout his letter, using numerous themes, phrases, and images from the Hebrew Bible to identify the fledgling church as the new Israel.

Whether or not this Peter is the same Peter who walked with Jesus is a matter of debate.[1] If it is, then his Greek is surprisingly good for a fisherman from Galilee. His references to the suffering of Christians in Asia Minor suggest a date in the late 80s. On both counts, this letter is generally held to be pseudonymous. Preachers will have plenty to explain without getting into the question of who wrote the letter, however, since the verses at hand are

[1]For a full discussion of authorial integrity, see David Bartlett's introduction to the First Letter of Peter in volume 12 of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 229–43.

Homiletical Perspective

There are some theological main courses here for the preacher and church to feast upon. Let me suggest the primary ones: Christ's atoning death, the nature of Jesus' resurrection, the proclamation of the descended Christ, salvation, baptism, the authority of the heavenly Christ, the Apostles' Creed (the passage contains many of the creed's phases: "suffered," "dead," "descended," "resurrection," "ascended," "the right hand of God," "the forgiveness of sins"), and the role of conscience in the life of faith.

It is a good thing the lectionary repeats itself every three years. Preachers will need half a dozen cycles of the lectionary to address adequately the smorgasbord of themes that emerge here. This passage may be preached in many, many different ways. So please do not try to preach them all at once! Choose one to develop in a sermon, and either incorporate the rest in worship liturgy (more on that below), or preach a series of sermons on this passage.

Though the passage opens with "suffering" (v. 18) and is in fact encased by the theme of "suffering" (vv. 3:17 and 4:1) in the context of 1 Peter 3, suffering through a long and overstuffed sermon is not the "patient waiting" (v. 20) that will encourage your flock to greater "righteousness" (v. 18). Discern, narrow, and focus, even if you decide to preach the "whole of the passage" by emphasizing the creedlike

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values. Today's text urges the members of the congregation to continue to do "what is good," "what is right" (vv. 13–14), even if such behavior causes them to suffer. By doing so, they will be saved.

By suffering on the cross, Christ gave the community the definitive example of how they should suffer. Yet the suffering of Christ is more than example. It "brings [them] to God," that is, gives them a place in the new world. Christ is now made alive in the spirit (i.e., Christ is raised from the dead) and is exalted to heaven at the right hand of God, where all other powers in the world are "made subject to him." This latter theological claim is stunning. Christ is now God's agent who is sovereign over *all* other rulers. The values of God represented in Christ are the norms by which all exercises of power in the present world are measured, and God through Christ will ultimately call all authorities to account for whether they have used power in the service of God.

The knowledge that Christ is exalted is the power out of which the community is able not only to endure suffering, but to witness in the midst of suffering. Because of Christ's exaltation, they need not fear those who harass them or be intimidated, but are to make a "defense" for "the hope that is in" them (v. 15); that is, they are to explain to their detractors why they left the dominant Gentile culture and embraced the ways of God.

This text raises haunting questions for the church in early-twenty-first-century North America. Many dominant values and behaviors in North America are similar to the unconverted Gentile life of antiquity: idolatrous, unjust, violent, and even death-dealing. Is the witness of today's church bold enough to catch the attention of the people and forces who shape our culture in gentile ways? Given the horrendous conditions of so many in the world today, resulting from things such as racism, sexism, and tribalism, is a church that is not suffering making a faithful enough witness? Indeed, by not making a forceful witness, is the church complicit (albeit unintentionally) in increasing the suffering of others?

A preacher needs to handle with care the theme of suffering. The preacher does not want to encourage neurotic attitudes toward suffering. Furthermore, immediately prior to the reading for today, in 2:11–3:12, the author of 1 Peter invokes a social pyramid that assumes that certain human beings have authority over others (e.g., the emperor as supreme, masters over slaves, and husbands over

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spirit. By their example of patient suffering and unavenged injustice, the Christians could draw more people to faith in Christ. Since we lack the return correspondence, we cannot know how these words were received, but if the Christians of Asia Minor were anything like us, then the call to patient suffering probably got a mixed reception.

These days, suffering has become a dirty word, a sign of failure, and our deepest fear. Ask people if they are afraid of dying, and many will say they are not afraid of dying; they just do not want to suffer. Americans have an especially strong aversion to suffering, as if our constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness also guaranteed a life free from suffering. Yet such thinking is sheer folly. No life is free from suffering. What really matters is how we make theological sense of it.

One approach is to make suffering a spiritual discipline, something to be not simply endured, but embraced. There is more than a hint of this in verse 18: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." This sort of thinking has caused pastors to counsel women to remain with abusive husbands and fanatics to engage in self-mutilation as a way of being Christlike. As a pastor, I find this rationale for suffering offensive, for Christ suffered not to bring more suffering upon us, but to save us from suffering eternally.

Similarly unsatisfying is the too common view that all human suffering is the will of God. If God causes suffering, which is often unpredictable and undeserved, then God becomes an arbitrary and capricious Lord who does not appear to love us. Can you put your trust in such a God? Furthermore, if God ordains some to suffer, then, by some perverse logic, we have little motivation to intervene. Is this why Christians have done so little to address the suffering of people in other parts of the world?

A gentler explanation for our lack of action is that experience has taught us we are powerless in the face of catastrophic loss. Overwhelmed by the suffering of others, we simply shut down. We have seen some of this in response to Hurricane Katrina. At first, there was a surge of financial and material assistance, but aid soon slowed to a trickle. Some places along the Gulf Coast are unchanged from when the hurricane hit two years ago, but there is no longer any urgency to our response. Sometimes human suffering exceeds our capacity to comprehend and respond.

Exegetical Perspective

challenging enough. There are variant readings and cryptic references here to a body of work that 1 Peter's readers may have known well, but which is quite unfamiliar to our own. To take up this challenge, however, is to find a rich resource for preaching.

The first important variation occurs in verse 18a. To register its impact, preachers may compare several translations of the passage. For instance, the NIV makes no note of the variant readings. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God," the first part of the verse reads in English. In contrast, the NRSV chooses the variant reading of "suffered" in place of "died," while noting the alternative in a textual note. The NKJV agrees with the NRSV, choosing the variant pronoun "us" in place of "you" later in the sentence: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God."

The second variation comes in verse 21, which describes the working of salvation through baptism. Baptism saves "not as a removal of dirt from the body," 1 Peter explains, but "as an appeal to God for a good conscience." As noted in the NRSV, *eperōtēma* may be rendered as "an appeal to God for [a good conscience]" or "a pledge to God from [a good conscience]," raising the question of where this good sense comes from. Does God confer it at baptism or is it a prerequisite? The NRSV favors the first sense while the NIV favors the second. The NKJV translates the same phrase as "the answer of a good conscience toward God." Either of these variations may call for comment, depending upon the theological tradition of the preacher and the congregation.

On the first Sunday of Lent, however, the placement of this passage between the Genesis account of God's covenant with Noah (9:8–17) and Mark's story of Jesus' baptism, temptation, and first public proclamation (1:9–15) will affect the way the congregation hears it. In this seasonal and biblical context, the passage from 1 Peter functions as a preface to the forty-day season of preparation for Easter, culminating in the baptism of new believers. The rehearsal of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension are here, along with a nascent theology of baptism based on the primordial flood. Using the flood to prefigure baptism (v. 21) requires "some metaphorical athleticism,"[2] Bartlett says, since Noah and his family were saved *from* water, while Christ's

[2]Ibid., 295.

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quality of these verses. I once heard David Bartlett say, "If possible, try to preach the text in the style of the text. A proverb will preach differently than prose and parables should preach differently than prophecy."

This portion of the epistle finds its unity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The text reads like a condensed resume of our Lord. If, as has been suggested, "a Gospel is a passion narrative with an extended introduction,"[1] then here in 1 Peter 3 we have the heart of the gospel. Helpfully, Jürgen Moltmann has said, "The death of Jesus on the cross is the center of all Christian theology."[2]

In these few verses we follow Jesus' passion, death, resurrection, and ascension—all the while keeping a dual focus on what effect this activity has on us. It is as if these verses answer the seeker's question, "Who was Jesus, and what does he mean to me?"

There is cause and effect at work here:

Jesus suffered/we are made righteous before God.
Jesus was put to death/we are saved from our sins.
God saves/we are baptized in water.
Jesus was resurrected/we must do good.
Jesus ascended into heaven/we (and all things) are subject to him.

This is the language of creeds and catechism; this is the language that teaches the church. The text makes claims upon us like baptism itself. Preach it that way!

Heavy and foundational as the theology may be, the preacher or worship leader may play with these life-saving truths by using them in the call to worship, the assurance of pardon, or other prayers in the worship service. You might even find a familiar hymn tune that will work with the verses of this text. Some scholars believe that verses 18 and 22 are from an early church hymn.

An emphasis on Christ's passion is most appropriate as the Lenten journey beings. Most folks want to skip the suffering and jump from a joyful Palm Sunday parade directly into a victorious Easter celebration. What about the garden, betrayal, arrest, trial, and cross? Many are tempted to pay these themes no mind. Since only the most faithful of parishioners will attend Maundy Thursday or Good

[1]Martin Kahler, *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988 [originally published in 1896]), 80, n. 11.

[2]*The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 204.

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wives). Most contemporary theology rejects such hierarchy as contrary to God's purposes. Today many Christian communities embrace a more mutual vision of community. The preacher needs to be clear that the gospel does not authorize arbitrary uses of power that cause the pointless suffering of others. For example, males need to know that they cannot be consistent with God's purposes by abusing women; women need to understand that faithfulness does not require them to tolerate abuse.

Christ's journey to the "spirits in prison" introduces a second theological theme. Although some scholars think the "spirits in prison" are heavenly beings, more likely they are people from previous generations who disobeyed God and were in a place of punishment. The dramatic theological claim of this text (see similarly Eph. 4:9–10) is that after the resurrection Christ visited those people and "made a proclamation" to them. Although the text does not specify the content of this preaching, most likely the author of 1 Peter thinks that Christ offered them the opportunity to become a part of the new age. Even if the author had in mind a once-in-history visit by Christ to the dead, the preacher could still emphasize that this text demonstrates the depth of God's will to save. The text presses the preacher to ask, "If God is truly unconditional love, is there a limit to which God will not go to save?"

A third provocative theological theme in this passage is its multilayered picture of baptism in verses 20–21. At one level, baptism is an ark through which God saves. Amid the floodlike conditions of suffering, baptism communicates to believers the sense of their belonging to God and thereby of making their ways safely through the floods ravaging the present age. At another level, baptism is performed by means of immersion in water. Floods, of course, are water in the mode of destruction. The power of God is so awesome that God transforms the flood water into the means of salvation. From this perspective, 1 Peter's attitude toward baptism is similar to that of the Reformers: Baptism is a sign from God to assure the congregation of God's continuing providence, even amid the suffering that comes from faithfulness.

RONALD J. ALLEN

Pastoral Perspective

What we need is a more robust understanding of suffering. Our text reminds us that our Lord suffered terribly before he died on the cross. Yet his suffering was not caused by God; rather, it was the result of Christ's faithfulness to his mission of reconciling us to God. By suffering and dying, Jesus not only defeated death, but defeated suffering as well.

Hispanic theologians like Roberto Goizueta describe the work of Jesus Christ as "accompaniment." Through his life, suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus has become the one who walks with us. There is no experience—tragedy or triumph, joy or sorrow—that is unknown to Christ. Even when we suffer, whether by accident or design, Jesus is with us. To quote Paul, nothing is "able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:39b).

Moreover, if Jesus through his suffering accompanies those who suffer, then we who are followers of Christ should feel compelled to respond, even if our only course of action is to bear witness.

Dr. Abraham Verghese recently wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* of his experience as part of a medical team that cared for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Over the years, Verghese had learned to steel himself against the sight of human suffering, so that he could do his job. Then one night he treated an elderly gentleman whose home had been destroyed by Katrina. For two days, the man had perched on a narrow ledge without food or water. When a boat finally picked him up, he was dropped off on a bridge packed with other refugees. Verghese was deeply moved by the man's story and said the only words he could think of: "I'm sorry, so sorry." The man stood up, shook his hand, and said, "Thank you, Doc. I needed to hear that." Afterward, Verghese thought about the way he had always tried to steel himself against human suffering and realized this did not help anyone. "The willingness to be wounded may be all we have to offer."[1]

SHAWNTHEA MONROE-MUELLER

[1]Abraham Verghese, "Close Encounters of the Human Kind," *New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 2005, 192.

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family are saved *through* water, but in any case 1 Peter asserts that the true saving power of baptism comes not through H_2O but through the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascension to the right hand of God (v. 22).

In the midst of this narrative comes a peculiar mention of Christ's preaching to "the spirits in prison"(v. 19b) after his death and resurrection. According to Perkins,[3] the legend of Genesis 6:2 (concerning "the sons of God" who took wives for themselves from the daughters of the earth) had undergone "considerable elaboration" by the time of 1 Peter. The tradition of these angels' imprisonment is alluded to in 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6, as well as in 1 Enoch, where Enoch himself appears to them. According to Reicke,[4] Jesus and the early church would have been well acquainted with the Enoch tradition.

First Peter's interest remains focused on the being and activity of Christ, who demonstrates his authority over these imprisoned spirits, not only by visiting them, but also by proclaiming to them. What does he proclaim? First Peter does not say, but the placement of this passage alongside Jesus' first public proclamation in Mark will give the preacher plenty of room to imagine.

This passage underscores the importance of baptism to the exiles suffering in Asia Minor. Like the Christ into whose death, resurrection, and ascension they are baptized, they too will suffer for doing good, not evil. Yet they have nothing ultimately to fear from those with power to put the flesh to death, for they have been made alive by the power of the Spirit. In good conscience, then, they may persevere both in living their faith and in proclaiming it, for they are the baptized. God has made them one with the One who "is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him" (v. 22).

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

Homiletical Perspective

Friday services, here is a wonderful opportunity to ground the Lenten journey of the entire congregation in Christ's suffering and passion.

Here is one example of an affirmation of faith based on 1 Peter 3:18–22:

Washed in the saving waters of baptism,
we give thanks for the ark of the church.
Joined to the faithful of all times and places,
we proclaim the suffering of Christ for the sins of all.
We rejoice and trust that:
the righteousness of Christ brings us to God,
the death of Christ proclaims God's love,
the resurrection of Christ awakens our spirits,
and the ascension of Christ enthrones him as Lord.
Therefore, with a good conscience and obedient lives,
we proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ—
even if for that faith we must suffer. So be it!

And here is a hymn, inspired by the same passage, that can be sung to the tune of "Jesus Loves the Little Children":

Jesus suffered for to save us,
Save us from fear and sin and death.
He was dead but now alive,
In his name we are baptized.
Obey the Christ who is the Lord of all.

Finally, here is a call to worship based upon the text:

One: As Jesus made proclamation to the spirits in prison,
All: So now, God is making an appeal to our conscience.
One: In former times, there was unrighteousness and disobedience.
All: But God waited patiently in order to save us.
One: Jesus suffered and died; was buried and raised.
All: He is the righteous one, our Savior and Lord!

G. OLIVER WAGNER

[3]Pheme Perkins, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1995), 65.
[4]Bo Reicke, *The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 110.

Mark 1:9-15

[9]In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John
in the Jordan. [10]And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the
heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11]And a voice
came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
[12]And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. [13]He was in
the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts;
and the angels waited on him.
[14]Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good
news of God, [15]and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has
come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Theological Perspective

Sometimes, the key to the theological meaning of a Gospel passage is found in its dramatic frame. Structurally, this pericope narrates a textbook rite of passage: the candidate is singled out (vv. 10–11), then taken for a proverbial length of time into a liminal space where old identities dissolve and new ones are forged (vv. 12–13), before being thrust back into society to occupy new roles (vv. 14–15). By contrast with Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel does not detail the ordeals to which the candidate is subjected. We are told only that Jesus was tempted by Satan, that he was with the wild beasts, and that the angels waited on him (v. 13). Certainly Mark is observing the ancient convention still honored in fraternity hazings: these are secrets known only to those who have already been initiated!

More importantly, Mark is using this stark story to preview the rest of the Gospel, in which Jesus is the wild beast who refuses to be domesticated into the household of conventional religion. Jesus' disruptive taboo-violating ministry of touching lepers and bleeding women, of healing on the Sabbath, of eating with tax collectors and sinners, turns his earthly career into liminal space and time for all of the other Gospel characters. The reader is shown how—like boys refusing to become men—the scribes and Pharisees and even the twelve disciples resist the

Pastoral Perspective

Creative religious figures have frequently reported periods of intense spiritual unrest, struggle, or ecstatic vision at the outset of their careers, times in which their sense of mission and world-changing message were formed. Of course it is theologically problematic to identify, without qualification, Jesus' baptismal vision and subsequent spiritual trials in the wilderness with other profound experiences in the history of religion. Mark's Gospel in particular emphasizes the utter mystery and uniqueness of Jesus the Christ. At the same time, it is important, theologically and historically, for the homiletical interpreter of these events to regard them as both human and divine in origin, and therefore to understand and interpret them from both perspectives.

From a psychological perspective, Jesus' baptismal vision has all the signs (in Anton Boisen's classic terminology) of an "upheaval" and "reorganization" of a person's "inner world," a psychological event that realigns the individual into profound attunement with that which is highest and best in his or her universe of meaning and value. In Mark's account, Jesus alone experiences the heavens torn asunder and the Spirit descending, and he alone hears the extraordinary life-changing words, "You are my beloved Son" (NRSV alternate).

Exegetical Perspective

Mark's Gospel begins with the account of John the Baptizer in the wilderness, calling Israel to repentance and demanding baptism in the Jordan River, preparing the way of the Lord (1:3). John's baptism of repentance—as well as his location in the wilderness and his costuming and diet—implies a vote of no-confidence in the current arrangements of the world, particularly those represented by the temple and the Jerusalem elites. John is Elijah, who pronounces judgment on king and court for their violation of the covenant with God and who returns from heaven to announce the coming of God. John's appearance in the wilderness is an apocalyptic sign of God's coming, bringing both judgment and hope. "Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee," the one for whom John has been preparing, arrives amid the crowds of Judeans and Jerusalemites flocking around John (1:5). The designation "Nazareth of Galilee," a third-class village in second-class Galilee, suggests the humble origins of the Messiah. The Galilean's presence is an offense among all these Judeans.

Why does Jesus, who is not a sinner, need to be baptized at all? Jesus' embrace of John's baptism signifies a public act of commitment to the way of God that John has been preparing. There is a subtle difference, parts of which are lost in English translation, in the way Mark describes Jesus'

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Mark does everything quickly in his Gospel, and his account of Jesus' first public appearance is no exception. If Mark's story were the only one we had, we would know nothing of John's attempt to make Jesus the baptizer instead of him (Matthew). We would have no debate between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness (Matthew and Luke). All we would have are these seven spare verses, moving at breakneck speed. Blink once, and Jesus is traveling from Nazareth to the Jordan River. Blink twice, and he is preaching his first sermon, with his baptism, his vision of divine favor, his wilderness temptation, and John's arrest all behind him.

Mark moves quickly, yet he fills these verses with momentous echoes from Israel's past. Is that Jesus with the wild animals or Adam naming them in the garden before the fall? Is that Jesus in the desert for forty days or Moses in the wilderness for forty years? Is that God's voice coming from heaven or the voice of the prophet Isaiah, beholding the servant in whom God's soul delights? In John's arrest, we even have a fore-echo of an arrest yet to come, when Jesus, like John, will be silenced by Rome.

There is no shortage of material for this Sunday's preacher, then. The main decision is whether to treat this passage as an introduction to the season of Lent, and if so, how. The most obvious approach is to

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transition by refusing to let go of their old identities. Sympathetic identification with the characters catapults readers into their own emergencies, forces them into a rite of passage to struggle through the tensions of holding on and letting go.

This is exactly where we belong on the first Sunday of Lent. But if many Gospel characters show us how *not* to respond, Jesus is the Master we are called to follow. We need to know how Jesus negotiated those forty days in the wilderness. Because Mark does not explicitly say, he puts us in the position of other members of society, left to guess what went on from what Jesus says and does afterwards. Because Mark does intend to provide guidance for our own transition, he has to fill his subsequent narrative with sufficient clues to do that job.

The first comes in the Beelzebul controversy (3:22–30), which shows what *the result* of initiation ordeals must be. When Jesus strides into ministry casting out demons (1:21–28, 32–34), Jesus' enemies charge that he does it by Beelzebul's power (3:22). Jesus responds that it is impossible to plunder a strong man's house without first tying him up (3:27). The outcome of Jesus' temptations—of our own wrestling for kingdom identities—is not to be a pact with the powers of darkness. Rather, Satan must be bound!

The second clue articulates *the shape of the vocation* Satan is trying to talk Jesus out of. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus counters with the first prediction of his passion and resurrection. Peter rebukes Jesus, and Jesus rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:29–33). Satan is trying to get Jesus to keep his eye on earthly advantage. Whatever else happens in the wilderness, Jesus lets go of human things and refuses to grasp ready-made savior roles. Instead, Jesus discerns a *wild* calling that explodes horizontal plots by passing through the disastrously bad (crucifixion) over into the unimaginable, supranatural good (resurrection life).

A third clue warns of *the importance of spiritual wrestling* and *describes its dynamics.* Mark's Gospel implies that Jesus bound Satan at the beginning. But in the Gethsemane pericope (14:32–42), Jesus struggles for clarity at the end. For three rounds, Jesus wrestles and prays through his ambivalence: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (14:36). Then Jesus rises resolute and strides through his passion the way he earlier marched into

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Psychologically we might suppose that this dramatic, formative event may have culminated a passionate spiritual search or "quest for identity" of some sort—though the text gives no hint of it, and Mark would certainly have rejected such a speculation. But whatever it was that moved Jesus to respond to John's call to repent and be baptized, when he emerged from the waters of the Jordan, he had a vision in which he acquired a unique sense of God-given identity and affirmation, followed by an overwhelming sense of the power of God driving him into the wilderness for an extended period of spiritual struggle. He emerged from this in due course a new man, by all appearances, with supernatural powers and a revolutionary spiritual message.

Mark describes these events in religious, even archetypal terms: Spirit descending, heavens opening, a voice from heaven, temptations from Satan, wild beasts threatening, and angels ministering. However we interpret such imagery historically, it seems profoundly significant and appropriate psychologically to the depth and power of such an experience. For only the numinosity of religious symbolism can evoke the intensity and extent of a renewal and redefinition of the self or "soul" and point evocatively beyond psychology itself to its transcending theological significance.

And as in so many other transformative religious experiences, "Spirit" is shown here to be at once gentle and dovelike, yet acting with awesome, disruptive effect—descending without warning from a heaven "torn apart," reorienting one's self and world, and setting one on a new and revolutionary spiritual path. In time, such a recipient of "Spirit," such a religious revolutionary, is bound to confront the world with his or her own special vision and claim—the urgency of the inbreaking reign of God for Jesus in Mark's Gospel—and to encounter the world's resistance and rejection. Such is the transforming power of Spirit in the Bible. When Spirit comes, one is changed and, in Mark's theology, set on the road of discipleship to a cross and beyond.

What Jesus heard from God in his disruptive, life-changing experience at the Jordan, and what he struggled to affirm in the wilderness, was a message of sublime wonder: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." He heard an affirmation of his unique being and significance *from God,* that is, from beyond finite, historical existence. It was a word transcending human origins, rooted in eternity, absolute, and unconditioned by the frailty,

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baptism, in contrast to the others who have come to be baptized by John. Jesus is baptized "into" (Gk. *eis*, 1:9, not just "in," cf. 1:5) the Jordan, without any confession of sins. He perfectly embodies John's call to repent of the world's ways, repentance not only from the sins of the world, but from the whole sinful world. This kind of repentance amounts to nothing less than death. With his baptism, Jesus signals the end of his former life. He dies not only to sin, but to all of the assumptions, worldviews, entanglements, and obligations of his former life as a citizen of Galilee; he is no longer subordinate to the temple and the Jerusalem authorities, to Herod, or to Caesar and the Roman occupiers. His baptism is not only a religious act, but a political and economic assertion of God's lordship. When he emerges from the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus is thus the first citizen of God's empire, completely free of obligations to anyone or anything but God and God's coming rule. He is now free to pursue God's call and empowered to do all the things that will define his ministry.

Jesus' baptism marks for him the end of the old world and the beginning of a new one, as is made clear as soon as he arises from the Jordan and sees the heavens themselves being torn apart. The image is both violent and hope-filled. The only other place Mark uses this word for ripping and tearing is in the description of the events that take place at the moment Jesus dies on the cross, when the veil of the temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. In both cases, God is doing the ripping. These are both high apocalyptic moments, when the boundaries between earth and heaven are disordered and dissolved. As the heavens are being torn apart, Jesus also sees the Spirit coming down from heaven, like a dove, not just upon him, but into him. This is the same Spirit of God that moved over the face of the waters of the deep at the creation of the world. The descent of the Spirit signals that God is now remaking the broken, sin-filled creation.

The voice that comes from heaven as the heavens are torn open affirms Jesus' identity and calling and suggests the script for how the new creation will come into being. The heavenly words are actually a composite citation of Israel's Scriptures, meant to recall not just these words alone, but the contexts from which they come. The first saying, "You are my son," comes from Psalm 2, a messianic psalm that offers a statement of political judgment and warning to the nations. "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?" the psalmist asks. "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take

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feature Jesus as the exemplar of self-surrender to God. Though Christian tradition holds that he was without sin, Jesus freely chose John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (practicing what he was about to preach). When the voice from heaven told him who he was, he attached no privilege to that announcement of divine favor. When the Spirit drove him into the wilderness, he did not seek a way out. The Beloved Son accepted the company God gave him in the desert—Satan, wild animals, ministering angels—with no drama of preferring one to the other. Here is someone who wastes no time defending himself against what comes to him, knowing that everything comes from God. Here is someone who shows us what it means to please God.

Since the forty-day season of Lent is modeled on Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, preachers may wish to focus on that part of the lection. Mark's paucity of detail will leave them largely to their own imaginative devices, however. One obvious strategy is to build a bridge from the text to the Lenten practices commended by the preacher's faith tradition. Another is to speak with church members about their experiences of Lent, weaving their responses into a sermon that reflects congregational practice.

Preachers who wish to make a more visceral connection to the text might consider a solo camping trip, paying special attention to the Lenten challenges posed by such a journey. There is first of all the decision of what to take and what to leave. What is essential to life, and what is not? When you have to carry them on your back, so-called necessities can become discarded baggage. There is also the matter of having quite a lot of time to think. Can you handle the silence, in which thoughts and feelings you have outrun will have time to catch up with you? Should you encounter some wild animals of your own, will you stay or will you pack up? How will you tell the difference between Satan's voice and those of angels? Do *you* trust that everything comes from God?

Those willing to settle for more vicarious desert experience may benefit from a visit to the desert fathers. Thomas Merton's classic introduction, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, is especially good. Other rich resources include *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* by Belden Lane, *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* by Terry Tempest Williams, and *Desert Solitaire* by salty-tongued Edward Abbey. As all of these resources make clear, the desert is not only a physical

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ministry. By contrast, Peter's confession is half-baked. Because he will not let go of it enough to enter into what Jesus is saying, Peter is quickly co-opted into speaking for Satan. Even at the transfiguration, the inner circle of disciples is too hard-hearted and closed-minded to take in the meaning of either crucifixion or resurrection. The disciples fix their eyes on human greatness all the way to Jerusalem. Because Peter does not submit his conception of vocation to the test of prayer, but sleeps in the garden, he is unable to follow Jesus' example. Peter yields to temptation in the courtyard and denies Jesus all three times.

The somber theological moral is that divine vocation is both amazing and dangerous. Up front, it signals divine favor (1:11; cf. 9:7). But divine vocation immediately thrusts us into liminal space. Unless we are willing to let old identities dissolve and allow ourselves to be reshaped into crucifixion-resurrection disciples, our sense of divine vocation is fraught with demonic potential. In Mark's Gospel, the experience of Jesus' first disciples stands as a warning: because the Twelve could not loosen their grip in advance, Golgotha became the liminal space where their old meanings crashed and burned, leaving them no choice but to despair or to beg for new ones.

Implicitly, Mark's Gospel also makes Lent the norm for Christian life. However it may have been for Jesus, resolution for us cannot be "once and for all" immediate, but a matter of surrendering our imperfect conceptions and wrestling for God's meaning afresh every day. These spiritual gymnastics strengthen us for major trials by deepening our acquaintance with the God who calls us. Things may go so badly for us that we lose sight of divine favor. Jesus' regular prayed *experience* of divine favor enabled him to remain resolute, even when he consciously wondered whether God had abandoned him (15:34).

MARILYN MCCORD ADAMS

Pastoral Perspective

uncertainty, and contingency of human relationships or historical circumstance. He learned that he was unconditionally *God's Beloved Son.*

But is it not precisely this message that we ourselves are privileged to hear and to learn in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Granting theological primacy and uniqueness to Jesus as God's Beloved Son, must we not also claim, in response to him and through him, that in our own unique and different ways we too are sons and daughters of God? Must we not also recognize that through him we too have been given a name, an identity, and a worth and dignity as human beings that is rooted and grounded with all the saints in the eternal, unconditioned, unalterable being and love of God? If we can hear this voice, which transcends all earthly voices, anchoring our existence, identity, and worth eternally in God, can we not also hear the challenge to *believe* it, to *live* it, and to *declare* its truth for every woman and man who is, was, or ever shall be?

Especially during the season of Lent, shall we not also then be prepared to bear the cost of our divine name and mission as Jesus' disciples, in the confident hope of our ultimate divine affirmation in the resurrection power and love of God? "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (says the apostle Paul). "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:14, 15c–17).

Is this not also the meaning of the imagery of the heavens being "torn apart" in Jesus' visionary baptismal experience (v. 10)? This powerful verb Mark uses only here and at the moment of Jesus' death (15:38), when the temple's curtain is torn in two—marking the radical overcoming of the veil between heaven and earth in the being and work of the Christ. For in this "Beloved Son," crucified and risen, are we not *all* declared to be God's beloved children, and thereby called and empowered to live and serve in the newness of life that is ours in him?

RODNEY J. HUNTER

Exegetical Perspective

counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed" (Ps. 2:1–2). But God merely laughs at these human plots, and then speaks to the chosen one: "You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps. 2:7b–8). When the voice from heaven cites Psalm 2, it both affirms Jesus as God's Son and predicts the opposition he will face among the nations and his ultimate lordship over them.

So, too, the last word we hear from the heavenly voice—"with you I am well pleased"—is an allusion to Isaiah 42, the first of the famous Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah. The one in whom God delights is the Servant, upon whom God places God's spirit, the one who will bring forth justice to the nations. The words from heaven at the baptism of Jesus inform Jesus, as well as Mark's audience, of what lies before God's servant, the Messiah, as he sets about rewriting the scripts that shape the life of God's people.

As soon as the voice is finished speaking, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Unlike the other Gospels, Mark makes no mention of the contents of the temptations themselves, which for Mark are not as important as the fact that Jesus is retracing the steps of Israel's history in order to rewrite her story. Whereas Israel in the wilderness stumbled and wandered for forty years in sin, rebellion, and distrust, longing again for the chains of slavery, Jesus withstands Satan's tests in the wilderness for forty days. By this means, Jesus is retracing Israel's steps, rewriting her story, and recasting the destiny of all of God's people. Jesus' first declaration of the gospel, after the temptation in the wilderness, says as much: he announces that the time has been made full, and God's rule has come near. All of the old obligations to the priests, to the temple, to Herod, and to Rome have been cancelled, not only for Jesus, but for all those who repent and follow him into God's rule.

STANLEY P. SAUNDERS

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place. It is also a spiritual place, rife with spots to engage the self-examination and repentance commended to the faithful during Lent.

Preachers who choose to focus on Jesus' message instead have a valuable opportunity to put flesh on some theological bones. As often as Christians use phrases such as "kingdom of God," "repentance," and "good news," few compare notes on what they mean by those words. Could that be because no one has ever asked them? Like many other words central to Christian faith, these words are entirely abstract. They have no weight, no smell, no shape, no temperature—no direct reference to lived experience. At the very least, a preacher may offer definitions of one or more of these words so that hearers are able to vet their own working definitions. In the process, preacher and hearers alike stand to discover that each word has many meanings instead of just one, based on its own history, theology, usage, and associations. "Kingdom of God" is of special interest to Mark, who uses it fourteen times in his Gospel. What, by the way, does the preacher mean by "God"?

Interpreters game for more imaginative wordplay may ask unusual questions of the phrases at hand. What does repentance sound like? How does the kingdom of God smell? What color is the good news? In every case, the idea is to run the words past the five senses, staying on the lookout for fresh associations. Of all the words that come out of Jesus' mouth this Sunday, "good news" may be the one most in need of refreshment at the beginning of Lent. What is the good news for this particular congregation at this particular time in this particular world? Can the preacher forget what the phrase is supposed to mean long enough to uncover the meaning that listeners are dying to hear?

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR