

Feasting on the Word

Preaching the
Revised Common Lectionary

Year C, Volume 2

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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. 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. Former President Laura S. Mendenhall provided splendid help as well. She made seminary resources and personnel available and encouraged us in this partnership with enthusiasm and all good grace. We thank her and look forward to working with Columbia's new president Stephen Hayner.

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

Westminster John Knox Press

Series Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ASH WEDNESDAY

Isaiah 58:1-12

- ¹Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
- ²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
- ³“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
- ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
- ⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
- ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

Theological Perspective

The temptation one faces in preparing to preach this text, especially attractive on Ash Wednesday, is to read and proclaim it as if it were simply a prophetic critique of religious practices that ignore the needs of the poor. Clearly, the prophet’s denunciation of a piety so rich in itself that it has become blind to the needs of others (as well as to its own poverty) burns here with a relentless intensity. Indeed, on Ash Wednesday we do well to remember that the ritual disposition of ashes, the confession of sin, our self-chosen Lenten fasts—as sincere and ardent as these practices may be—do not of themselves draw us one step nearer to God, and can in fact become ingenious contrivances for avoiding God altogether.

So how is one to read this text, which pointedly condemns any quest for righteousness before God that overlooks the plight of the poor, and contrasts such an unfaithful “fast” to God’s concern for loosening “the bonds of injustice” and letting “the oppressed go free”? “Is this not the fast I choose?” asks the Lord. Indeed, it

Pastoral Perspective

In today’s text, a crisis moment has arrived. Quiet diplomacy will not do. “Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” the prophet urges. “Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.”

Who wants to hear this? Nobody likes loud-mouth folk! When the prophet brings forth moral charges, none of the accused want to hear or deal with them. If everyone appears to be doing more or less the same thing, and things appear to be going their way, then why stir up trouble by making people feel uncomfortable? Let sleeping dogs lie! Why “declare” the people’s transgressions?

If the prophet is encouraged to raise his voice like a trumpet, it is because quiet diplomacy has not worked. Yet will his trumpeting not call out contempt and violence against him? History is replete with stories of those who cried out and declared to the people their wrongdoing. Such efforts were called “disturbing the peace.” Protesters were called

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

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

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

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

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Exegetical Perspective

The particular verses from Isaiah appointed for Ash Wednesday are part of a longer section of Isaiah that begins with 56:1 and concludes with 59:20. The overarching theme is that the prerequisite for divine deliverance is that the people maintain righteous and just lives (cf. 56:1 and 59:16–20). Isaiah 58:1–12 stands in the middle of this longer section stressing the need for proper, inward repentance that leads to acceptable outward action (cf. 58:1 and 59:20; 58:2 and 56:1).

Within the longer unit, 58:1–12 should be extended to include verses 13–14 for several reasons. First, one of the key terms in 58:2, “delight,” is repeated in 58:13–14 where the whole idea of what is pleasing to God is brought to closure. Second, “Jacob” as referent appears in 58:1 and again in 58:14. Third, the issue of pursuing one’s personal agenda is addressed in 58:3 and again in 58:13. Finally, the last line of 59:14, “for the mouth of the LORD has spoken,” marks the end of the prophet’s declaration that begins at 58:3c with the words “Look, you serve your own

Homiletical Perspective

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the forty days of Lent. It is traditionally a time for Christians to enter a period of self-reflection, prayer, and preparation in anticipation of the celebrations of Easter. The symbolism of forty days has many roots, including the flood and forty years of wilderness wanderings, but inspiration for this time is probably taken from Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness where he, like Moses and Elijah before him, sojourned in preparation for his ministry.

Fasting was one of the notable features of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. A common practice throughout the Bible, fasting was believed to be a humbling act of commitment or repentance that was intensified when combined with prayer. Fasting has become a favored spiritual discipline for a wide variety of people who believe this effort can help eliminate earthly distractions as they seek to draw nearer to God. John Wesley, Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, and Thomas Merton all

Isaiah 58:1-12

Theological Perspective

is, but what makes God's "fast" remarkable is not its social or political or even economic sensibilities but its reckless self-forgetfulness. "Why do we fast, but you do not see?" is the question of an anxious idolatry eager to make God "useful," worshiping God *for the sake of something else*, in this case, one's own salvation. Lusting for such a possibility was the great threat that continually confronted Israel and continues to tempt us today in both liberal and conservative garb. All desire the power to save themselves. All.

The form of fasting that God chooses is strangely free of this affliction. It is distinguished from idolatry in its lack of anxiety. It is free to engage another, to *see* the other, and to see the other not as something to be used or merely as an object of pity or duty, but as a gift.

That is why Karl Barth begins his treatment of human freedom not by talking of rights or duties but by speaking first of being set free for God, a freedom manifest in the way we keep the Sabbath day. How we understand what that day is for is the central clue to our understanding of what human beings are for. Isaiah 58 does not offer moralistic wisdom at this point. Rather, "the fast God chooses" describes a new vision of humanity. In the presence of this One, we are saved from the loneliness of our self-justifying ways, even as we are forbidden to give ultimate loyalty to our own agendas, however pious or political. Instead, we are invited to receive ourselves and others as gifts, discovering in God's engagement with us a life that can only be a life together. The end of such Sabbath freedom leads not "to the individual in isolation, but in relationship to his fellows."¹

The danger of worship concerned only with one's own salvation is not its immorality or lack of authenticity, but its blindness. When we suffer from such idolatry, only "the fast God chooses" is able to render the neighbor visible to us. Simone Weil, hardly a Reformed theologian but a wise guide to much in Scripture, writes that it is God's freedom to forget self that is at the heart of the passion to which Ash Wednesday directs us, a freedom that is manifest in its extraordinary vision. She has in mind the freedom that enabled a despised Samaritan to stop and render aid when the priest and Levite had business elsewhere. Of this story (which has a definite resonance with this text in Isaiah 58) she writes: "One of the two is only a little piece of flesh, naked, inert, and bleeding beside a ditch; he is

Pastoral Perspective

"outside agitators." They were often beaten, tortured, lynched, or otherwise silenced.

On Sunday, September 23, 2007, Burmese Buddhist monks participated in a peaceful demonstration to protest the harsh treatment of the people by the government. They were shot and killed by the military because they demonstrated. A 39-year-old Burmese protester in Rangoon, an ordinary citizen, cried loudly in the press. After crying out he came to the pessimistic view that nothing was going to change. Still, he continued to protest. Why? Because loud outcry is better than silently hiding behind closed doors in fear. Perhaps if the community will cry out loud enough and long enough, someone, somewhere will hear and respond. That is where the hope lies.

The prophet tells us that God is not seduced or impressed by the noise that comes from our solemn assemblies. This is what God wants from us: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free." These are things the community can achieve through ongoing struggle. Pastoral and social-justice issues are inseparable. The prophet's pastoral perspective joins moral and spiritual vision with transforming political, economic, and justice systems.

One of the most challenging parts in the list of what God wants is close to where we live. "Bring the homeless poor into your house" (v. 7b). Whoa! Is the prophet giving us bad advice here? What about issues of personal boundaries? Perhaps the most challenging part of all is "not to hide yourself from your own kin" (v. 7d). Have you ever wanted to hide from your relatives? Relatives can show up unannounced, at any time, with a sense of entitlement. No doubt, stories abound.

The prophet's list of what God wants from us is far from what we conveniently offer to God. God cares about healing the whole creation. When we participate in the whole work of redemption and healing, God's light breaks through the gloom of despair, the darkness of ignorance, and the deception of arrogance, fear, and violence. "Then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom be like the noonday" (v. 10b).

Still, there will be work to do, even in the new and idealized situation. History will continue to unfold, and new challenges will arise. However, there will be a significant difference: our desire will be satisfied in scorched places. Our bodies will be strengthened and our lives will be refreshed "like a watered garden" (v. 11d). This is how God's redemptive and healing power is revealed and experienced in the community.

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 69.

Exegetical Perspective

interest on your fast day.” Some commentators arrange the poem in five stanzas (58:1–3b; 3c–5; 6–9b; 9c–12; 13–14), others three (58:1–5; 6–12; 13–14), but most agree that 58:13–14 provide the proper conclusion of the poem and are not a later addition.

The historical setting of this passage cannot be precisely determined. The mention of “ancient ruins” (58:14) suggests some time after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE but before the restoration of the temple in 520–515 BCE. As attested by the book of Lamentations, worship did continue in Jerusalem by those not taken to Babylon. Since the character of “fasting” that is to be accepted as the worship of God is addressed, some form of organized ritual can be assumed. At least four fast days had been regularized by the time Zechariah arrived around 520 BCE (Zech. 8:18–19). Those may have remembered particular historical moments such as (1) the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem—the tenth day of the tenth month; (2) the capture of Jerusalem—the ninth day of the fourth month; (3) the burning of the temple and city—the tenth day of the fifth month; and (4) the murder of Gedaliah—the third day of the seventh month.¹ Since Isaiah 58 has been incorporated into the work of the great exilic Babylonian Isaiah (Second Isaiah), it seems likely that it reflects a time somewhere after the return of some of the exiles in 538 BCE but before the time of Haggai and Zechariah. Jerusalem was in a state of economic and social disarray, a continuing situation reflected still later in Ezra and Nehemiah.

The section opens with God’s charge to the prophet and the statement of the problem: the people are very “religious,” but all their fasting is mere outward “show” (vv. 1–3). They are in “rebellion” (NRSV has the better translation of *pesha*) and do not practice “righteousness,” *tsedaqah* (vv. 1–2). In this passage the disregard for doing righteousness is equated with selfishness, serving one’s own interests (vv. 3, 13). “Oppressing” one’s “workers,” quarreling, and “pointing of the finger and the speaking of evil” (a judgmental act accompanied by slander) were all related to the selfish pursuit of personal rather than communal interests (vv. 3–4, 9). As the questions of the people indicate, they did not understand why God was not responding (v. 3a). Rather than the repentance that might prompt God to listen, the people were caught up in outward signs of mourning, such as fasting and putting on mourning garments, actions that in themselves were not acceptable to the Lord (vv.

1. James Muilenburg, “Isaiah,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 5:678.

Homiletical Perspective

regularly fasted; Roman Catholics are required to fast on Ash Wednesday; among Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists, many fast. In contemporary Protestant religious practice, during Lent many persons practice some kind of fasting or a more popular (and, alas, regularly abused) idea of “giving up” something for the duration. Reasons for fasting abound—nearness to God, weight loss, detoxification—but they are often misunderstood (many forget that nothing *we* can do will draw us any nearer to God—God is already with us). The Lenten reading from Isaiah 58 helps us with this precise point.

Second Isaiah preaches to Israel at the end of their exile when they are overwhelmed with a sense of defeat and abandonment by YHWH. We know from Zechariah 7 that Israel’s religious habits have become rote and empty. Walter Brueggemann calls it a kind of “pseudo-holiness.”¹ Thus, when people complain that God is not hearing their prayers or responding to their fasting, Isaiah confronts them with the hypocrisy of their humility. He is direct: fasting should never be understood as an end in itself or a substitute for righteous living. Indeed, it is arterially related to righteous living. Our private devotions are inextricably linked to our public lives. True devotion to God demands both. If we are not living righteously, then our spiritual disciplines lose their meaning.

For the preacher confronted with growing numbers who say they are “spiritual but not religious” and who are infatuated with ever-increasing numbers of popular “spiritual” practices, Isaiah 58 and its emphasis on *righteousness* (Heb. *tsedaqah*) and *justice* (Heb. *mishpat*) is a text worth exploring. According to Abraham Heschel, there are few things as deeply ingrained in the heart of the faithful “as the thought of God’s justice and righteousness. It is not an inference, but self-evident; [it is] not an added attribute to [YHWH’s] essence.”² This theme was absolutely central to Jesus’ preaching. One need only reread the litany of accusations in Matthew 23 to experience Jesus’ indignation over the same hypocrisies of the Pharisees.

Isaiah’s audience is reoriented to YHWH’s definition of fasting that seeks to “loose the chains of injustice,” clothe the naked, and feed the hungry (cf. Matthew 25). The soaring words of this chapter reach their pinnacle in verses 9–11, when the prophet shows that when those who live righteously call upon YHWH, the Sovereign will satisfy their

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 462.

2. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 255.

Isaiah 58:1-12

Theological Perspective

nameless; no one knows anything about him. Those who pass by this thing scarcely notice it, and a few minutes afterward do not even know that they saw it. Only one stops and turns his attention toward it.” In desiring the existence of this other, the Samaritan shares “in the state of inert matter which is his,”² a sharing that is in fact cruciform in shape and therefore able to *see* what healthy and even virtuous eyes otherwise had somehow missed. That is what it means to be free, not just generously compassionate or virtuously self-denying, but free to *see* the other and to recognize in him or her a child of God.

That is the strange place where this passage leaves us, promising of all things that those who keep the fast God chooses will indeed be set free, that is, will be able to call upon God, to cry for help and hear God say, “Here I am.”

All true joy in life derives from this free decision of God to seek fellowship with that which is not God, just as all human fellowship is rooted in the triune love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is where Ash Wednesday’s journey is taking us, the place where God’s fast pours itself out for the sake of the whole world. There God’s fast becomes our food, and we are set free to sit at table with others whom we have not chosen and would never choose, to eat and even delight in this fearful mercy.

Strangely, the prophet is very clear about this mercy and this irrepressible joy: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly. . . . Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.” In commenting on this passage Calvin writes, simply, “The chief part of our happiness” is that “God listens to us.”³ What the prophet knows, but the self-absorbed pietist and the ideologue forget, is that the God whose fast is to loosen the bonds of injustice delights in the life together that is the gift that belongs to all his children.

THOMAS W. CURRIE

2. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 90.

3. John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 236.

Pastoral Perspective

We will be called “repairer of the breach” when we help heal broken relationships and make the streets safe for human dwelling.

The personal and social are inseparable. Ash Wednesday and Lent are times to think about the interrelatedness of the personal, the social, and the political. “Loose the bonds of injustice,” the prophet cried, “let the oppressed go free” (v. 6). With pastoral care, Ash Wednesday celebrations will distinguish false piety from the true worship of God. False piety is characterized by our convenient offerings to God, which fall short of the moral challenges posed by violence and poverty. We are called to observe the requirements of both love and justice.

We know that violence in the streets and the world has its starting place at home among the “relatives.” The U.S. Department of Justice’s 1996 National Crime Victimization Survey informs us that women of all races are equally vulnerable to abuse by husbands, boyfriends, or other male members of the family. In some cultures, honor killing is sanctioned. The church covers domestic violence, for example, through silence. It fails church and community when it does not cry out loud about the violence done to women, children, and some men.

The church’s ministry can address domestic violence through protest, the education of children, preaching, home visitation, pastoral conversations, committee meetings, pastoral counseling, and other venues where pastor and parishioners gather to talk about the life of faith. Violence in the home and streets is relevant talk for all seasons. Ash Wednesday and Lent are especially ripe times to raise a loud voice against family, domestic, and other forms of violence.

The focus of the whole season and of today’s liturgy in particular is on taking stock of our lives, acknowledging betrayal, lamenting, confessing, and repenting. To remain silent about violence in the home and in the community is to give sanction to it. Victims will continue to be victims. Perpetrators will not be called to account, while the church continues in delusional thinking, shallow devotion, and empty ritual.

When it is true to its purpose, Lent will move us closer to being the suffering and resurrected body of Christ in the world. We will find hope in being faithful and strength in being honest. We will be made wiser by our discernment and confession, poised to struggle for wider justice, and enabled to dig deeper wells for the expression of compassion. “Then,” the prophet says, “your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

ARCHIE SMITH JR.

Exegetical Perspective

3, 5; cf. Jer. 14:11–12). They did not recognize their need for a basic change of attitude.

The prophet does not condemn all ritual forms of fasting. Fasting had a legitimate place in the religious/political life of ancient Israel. Joel called for public fasting in the face of a community crisis (Joel 1:8–2:17; cf. also Ezra 8:21–23; Neh. 1:4–11). Private fasts are noted (2 Sam. 12:15–23; Ps. 69:1–15). Rather, the prophet stresses what God desires as the proper outward expression of repentance. To do righteousness in the eyes of the prophet was to redress all forms of oppression and injustice. As signs of inward remorse, the people, especially the business leaders, were to correct the communal breakdown reflected in the reality of widespread hunger, homelessness, and insufficient clothing (vv. 6–7, 10; cf. Zech. 7:5–11; Matt. 25:35–40). Such action would represent the “fast that I [God] choose” (v. 5). Such action demonstrated a commitment to maintaining justice, the prerequisite of divine deliverance (56:1; cf. 59:9–20).

An integral part of doing righteousness was honoring the Sabbath (56:2–8). The pursuit of a personal agenda, serving one’s “own interests,” was totally unacceptable (v. 13). Just as breaking the bonds of injustice and freeing the oppressed were critical (v. 6), so was properly observing the Sabbath (v. 13). Each was an aspect of the fast that God expected. In Deuteronomy the rationale for the Sabbath is based on the experience of the slavery endured by Israel in Egypt (Deut. 5:12–15). The importance of Sabbath-keeping was a long-standing tradition. Jeremiah declared the desecration of the Sabbath in his day as one of the primary transgressions of the people of Judah that brought the Babylonian destruction (Jer. 17:19–27).

Those who have experienced oppression should not allow or participate in the structures of society that inflict others with the same. This passage contrasts self-serving “religiosity” (vv. 3–4) with a genuine attitude of repentance that seeks to set right wrongdoing and offer relief to those suffering within the community (vv. 6–7). God’s promise to those who do fast in such a manner is that their cries for divine presence and vindication will be heard (vv. 8–12; cf. v. 3). Ash Wednesday is an appropriate time to reflect again on what should be an inseparable relationship of inward repentance and outward actions with regard for the undoing and overcoming of the destructiveness worked by human sin within the human communities in which we live.

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

needs and tend them like “a watered garden.” Verse 12 fulfills the longed-for promise of restoration and anoints the people with the title “repairer of the breach,” “restorer of streets to live in.”

This idea of repairing the breach has deep meaning for the Jewish community and is best known in the phrase *Tikkun Olam* (literally “repairing the world”). The phrase *tikkun* appears in Ecclesiastes (1:5; 7:13) and the concept is rooted in rabbinic literature, especially the “Aleinu prayer” (one of the most essential prayers of Jewish worship that refers to their responsibilities as a chosen people). *Tikkun Olam* is a call to a kind of social action that seeks to repair the world through the establishment of the reign of God. In this it undergirds Martin Luther King Jr.’s concept of building the Beloved Community and most recently can be seen in the writings of several young Jewish activists in the book *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*.³

One cannot read the paper or watch the news these days and not be alarmed by the polarization of nearly every segment of society. Nowhere is this more painful than in the church’s implosion over cultural issues and the sad tensions among Christians, Muslims, and Jews on a national and international level. We who believe that we have much to offer the world must find a way to reject the battle to occupy the ground on the right or the left and instead seek to occupy the higher ground. In light of our current battles, fears, and accusations, it is poignant and disturbing to read Isaiah’s message: “*Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists*” (v. 4). An Ash Wednesday call to a new kind of fasting oriented to “repairing the breach” of our differences could carry a powerful challenge that would make Isaiah’s 2,500-year-old prophetic voice keenly relevant.

Whatever one chooses as a Lenten discipline, the message of Isaiah 58 can help bring a new orientation to that discipline. How might one turn the casual cultural concept of “giving up something for Lent” into a meaningful act of devotion? How might one redefine fasting, or perhaps “detoxification,” to have more relevance to the things that pollute our relationship to God, rather than just the things that pollute our bodies? These are questions worthy of Ash Wednesday and a journey through the season of Lent.

NICK CARTER

3. O. Rose et al., eds., *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008).

Psalm 51:1-17

- ¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴Against 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.
- ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁶You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 51 provides a distinctive opportunity for confession and reflection upon Christian notions of sin in our current social context, as well as in the liturgical setting of Ash Wednesday. In liturgies and songs used in contemporary worship, Psalm 51 is primarily viewed as a commentary on one's individual sin and serves as encouragement for worshipers to turn inward to repent and seek reconciliation with God. The history of theological interpretation underscores the context of the passage as a reflection upon David's sin against Bathsheba. Using the story of David and Bathsheba as a lens for interpreting this text, readers are invited to consider the meaning of familiar phrases in this psalm such as "create in me a clean heart" and "restore to me the joy of your salvation" in the context of personal devotion and as these words relate to a larger community.

John Calvin read literally the superscription to Psalm 51 that attributed the psalm to David after "he had gone in to Bathsheba." Calvin viewed the psalm as David's expression of guilt for lusting after Bathsheba and believed that David would have seen the psalm as proof of his own repentance. David's sinful actions caused him a great deal of angst and contributed to the sincerity of his prayer. Although Calvin's commentary on the psalm set it in the

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 51 has been described as a "lament" and is considered the most famous of the seven Penitential Psalms. Words from this psalm are well known to those who attend Christian churches or synagogues. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me," the psalmist prays. "Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me." These are words of a personal or communal petition to God that through divine love and mercy a new heart may be created in us that is clean and pure; that God will put a right spirit in us that will bring about a close, intimate relationship with the God who loves us and whom we love. We may even express this petition as "a desire to live directly out of God's vibrant presence."¹

As we prayerfully consider Psalm 51, we learn that much more is offered to us in this psalm than just a way to "lament" our sins and petition for forgiveness. Psalm 51 offers us insight into a way to deepen and enhance our relationship with God. We may use this psalm as a portal for us to practice honest and courageous introspection and conversation with God. We can be guided to meaningful self-reflection, forgiveness, cleansing,

1. Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to Awareness of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987, 1995), 45.

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

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Exegetical Perspective

This psalm, justly treasured as a profound expression of the need for God's forgiveness, is an apt text to initiate a season of repentance. It is often associated with the Christian tradition's other Penitential Psalms (Pss. 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143). Scholars differ over the precise category to assign it to, but many see it as a variation on an individual lament. The psalm title tries to locate the composition as David's response to Nathan's courageous confrontation with him over the injustice he committed against Uriah in order to take Bathsheba as his wife (2 Sam. 12). Perhaps this association came about to underscore the idea that all mortals, even a powerful and beloved king, stand in need of profound repentance.

In composition, the psalm falls into three distinct sections, verses 1–9, 10–14, and 15–19. The first section opens with a classic chiasmic form asking for forgiveness based on God's qualities of steadfast love and abundant mercy, qualities that Israel attributes as core aspects of the divine character (see Exod. 34:6–7). With verse 3, the psalmist initiates an unequivocal confession. He acknowledges that the sin remains an issue until it is cleared away and that he has acted against God's standards (v. 4a). The psalmist acknowledges the justice of God's judgment against him and holds God "blameless" in the matter

Homiletical Perspective

It would be hard to imagine a psalm better suited for Ash Wednesday. Psalm 51 has poetry, honesty, and of course searing confession, confession of the type that must hit God right between the eyes. The psalmist's words admit fault, desire new direction, and seek relationship, all at the same time. It is a preaching treasure, especially if the preacher is willing to be brutally honest with his or her own spiritual condition when preparing and delivering the sermon.

There is a struggling Kansas City church that sits at an inner-city intersection facing three small businesses. On one corner is a car wash, on another a dry cleaning outfit, and on the third a drug addiction treatment center. The pastor used to say, "This is the one intersection in town where people come to get really clean. You can get your car cleaned, your clothes cleaned, and your body cleaned. Here at St. Mark, we offer a cleaning of the soul."

Psalm 51 was spoken, sung, and later penned by someone who understood the cleaning industry. Look at the verbs: wash, cleanse, wipe, purge, blot. They all speak to something that is very dirty or really deep, or both. *Sin* would be that dirty and deep grime that needs to be treated. What better day than the liturgical observance of Ash Wednesday to gain fresh insight on this age-old condition called sin?

Psalm 51:1-17

Theological Perspective

context of David's sin against Bathsheba, Calvin made no specific mention of the impact of David's actions upon Bathsheba herself. Instead, Calvin emphasized the wrong that David inflicted upon Uriah and especially God. Calvin thought that David's prayer served as a model for confession and for seeking reconciliation with God.

Verse 5, "Indeed, I was born guilty . . ." also showed the way that a particular sin invited David to reflect on his nature as a human being. According to Calvin, David realized that "he brought nothing but sin with him into the world, and . . . his nature was entirely depraved."¹ In his interpretation of this verse, Calvin aimed to set himself apart from Christians (particularly Pelagians) who believed that they themselves could right wrongful behavior because sin "descended from Adam only through force of imitation."² Calvin believed that only God could offer the mercy, loving-kindness, and compassion necessary to overcome the gap created between God and others by human sinfulness.

The idea that God's grace is most clearly understood in contrast to human sin is a theme that continues to define much of Reformed understandings of sin. Reinhold Niebuhr argued, along similar lines, that God's grace not only represented God's mercy and forgiveness but also encompassed the sinful elements that human beings could not overcome.³

Today biblical scholars think that Psalm 51 is more likely to have been added to the psalter by editors wanting to invite readers to hear it against the background of the story of David and Bathsheba, the murder of Bathsheba's husband Uriah, and the confrontation between Nathan and David. When reading 2 Samuel 11, one cannot miss the issues of power and authority present within the story of David and Bathsheba. The text says that David "lay with her" (2 Sam. 11:4), but those words do not convey the significance of a king's authority and the violence perpetrated against Bathsheba. Bathsheba clearly had no choice but to do as she was told. If we are to take seriously the biblical context in which we read and hear the words of Psalm 51, then additional questions about sin and God's grace must also be raised regarding this passage. Who is the audience for this psalm? Is it all those who sin? Or is this the

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 2:290.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943; reprint 1963), 98.

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and comfort in God's presence, and to increased trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit. This psalm thus provides us with a fulfilling way to experience Ash Wednesday and Lent.

We begin the Ash Wednesday experience by being willing to be honest with ourselves about who we are, about our relationship with ourselves, and about our relationship with God. We may not be able to come to this honest self-knowledge instantly, however. We seek God's assistance in taking this careful approach to self-examination.

In the Hebrew Bible, King David offers us an example of someone who was not yet ready or able to be honest about his own behavior and relationship with God. God's love and compassion gradually brought David to a more accurate self-knowledge. God worked with David for a period of time to soften David's heart and open his eyes to the impact of his selfish and sinful behavior. God sent Nathan the prophet to tell David a parable (2 Sam. 12:1-14). David was astounded by the selfishness and sin of the rich man in the parable and was appalled when Nathan helped him understand that the rich man was none other than David himself. In this way, David gained a new awareness of himself and his deeds, realizing that his behavior had not only harmed others but had displeased God and damaged his relationship with God. Only then was David able to ask forgiveness and establish a right relationship with God.

God's interaction with us (like God's dealing with David) is based on God's love, compassion, and mercy toward us. A loving relationship between God and us is initiated and sustained by God. We can be active in the process of deepening our relationship with God by responding to God's loving care and call. When we experience the great joy of a "right" relationship with God, we have the energy and motivation to contribute to the maturing and deepening of that relationship.

Ash Wednesday and Lent take us beyond a lament for wrongdoing and a petition for God's forgiveness. We know that God can and has forgiven us for past failures, but part of God's promise to us is that God will "blot out" our transgressions. God is willing to focus, not on our past mistakes, but on our desire for a new heart, our desire to live out of God's vibrant presence. With new hearts we will not only experience God's forgiveness, but we will be able to forgive ourselves as well.

During Ash Wednesday and Lent we renew our covenant with God. This includes our honest self-

Exegetical Perspective

(v. 4b). He concludes by reflecting on his entanglement in transgression. The Hebrew here is far clearer than rendered by the NRSV: “Indeed, *in guilt* I was born, *in sin* my mother conceived me” (v. 5). The point is not the sinfulness of being born or conceived, but that, from the very moment of his coming into existence, the psalmist found himself ensnared in transgression. He cannot extricate himself from his failing before God.

Verse 6 shifts the focus of the writer from self-examination to acknowledgment of God’s interest in his deepest nature. While the precise wording is difficult to translate, the general sense is clear: “Indeed, you take pleasure in truth that is deep; and by hidden wisdom you inform me.” God’s wisdom takes into consideration hidden, deep things (see Job 28 and the discourse on wisdom hidden in the depths) and so knows the remorse of the sinner and the desire for transformation. The psalmist continues with a series of statements rooted in the idea of God acting to remove the stain of sin. The “hyssop” of verse 7 is more likely marjoram, since the common hyssop is not native to Palestine. Branches of this plant were used in several rites where the worshiper would be sprinkled with a liquid (Num. 19:18) to signify cleansing. The writer implores God for restoration by asking to hear “joy and gladness” again (v. 8a). “Bones you have crushed” is a poetic expression for the sense of feeling the impact of judgment in one’s physical self. The author appeals that God turn away from seeing his transgressions (v. 9a) and remove their impact (v. 9b). The focus is on God’s gracious actions in undoing what the penitent cannot undo on his own.

The second section (vv. 10–14) begins with a series of desperate requests, acknowledging that only God can bring about the transformation of the penitent. The call for a “clean heart” (v. 10a) is a call for the center of perception to be remade over, and connecting it with new spirit echoes the renewal of the nation foreseen following the exile (see Ezek. 36:25–26). In this section, the psalmist seems to be taking the promises of restoration for the postexilic community as a whole and applying these promises to his personal situation. He continues by asking that God not reject him (v. 11a) but continue to allow his presence to afford comfort and sustenance (v. 11b); thus he may be restored to joy in divine service and obedience (v. 12). Once such a transformation is complete, the author indicates his sharing of his experience will bring others who have strayed back into obedience to God (v. 13). To underscore his

Homiletical Perspective

A quick overview of contemporary culture reveals two mistakes that affect a helpful understanding of sin. Our interpretative missteps are so commonly spoken and so completely at odds with Scripture that we might speak of them as crises. First, delighting in the deliciousness of other peoples’ sins occupies much of our attention. Such a focus conveniently removes the heat that would come naturally from facing up to our own sin. We all know how easy it is to talk down at those who live some “low life,” ignoring our close kinship with them as like types who are also “by nature sinful and unclean.”

Second, we usually look at sin as primarily external in character. It is the eating of chocolate during Lent, the cursing of another motorist who cannot merge, or the bad habit of having one drink too many. According to Scripture, sin is much more internal than external in nature. God calls sin adultery of the heart. Jesus wants us to think more about what comes out of our mouths than what goes into them. One day he spoke in this way to suggest that what we utter arises from what we think and what we want. Sin is thus an internal problem. If we think in terms of cause and effect, we might say that *sin* is the cause and *sins* are the effect. Paul speaks of sin as a condition that underlies much of our inexplicable behavior (“I do not do what I want,” he wrote one time, “but I do the very thing I hate” [Rom. 7:15]).

Those who preach Psalm 51 have the responsibility of addressing this twofold crisis. Neither the tendency to zero in on the sins of others, nor the practice of thinking about sin as mostly external, is beyond correction. People have the capacity to understand their own lives as encompassing more than mistakes, missteps, and confusion. They need to discover the language of sin. What better place to learn this language than in the church? Here they may find that sin cannot be trivialized in quite the same manner that mistakes or errors can. As for the hope of encouraging the faithful to look inward at sin instead of outward, this too can make for fruitful ministry. Think of it in this way: Most people have a basic understanding of the computer world. If they have a rudimentary comprehension of software, and the invisible way it works magic through the hardware, or of viruses, and the insidious way they instantly destroy a hard drive, these same people have a good chance of understanding how sin originates as an internal condition of our lives.

The psalmist illuminates such matters by speaking confessionally. First-person pronouns

Psalm 51:1-17

Theological Perspective

prayer of the powerful and privileged—those who abuse? What would this psalm sound like if it were rewritten from Bathsheba’s perspective? Would God’s grace and mercy be understood differently from the perspective of other characters in the story, such as Bathsheba and Uriah, who were most affected by David’s violent actions?

One difficulty in the passage is that the psalm itself also seems to be silent with regard to Bathsheba’s perspective. Both approaches to the text—considering the psalm as David’s own reflections and taking the more contemporary view that the psalm was added by editors to express the way the community of faith wrestled with David’s action—invite readers to think about sin and forgiveness in a larger communal setting. Verse 12, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation,” speaks clearly about the importance of restoration. In the Hebrew Bible and also in later Christian tradition, restoration refers not only to the way that God acts but also to the human response to God’s grace and mercy.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. The Lenten season invites us into reflection about our own individual and communal wrongdoings and leads us toward transformation. Psalm 51 is a rich resource for reflection that will deepen our own understanding of the ways we live in collusion with social systems that marginalize and oppress ourselves and others. We are living in a world that encourages us to consider individual desires first, even when satisfying those individual desires and needs comes at the expense of others. Evidence of this is seen in the way that decisions about human well-being are made on the basis of economic motives. In movies and other media, relationships are too often portrayed as the means to secure one’s own well-being, with little thought of others’ worth. Our bodies are turned into commodities and used by advertisers to lure us to buy consumer goods. Sexuality continues to be seen as the means to dominate others and for individual fulfillment, rather than as a significant part of relationships.

Traditionally, Christians observe Ash Wednesday with a service where ashes are used to mark a sign of the cross on each worshiper’s forehead. When we pray this psalm on Ash Wednesday, we are marking the beginning of our commitment to find ways to participate in the restoration of relationships.

ELIZABETH L. HINSON-HASTY

Pastoral Perspective

assessment and disclosure to God; the experience of God’s love, compassion, and forgiveness; the practice of forgiving ourselves (and others); a renewed effort to live in the awareness of God’s presence; the restoration of a right spirit within us; the assurance of the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit; and the joy of salvation.

- Psalm 51 describes a process of spiritual formation and deepening through actions like these:
- Seeing ourselves as we are, as God sees us
 - Focusing on our relationship with God by being aware of God’s loving and living presence
 - Admitting to God (and others, if necessary) where we have fallen short in our behavior and response to God’s love and care
 - Being aware of God’s steadfast love and abundant mercy available at all times
 - Believing that God can cleanse us, create a new heart within us, and deepen the loving relationship between God and ourselves
 - Knowing that God desires a relationship of truth and love and works with us continually to develop a relationship with those qualities
 - Experiencing the Holy Spirit of God within us that is continually working to develop a “right” spirit
 - Valuing and cherishing this deepening relationship with God
 - Trusting that God is willing not only to forgive us but also to “blot out” our iniquities
 - Realizing how essential this loving relationship with God is to our joy and fulfillment in life
 - Being willing and available to partner with God to assist, guide, and mentor others in their relationships with God
 - Relying on God to open our lips appropriately to sing God’s praise

On Ash Wednesday we should be aware of and sorry for our failings, our missing God’s hopes and prayers for our lives. We should also be confident in God’s love, compassion, and mercy for us and in God’s continued remarkable action in this world. Beginning today, we move toward a unique forty-day journey with Jesus and have the opportunity to fall more deeply in love with Love.

KATHERINE E. AMOS

Exegetical Perspective

desire to share his experience, the psalmist implores God to deliver him from “bloodguilt” or “bloodshed” (v. 14), a term often associated with a very significant transgression of God’s moral order (see Ezek. 9:9). This may be functioning as a rhetorical overstatement to dramatize the serious consequences that the author sees resulting from his transgression. The motive for God’s acting to absolve the psalmist is that then the writer could respond by reporting to all who care to hear the gracious actions of God, an idea repeated in verse 15, once God has opened the penitent’s lips.

In the third section (vv. 15–19) the writer summarizes his confidence in God’s desire to forgive. He notes that the externals of offering a sacrifice for forgiveness are not what God truly desires (v. 16). Rather, what God is concerned with is the interior state of the penitent (v. 17). The expression at the beginning of verse 17 may well be a superlative and rendered as “Exceptional sacrifices are a broken spirit,” the term “God” sometimes employed to express the superlative (see Jonah 1:3). The second clause uses two adjectives to describe the interior state of the penitent: “a broken and crushed heart, O God, you will not despise.” The same verb for “broken” is employed in both 17a and 17b, and is used in circumstances of abject humility (Ps. 38:8). The psalmist is emphasizing that God’s truest concern is with the inadequacy the penitent feels in light of God’s overwhelming grace, and that God would never reject an approach out of such an overwhelming sense of brokenness and need.

The lectionary leaves off the conclusion of the canonical form of the psalm in verses 18–19. This portion seems to express a view contrary to the overall thrust of the psalm, namely, that God will be pleased by proper sacrifices, so many take verses 18–19 as an addition to this psalm intended to reaffirm the central role of the temple in the Second Temple period.

KENNETH G. HOGLUND

Homiletical Perspective

surround his language of washing and cleansing. Read Psalm 51 aloud, and you will not be fooled into believing that sin is merely some ugliness lodged in other people. No, this psalmist is committed to dealing impartially with himself. He does not avoid guilt. He treats sin as something more than surface grime—“Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (v. 5). There is a deep consciousness of personal responsibility for the havoc his own sin wreaks, making his pleas for divine mercy all the more poignant.

There are two other homiletical possibilities. A preacher might devote some energy to the psalmist’s line, “Blot out all my iniquities.” People understand the concepts of equilibrium and disequilibrium. Anyone who has suffered a raging ear infection knows the imbalance that comes when an ear is out of sorts. A body in disequilibrium is a body that cannot stand up straight under its own power. A spiritual life in similar imbalance struggles in its own way. *Iniquity*, like *inequity*, has to do with unevenness or imbalance, a perfect theme for Ash Wednesday preaching.

The other line worth attending to is the poetic verse: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” Someone once said that sin lacks creativity and has a monotonous quality to it. According to this understanding, sins are mostly reruns of one another—“the same old, same old.” If this is true, then it stands to reason that the only way out of this hamster wheel of reruns is to receive a gift from the outside—some gift that the Lord alone can fashion. Call it grace that is new every morning, if you want. Just be aware that it is a creation of God, and exactly what we need. In fact, it is perfect for cleaning up something as dirty as sin.

PETER W. MARTY

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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

^{6:1}As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For 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! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Theological Perspective

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a season of spiritual introspection. At least four groups for whom a pastor has concern can be addressed by this text: (1) congregations, like the one at Corinth, and possibly the pastor’s own; (2) individuals, like Paul, reflecting on personal relationships; (3) pastors, like Paul, thinking about ministry; and (4) global Christianity, puzzling over religiously fueled violence and divisive divisions.

In our text each group is asked to examine itself. The congregation is charged to explore its unity as the body of Christ. Individual parishioners are to ask if the reconciling grace of God that has encountered them is having a positive effect. Or have they received grace in vain? Pastors listing Paul as an apostolic model of ministry are to assess their attitudes and attune themselves to the work of reconciliation. Finally, the congregation must receive the imperative to be reconcilers in the divided world beyond the church. The theological motifs of the passage are crucial for Christian anthropology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

The Corinthian church is a microcosm of much of the modern church—urban, educated, diverse, and beset by numerous ethical and theological issues. Moreover, this church vacillates between the conflicting authorities of competing voices. In particular, they have found themselves divided over

Pastoral Perspective

Ashes on your forehead is one of the most powerful markings you may ever wear. College students tell me that Ash Wednesday is the one day of the year when they talk to strangers about their faith. People approach them after class, point to the ash crosses on their foreheads, and ask, “What’s up with that?”

You remember the nursery rhyme: “Ring around the rosie, Pocketful of posies, Ashes, ashes, We all fall down.” Strange things happen when we publicly acknowledge our mortality. It can open up conversations that might not otherwise take place. Naming mortality in a community is a way of falling down together so we can be pulled up together by the grace of God.

Paul is wearing his ashes in 2 Corinthians 6. As he summons the Corinthians to live faithfully, he shows his mortality and his vulnerability as a disciple. He has endured beatings, imprisonment, sleepless nights, hunger, and other hardships. His ashes are showing. At first glance, these ashes are not a great sales pitch for Christianity. Yet Paul is writing to his beloved Corinthians, whose neighbors are calling them impostors and who need a dose of encouragement in their new faith.

Paul’s example of faithful living can be daunting. As a model Christian, he leaves the rest of us lurking in his shadow, struggling to live up to his standards.

Exegetical Perspective

Selected for the ringing summons to reconciliation with God (6:1–2) and the formulaic celebration of righteousness bestowed in Christ’s death for sinners (5:21), this passage sets an important theological tone for Lent. The penitential season is not a lapse into “holiness boot camp,” as though human beings make themselves righteous before God. Lent asks us to open our hearts to the grace of God.

A closer look at the reading in its context uncovers a more personal dimension to Paul’s rhetorical highlights. Paul describes himself as God’s ambassador, appealing to the audience for reconciliation (5:20a). The verses that follow this text (6:11–12) indicate the personal nature of this appeal. Paul hopes for a restoration of his badly frayed relationships with Christians in Corinth. Consequently, the main section of this reading (6:3–10) describes Paul’s ministry in response to criticism by others (vv. 3, 8). This catalog is limited to immediate personal affronts, however. Paul sees the paradoxes of his apostolic ministry as appropriate to the message he preaches. He returns to this theme of the hardships that authenticate him as a minister of Christ when dealing with apostolic interlopers in 11:23–30.

Paul’s opening appeal (5:20b) reminds readers that the stakes are not personal. As ambassador, Paul speaks for Christ. The formula in 5:21, “made him to

Homiletical Perspective

Ash Wednesday is a day for honest reckoning with human frailty, sinfulness, and the hope of reconciliation embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This day begins the forty-day preparation for the paschal mystery of Christian redemption. Ash Wednesday confronts the gathered community with the uncertainty and difficulties of human life. For those who are marked with the ancient sign of ashes, the phrase “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” is the somber refrain that scores the entire service. The worship leader who is faithful to the solemnity of this day in the Christian year will keep the liturgy of Ash Wednesday in a minor key. The major chord of resurrection will come, but to hear the song of eternity, one must first have ears tuned to the reality of human brokenness and finitude.

Whether or not the worshiping congregation is marked with real ashes, ashes constitute the guiding image for the liturgy and proclamation on this day. This being said, one way to approach this reading from 2 Corinthians—and all the readings on Ash Wednesday—would be to surround the Scripture with *extended silence*. There is power added to what any preacher can proclaim on this day in the exercise of quietly and prayerfully hearing the biblical words with an invitation to self-examination. Words are

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Theological Perspective

which voices they will hear (1 Cor. 1–4). As 2 Corinthians demonstrates, they have not respected Paul's preaching and presence, thereby wounding him and depreciating his pastoral authority.

In response, the wounded apostle seeks to be a healer for this troubled congregation.¹ Paul appeals to the Corinthians to remember that they have received God's grace (5:18–19), that they have been forgiven of their sins (5:19), that they are now reconciled to God and one another (5:19), and therefore, with Paul, they are to act as God's representatives and witnesses (5:20). He fears that the factions that divide them and their ongoing rift with Paul make their graced state fruitless, in that they may have received that grace "in vain" (6:1). The congregation's task, therefore, is to rekindle a reconciling attitude with regard to one another, and to embrace Paul's ministry among them.

Good faith bears good relationships and good works. Thus, after thoroughly chastising the Corinthians in earlier chapters, Paul appeals to them to allow God to heal their brokenness and mend their tattered unity so that they can become the body of Christ. Forgiveness is a key theological concept in this passage. Paul reminds the Corinthians that their sins are forgiven; they are restored as a "new humanity" (5:17). They now must end their fruitless bickering by forgiving one another and seeking reconciliation with grace and not with haughtiness—including reconciliation with Paul. Being "at one with God" among themselves and with their pastor must begin "Now!" (6:2b), so that their salvation might be embodied and not useless and empty.

God has sought to reconcile not only congregations, but individual believers. God offers forgiveness to each person. Each is to become one with God and God's mission and serve as an ambassador who speaks of reconciliation and who is a reconciler. Indeed, as leaven in the loaf, the graced behavior of one can have an exponential effect on the whole. A widow's offering, an unsolicited helping hand in a crisis, a parent's forgiveness of an incorrigible child, are all images of reconciliation and peace. Small acts can result in big consequences. When Telemachus leaped into the arena in Rome as a living protest against the gladiatorial carnage, he was promptly run through with a sword and died. His one act was credited with the beginning of the end of these savage games. So, also, a humbled and repentant person can be a transforming representative of God's grace.

1. A direct allusion to Henri Nouwen's notion of the wounded healer.

Pastoral Perspective

Paul's list of trials may not resonate with everyone in the pews. The most pressing problems in our lives may seem insignificant compared to the trials on Paul's list. Yet we bump into reminders of our mortality every day, and they rub off on us. We are marked by mortality, though we may prefer not to look. Even if a particular church does not practice the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, it is possible for a congregation to consider the ways that Christians metaphorically wear ashes—signs of our mortality—as we begin this holy season of Lent.

Consider those struggling with alcoholism, whose families are hoping someone will see the ashes on their foreheads and answer their cries for help. A few in our congregations may be literally imprisoned as Paul was, but many of us are imprisoned by consumerism or greed. To acknowledge this imprisonment is to name our mortality: we cannot take all those possessions with us, no matter how tightly we hold them. Some in the pews are wearing the ashes of frustration or exhaustion as they labor for justice but cannot see the fruits of these labors on the horizon. To accept mortality is to accept humanity. "Ashes, ashes, We all fall down."

Unfortunately, some in our congregations and communities do literally suffer beatings, imprisonment, or hunger. How can we lift up Paul's encouragement without validating domestic violence or famine in any way? How can we name our mortality without glorifying suffering? Christ modeled this balance for us. Christ was aware that he would suffer and die, yet he spent his days on earth fasting, praying, healing, giving—and encouraging others humbly to do the same. He did not glorify suffering, but worked to alleviate the world's suffering, while also laying down his own life for others.

Paul has been marked by his brushes with mortality too. Yet he knows the ashes are not the end of the story. A few verses earlier, he declares to the Corinthians that because they are in Christ, they are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). How can a new creation already be smeared with ashes? Paul's litany in 6:8b–10 names paradox as central to a life of faith. We are poor yet lavishly rich. We are struggling yet rejoicing. We wear our mortality on our foreheads yet trust the promise of eternal life.

Just when we think all of the glory has to wait until we reach heaven, heaven breaks in: "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2). Paul's pep talk to the Corinthians includes a rearrangement of our assumptions about time. As Nathan Mitchell argues about the concept of time in

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be sin . . . that . . . we might become the righteousness of God,” employs patterns found elsewhere in Paul (Gal. 3:13–14; Rom. 8:3–4). By taking the place of sinful humanity (on the cross), Christ made it possible for sinners to stand as righteous before God. Traditionally, the phrase “made sin” has been interpreted in two ways. Some, following Latin patristic writers, treat it as shorthand for “sin offering,” a cultic action (so Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 5:7). The alternative is closer to Paul’s view in Romans 8:3–4. It implies that Christ suffers as though he were sinner. As obedient Son of God, he would not be subject to death as punishment for sin (Rom. 5:12; 6:23), had he not chosen to die in place of the sinner.

What is the relationship between the “righteousness of God” bestowed through this exchange and the reconciliation with God in verse 20? Some see the former as a variation of Paul’s customary righteousness language to accommodate the specific needs of the moment, the reconciliation between the Corinthians and the apostle. Most interpreters opt for some distinction between the two. Reconciliation picks up on the sinner’s estrangement from God. Righteousness reflects the goal of the process of salvation, standing before God as new creation (5:17). As believers, Paul’s audience have received that grace of being righteous before God. Yet he warns that such faith could be “in vain” (6:1). Paul then quotes Isaiah 49:8 (LXX), reminding his audience that God has already extended salvation to them (6:2). The unstated rhetorical conclusion is that they should respond in kind.

Verse 3 marks a sharp turn back to the real problems faced by Paul and his associates. He insists that their conduct has been irreproachable (vv. 3–4a). When Paul follows that claim with self-commendation (v. 4a), he is venturing into rhetorically dangerous territory. Boasting could be construed as arrogance, a charge that he will later (in 2 Cor. 10:12–18) make against “false apostles” and their claims to be superior to Paul’s apostolic presence. Paul has set up the self-commendation of verse 4 in 5:12. Everyone should answer to God for what is in the heart, as Paul does. Since there are some who criticize the apostle, and those who trust in the gospel he preaches on the basis of externals, this self-recommendation is to provide his audience with a way to answer back.

Having brought the audience over to his side so that they might even count themselves coworkers with Paul and God (6:1), Paul then describes the apostolic life in a catalog of hardships endured (vv. 4c–5);

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not always an improvement on silence, and on this day of all days in the liturgical year, a fast from excessive explanation and rhetorical flourish is the feast that is most appropriate.

If a brief sermon is to be offered on this day based on 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10, then two themes are immediately apparent: the *urgency* of the call to accept the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ and the *inherent cost* in worldly terms of following the call of Christ.

Echoing Joel’s call for the people of Israel to return to the Lord and quoting from the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 49:8), Paul cries out, “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” Part of Paul’s proclamation is that our time on earth is limited; our lives are finite. We do not have forever to live into the grace that comes our way through Jesus Christ. Paul wants the church at Corinth to see the sand falling through the hourglass. Paul wants us all to hear the pressing importance symbolized in the imposition of ashes. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* Now, not later, is the day to accept and respond to the reconciliation that comes through Jesus Christ! This day, not tomorrow, is the time to embrace the grace that fills the finitude of our earthly lives with eternity! Now, right now, the trumpet blows calling us to return to the Lord!

The preacher does not have to share Paul’s sense of the imminence of Christ’s return to preach about the importance of turning to God’s reconciliation in Christ soon and very soon. Death is an obvious reality for each of us. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* Everyone, young and old, needs to be reminded that time can be wasted and grace accepted in vain. There is a depth of purpose and a source of joy available in Christ that makes the living of our days rich and alive, but the allure of worldly wealth, security, power, and prestige can turn our eyes from the “treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:20).

Paul also wants the Corinthians to take note that things are not always as they seem. Paul wants to make it clear that to look at his ministry and see hardship and earthly failure does not mean that the message of reconciliation in Christ is untrue or unrealized. A ministry beset with “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (vv. 4b–5) does not necessarily mean that the ministry is failing or the message is false. In fact, such difficulties may give evidence of the commitment of the messengers to be

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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Not only does Paul address congregations and individual believers; he models reconciling love with humble boldness that can be both breathtaking and dangerous. In homiletics many of us were taught that confessional preaching in which we use ourselves as illustrations or models smacks of self-serving egoism. *Preacher, you are not the subject of the message. You are merely a bearer of the Word. You are a vehicle of the message.* In this passage and many others, however, Paul exudes an incarnational theology that is rooted in his life experiences.² Here he rehearses the suffering that he has endured from Jerusalem to Caesarea to Crete; then, at Galatia; in the synagogues where he introduced Jesus as the Christ; and more recently at the hands of the Corinthian church.

As the theologian does so often when narrative reaches its limits, Paul becomes an emotive theologian in a cascade of antitheses, and even paradoxes (6:3–10). Like Hosea, he will not renounce his love of the Corinthians to whom he is God's representative. Not because of them, but in spite of them, and because of his own experience of being reconciled to God, he bids them join him in the work of reconciliation. What a bold and graceful challenge, especially to pastors who have so often been unjustly maligned and suffered silently, not only in the vicissitudes that life brings, but, sadly, at the hands of Christian brothers and sisters. In many respects our ministry can be measured by how we act in times of human brokenness that is attended by destructive behaviors. Surely we are, as God's representatives, "healers." Paul's fighting words resonate to the cowed pastor: "with the weapons of righteousness [I am armed]" (6:7) to endure, though buffeted about by "afflictions, hardships, calamities, etc." (6:4).

Finally, beyond the congregation, the individual, and the pastor, Paul's wisdom leads us to consider Ash Wednesday for global Christianity. The scandal of schisms among Christians across the world deserves an ashen attention. Moreover, violent action in the name of God begets cycles of endless violence. During Lent we need to include the "big picture" of global brokenness. As those who have been turned from enemies to friends by God's grace, we must embrace the peoples of the earth in our vision of reconciliation. This is implied in Paul's call for us to be ambassadors, and it is the eschatological hope of all that Jesus taught about the kingdom of God.

DONALD W. MUSSER

2. James William McClendon, among others, has argued that all theology is autobiography.

Pastoral Perspective

liturgy, "Time is defined by meaning instead of its duration."¹ For Paul, the time for reconciliation to God is today and every day we wake up to stumble through life. Through this reconciliation, God has promised salvation.

In this reality of rearranged time, how are we to live? Paul connects reconciliation to God with living an honorable life. You are forgiven, but what difference does it make in how you live? You are persevering by the grace of God, but how will others know? Paul suggests that our journeys will be marked by struggle, but also by our striving for purity, knowledge, patience, and kindness (6:4–6). Every time we fall short, we are met with an Ash Wednesday moment, when we say yes, both to the ashes and to the promise of God's grace and forgiveness.

Confessing our sins is a central part of Ash Wednesday worship. On this day we practice wearing our ashes by naming our sins before God and one another. Paul's list of honorable qualities in 6:6–7 can remind us how it looks to live as people reconciled to God. It can also remind us of how far we still have to go. His refrain of hope in 6:8b–10 is our assurance that running this race is not in vain.

How will you wear your ashes today? How will you lead your congregation in confessing their sins and naming their mortality? If today is the day of salvation (6:2), then what better time to wear our ashes, showing the world that we are mortal, yet reconciled with God?

CALLISTA S. ISABELLE

1. Nathan D. Mitchell, "From Liturgical Text to Tablature: Telling It Slant," paper presented at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music Kavanagh Lecture, New Haven, CT, October 9, 2007.

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virtues exhibited (vv. 6–7); indifference to what others say (v. 8a); and paradoxes of apparent weaknesses that result in the greatest good (vv. 8b–10). The initial list of hardships endured corresponds to situations that Paul faced in spreading the gospel. Some were caused by the hostile reaction of others or by natural disasters. Others, such as working at a trade and possibly suffering both hunger and lack of sleep, were Paul’s strategy. He could offer the gospel “for free,” not commanding the wages of popular orators or philosophers in his day (1 Cor. 9:3–18).

The opening set of virtues in verse 6 appears to contain more general attributes of the Christian life that are signs of living according to the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22). The turn toward “power of God” and the military image “weapons of righteousness” (v. 7) return to the sense of apostolic ministry as struggle. Paul later speaks as though he were a general besieging a city (10:4–5). Both the weapons and the victory in promoting the gospel belong entirely to God.

Paul had been accused of inconsistency after a disastrous visit and cancellation of another visit to Corinth (1:15–2:4). Here he insists that he does not change his behavior to suit what people are saying (v. 8a). The catalog of paradoxes (vv. 8b–10) supports his claim. Each negative represents an outsider’s view of the apostle. Most connect with hardships such as imprisonment, beatings, laboring, going hungry and without sleep. The apostle has nothing that would confer honor in the sense of social standing or importance. Yet for each negative, there is a positive outcome. It is, as he argued earlier, the near-death character of the apostle’s life that enables life-giving faith (4:7–12).

Paul invites listeners to stand with him in recognizing the true foundation of his apostleship in the power of God. Does he succeed? If 2 Corinthians 10–13 came later, Paul would go over much of this ground again when outside “superapostles” used his weaknesses as marks of dishonor.

PHEME PERKINS

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ambassadors for Christ in season and out of season, in good times and bad times, in ill repute and good repute. To turn back from proclaiming God’s reconciliation because of obstacles on the journey would be to doubt the work of God in Jesus Christ. Paul reminds the church at Corinth that he and others continue in the hard times with “purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God” (vv. 6–7a).

Ash Wednesday calls us to face the harsh realities inherent in living in the finite world while committed to eternal things. The truthfulness of reconciliation in Christ is deeper and far more important than any worldly signs of power, prestige, or place.

A sermon on this passage might remind a Christian community that the call of Christ is to faithfulness, not to earthly success. To borrow other language from Paul, Ash Wednesday is a time to take stock in our foolishness for Christ. Are we willing to go where the Spirit of Christ leads us, even when that leading might be down the difficult road of reconciliation? Are we willing to give up the trappings of high station in order to be messengers of grace and eternal treasures? Can we come to a place of understanding that in Christ we possess everything, even as we have nothing of material value? In this world we are dust, and to dust we shall return; so can we place our trust in the One who brought to our dusty world the salvation of God?

ROBERT W. PRIM

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so 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. ⁶But whenever

Theological Perspective

In the Canadian movie *Jesus of Montreal* (1989), actor Lothaire Bluteau plays an actor named Daniel who, in turn, portrays Jesus in a revamped version of the passion play. The enlivened telling of the life of Jesus raises the concern of the local Catholic authorities, including the cathedral priest who commissioned the work. They are all worried about the potential questions raised by the not-entirely orthodox text of the script when, in fact, the lives of the actors participating in the production are being transformed, taking on the concerns and traits of their respective characters. Likewise, members of the audience are being transformed by their encounter with the particular and authentic performance of Jesus’ life and ministry, death, and resurrection. How poignant, then, is Daniel’s proclamation as Jesus during a performance of the play when the disgruntled and self-righteous Catholic dignitaries are in attendance: “Beware of priests who desire to walk in long robes and love greetings in the markets, the highest seats in temples, the best rooms at feasts, who devour widows’ houses, pretending prayer. They shall receive a greater damnation.”¹

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“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.” This principle of doing acts of piety without concern for being seen flies in the face of many subtle and not too subtle temptations shaped by social pressures. Our postmodern culture is characterized by image and style while being distinguished by the drive of marketing, television, and other media into our lives.¹ In a culture that values size and “success,” there are ample examples of megaministries that are adept at marketing their ministries and are the apparent “winners” in the “religious marketplace.”

Ministers may be tempted to imitate well-known ministerial entrepreneurs who transform their spiritual gifts into salable commodities for mass consumption.² In this context of competition for souls, I was once struck by the remark of a pastor who said to a group of ministers, “Presentation often matters more than substance.” All of us living in a culture where “perception is reality” need to beware of the temptation toward preoccupation with bolstering our image simply to make a good

1. *Jesus of Montreal* script: http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/j/jesus-of-montreal-script-transcript.html (retrieved August 31, 2008).

1. Shayne Lee, *T. D. Jakes, America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 4–5.

2. *Ibid.*, vii.

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

Today’s Gospel reading comes from the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. It addresses the focus of Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent that it inaugurates, by naming the disciplines and practices that help to prepare one for the events of Holy Week and Easter. The passage begins with a warning in verse 1 (“Beware . . . !”), elaborates with three examples (vv. 2–18), and concludes with a summary warning (vv. 19–21).

Except for the Lord’s Prayer (in vv. 7–15, which is not assigned to be read in this lection) and the conclusion in verses 19–21, both of which are found also in Luke (11:2–4 and 12:33–34, respectively), this material is unique to Matthew’s Gospel. The specific examples—charitable giving, prayer, and fasting—are standard examples of actions that would have been deemed worthy of praise in both Jewish and Gentile society. They are commended also for the followers of Jesus and the church of Matthew’s day.

The difference for followers of Jesus was not the acts themselves, but rather the motives and manner in which they were to be carried out. Instead of being done with fanfare that would attract attention and admiration from other people, these deeds were to be done modestly and in secret. In that way they became a challenge to the “honor” and competition that characterized Roman society and that Matthew accuses the local synagogue of adopting.

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On the Christian calendar, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of a season of awareness of sin and death and of the possibilities of new life in Jesus Christ. For some, Lent is also a time of increased devotion—extra prayer services, added prayer disciplines, and fasting. Within this attention to devotion and discipline, this text from Matthew’s Gospel offers a stern warning: the dangers of sin are as close as the expression of piety to which we are called. “Beware,” says Jesus, “of practicing your piety before others” (v. 1). To preach on this warning is to bring it into the life of the gathered community, and doing so could make for a strong hortatory or prophetic sermon. To preach in this way, however, is not without its dangers.

The text itself has a hortatory character and, as redacted by the lectionary, has a particular shape. Jesus speaks to his disciples, cautioning them against practicing their righteousness before others. Three specific warnings follow, concerning almsgiving, praying, and fasting. In each case, the disciples are not to allow anyone to see what they are doing; their practice is to be done “in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (v. 4). The selection concludes with an exhortation to build up treasures in heaven, which are invulnerable to the decay of moth and rust. At issue is the *focus* of the disciples’

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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The critique alludes to the ongoing tensions both between Jesus and the Pharisees (as well as other Jewish authorities) and between Daniel (in the fictitious world of this movie) and the church authorities of his time. More importantly for the Ash Wednesday text from Matthew 6, it highlights the dangers and consequences of inauthentic piety. Public or pretend displays of pious acts merit nothing. Matthew iterates the point explicitly: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” (v. 1). In each of the directives in today’s reading, the theme is the same: when you give to the needy, donate privately (vv. 2–4); when you pray, pray privately (vv. 5–6); when you fast, abstain privately (vv. 16–18); and when you store up treasures, store up treasures of the heart (vv. 19–21).

How can a text that implores private acts of righteousness be read on the day one receives (in many denominations) the imposition of ashes, a very visible and public act of piety? The thematic emphasis on private piety can be overstated. Better is the more implicit (and underlying) theme present in the calls to charity, prayer, and fasting: namely, authenticity. Understanding the Matthean mandates to private acts and the reception of ashes through the hermeneutical lens of authenticity bridges the (otherwise) apparent divide. Authenticity blurs the rigid lines of public and private, so that neither need be read legalistically. Private acts are not authentic, and public ones inauthentic, by default. Rather, the authenticity of an act of faith, or an act of piety, is determined by the desire and motivation of the one engaged in that act. Those desires and motivations cannot be judged externally.

Nonetheless, here is one helpful illustration of an authentic act (perhaps of piety, certainly of friendship) that is authentic, in large part because the act is done privately, even secretly. It comes from an unlikely source, a children’s book called *The Frog and Toad Treasury*, by Arnold Lobel. Frog and Toad are good friends. In chapter after chapter, Lobel describes ways they pass time together, explore the world together, and support one another. One chapter is titled “The Surprise.” The action in it takes place in October. The leaves are falling. Frog decides to go to Toad’s house, secretly, and rake his leaves for him.

“I will rake all the leaves that have fallen on his lawn. Toad will be surprised.”² Toad has the same

2. Arnold Lobel, *The Frog and Toad Treasury* (New York: Harper Collins, 1970), 42.

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impression on others. When this is our goal, managing our public reputation trumps the quiet walk of personal integrity. We are tempted to “play the role” in the world that is “our stage.”

As a pastor and seminary professor, I struggle with the problem of “appearances.” Though I acknowledge that my gifts and talents are from God, “presentation” of myself “counts” in the public arena. For speaking engagements in churches, I am asked for a biographical sketch that summarizes my accomplishments and journey in ministry. Will sharing this promote the event or me? As an African American male with an academic doctorate, I see this accomplishment within a broader communal context of a marginalized people’s strides toward freedom. So soon after doors of opportunity have been opened, more African American males are languishing in the criminal justice system than are achieving in the educational system. Is it personal ego to insist that my students recognize my title, or is this being a faithful witness in the struggle?

One of the rules of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, was “to do good.” Wesley wrote, “It is expected of all . . . that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation. . . . By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible to all.”³ What a marvelously simple rule to understand and to practice! However are not our motives for doing good sometimes mixed? Rules that are simple to understand are not easy to practice. Yes, we do good to help others, but do we not also “do good,” hoping that we will receive some social benefit in return—receiving a tax deduction, accomplishing service learning goals, obtaining community service credit, increasing our network of contacts from our service on not-for-profit boards, or building our resume? In the complexity of our living, even simple rules can become perilously difficult.

In the face of such temptations, the Ash Wednesday Gospel text calls us to a season of examination of our motives. Even “doing good”—to give to the needy, to pray, or to fast—can become an occasion of religious posturing. There is no contradiction between the warning to examine our motives and the admonition of Matthew 5:14–16,

3. *The Doctrines and Disciplines of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, with an Appendix Revised by the General Conference Greensboro, North Carolina, July 28–August 3, 2004* (Charlotte, NC: A.M.E. Zion Church, 2005), 23. John Wesley’s General Rules are common to Wesleyan churches, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and United Methodist Church.

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The initial warning presents the only translation problem in the passage. The acts that are meant are summarized as *dikaïosynē*, which the NRSV translates as “piety,” following its predecessor, the RSV. The KJV and the NKJV translate it as “charitable deeds,” equating the term with the first of the three actions, instead of seeing it as encompassing all of them. The NIV and the New American Standard Version stay closer to the Greek by translating the term as “righteousness” or “deeds of righteousness.” Most Spanish translations edge a step further by translating the term as *justicia*, justice. Instead of devoutness as an attitude toward God, which the English word “piety” suggests, the Greek word and such translations as “justice” or “righteousness” ground the three specific behaviors in the practice of covenant righteousness that is mandated by Torah and that denotes the presence of God’s reign. The warning in verse 1 poses a stark alternative: if one does these things for honor or rewards on earth, one forfeits one’s reward from God.

The three examples of the “justice” one is to practice follow the same pattern. Each begins with the assumption that one will do the act, be it almsgiving, prayer, or fasting. Then there is an instruction on how *not* to do it, followed by a positive alternative or model. The first, almsgiving (vv. 2–4), unfolds in hyperboles that reflect the tension that existed between Matthew’s community and other Jews in the synagogue out of which they came. First, the text uses a term from the theater, “hypocrites,” actors who play their parts with full fanfare, in order to be glorified by the audience for their impressive performances. While there is no record of people actually sounding a trumpet to herald their actions, the exaggeration encompasses all such deeds done as part of a public role to enhance one’s own honor. Public acclaim is not to be the end pursued by Matthew’s community. Instead, they are to continue to redistribute resources to those in need, but to do so in secret. Hyperbole again marks the teaching, for of course it is impossible for one hand not to know what the other is doing. The point, though, is to meet the needs of the poor, and not to put on a performance. God will know and reward such deeds. All three of the examples end with the same assurance—that God “who sees in secret will reward you.” Nowhere does Matthew elaborate on the nature of the reward beyond the affirmation that one is in accord with God’s own purposes.

Prayer is the second act of justice that is mentioned (vv. 5–6). The form and the substance of

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piety. For those who follow Jesus, acts of devotion are not done for praise, visibility, or the building up of wealth and reputation. Instead, the focus is to be God alone. Hypocrisy consists of undertaking pious action in hope of earthly rewards, rewards that come from human beings instead of God.

To communicate this insight of the text, the preacher should ask herself several questions. First, in what forms of piety does her congregation engage? Jesus assumed that his disciples would fast, pray, and give alms; these were the marks of a good Jew. These examples, however, may or may not connect with the lives of individual parishioners or the congregational setting. There may be other forms of piety, such as a specific liturgical practice or various social ministry programs. The preacher may ask, What other works of devotion are *assumed* in this congregation as part of our faith life? Serving on a committee? Assisting with worship? Teaching Sunday school? Volunteering at the food bank? With these questions answered, the preacher might explore *why* these things are done. As most pastors will tell you, the motives for the things that churches and their people do are usually mixed. A genuine love of God can sit side by side with a desire for self-aggrandizement, a passion for justice with a selfish need for control. Under the condition of sin, it cannot be otherwise. It is, however, the preacher’s task to name those impure motives and continue to call forth actions done in faith and hope. Or, in the language of the Lutheran theological tradition, it is the preacher’s task to put “old beings” to death and to raise up “new beings” of life and faith.

There are, however, a few difficulties with extending the insight of the text into the sermon in this way. First, a sermon critiquing the life of the congregation requires a good deal of self-examination on the part of the preacher. Why has she chosen *these* examples to preach about? Does she harbor unresolved personal anger or disappointment in something the people are doing that might color the text and tone of the sermon? It is tempting indeed to use the pulpit to air grievances against the habits of the congregation or individual parishioners. The preacher is not Jesus and is thus subject to sin in the same way as the rest of the congregation. She, like they, must heed Jesus’ warning: is the purpose of her sermon to advance her own agenda, or is it truly a word from the Lord?

In addition to examining her own motives, the honest preacher will also have to wrestle with how to handle Jesus’ condemnation of the “hypocrites” in

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-2

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idea. Both manage to arrive at the home of the other unseen, ascertain that no one is home, rake the leaves, and return to their own houses unnoticed. On their respective ways home, however, a wind comes.

The wind blows and blows. The piles of leaves do too, so that the leaves are scattered everywhere. At the end of the day, neither Frog nor Toad realizes what the other has done, because both return home to leaves strewn across their yards. Both pledge to rake their own leaves the next day.

“When Frog got home, he said, ‘I will clean up the leaves that are all over my own lawn. How surprised Toad must be!’” Toad echoed Frog. “That night Frog and Toad were both happy when they each turned out the light and went to bed.”³

The sense of purpose each derived from his acts of love and service (like praying or charitable giving) was not dependent on a public response or acknowledgment; it was not, in the end, even dependent on the accomplishment (given the wind). The acts were, in a word, authentic.

In contrast to Frog and Toad’s private, unacknowledged, and authentic acts of service (or Matthew’s call for private fasting and prayer) stands the Ash Wednesday practice of the imposition of ashes—replete with a very long and complicated history—as a public display of faith and an act of piety. However, Ash Wednesday is so much more. It marks the beginning of Lent and calls us to reflection and repentance; it invites us to begin our preparation for Good Friday and for Easter. It does all these things by the very use of ashes, which remind us of our humanity and our sinfulness: that we are of dust and to dust we shall return. In this way, the imposition of ashes does not stand in contrast to the reading from Matthew but embodies the spirit of those readings in its own painstaking authenticity.

LORI BRANDT HALE

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where the disciples are told to let their light shine before persons so that others would glorify God. Righteous conduct must be visible and sometimes explained so that God is glorified. The opening verse of our lesson, Matthew 6:1, sets the frame for our practice of three ancient acts of Jewish piety—almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Jesus assumes that his followers will do all three. He says, “Whenever you give alms” (v. 2), “whenever you pray” (v. 5), and “whenever you fast” (v. 16). Each of these is a spiritual discipline that, when practiced during the Lenten season, strengthens our capacity to please God in such acts of piety all through the year.

We are also instructed how to carry out these spiritual disciplines in such a way that our lives lift up the Savior rather than ourselves. We are warned not to do acts of piety to be praised by others. We are guaranteed that those who ignore this warning may get what they want but will not receive God’s blessing. We are instructed how to perform these acts secretly. Finally, we are assured that the Father who sees in secret will reward openly.

The ritual of imposition of the ashes is a sobering reminder of our mortality. Receiving the ashes with the words “You are dust and to the dust you shall return” is a gentle whisper that says, “It is not about you.” It is the Creator who is always to be glorified and not we who are created. Hearing the words “Repent and believe the gospel” is a strong rebuke to our tendency toward guarding our own image rather than growing in the image of God.

Might the season of Lent be a time of penitence and transformation from our selfish consumerism to unselfish contribution? What if we learned to serve together with persons of other races, classes, churches, and religions without being concerned with who gets the credit? Repenting, believing, and doing the gospel would become more important than our reputations. Despite our mixed motives, imperfections, and many mistakes, God uses those whose hearts are right. The inside-out work within us that marks profound transformation begins by giving ourselves sincerely to God through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, acts of piety, and acts of justice.

JEFFERY L. TRIBBLE SR.

3. *Ibid.*, 51–53.

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this teaching echo the first. Again, the point is that prayer is not a public show to impress one's neighbors, but rather something between oneself and God. The teaching on prayer is expanded by a further negative and positive example (vv. 7–15, not included in this lection). There the contrast is between the long and flowery prayers attributed to Gentiles and the spare language of the prayer Jesus taught, which echoes prayers known in the synagogues of Matthew's day.

The final act of justice, fasting (vv. 16–18), receives a similar warning and advice. Instead of making a show of one's fasting by looking utterly miserable, one should groom and conduct oneself normally, since the reason for fasting is not to show off to others for the sake of one's own honor, but to focus on and commit oneself to God's purposes.

The concluding summary (vv. 19–21) elaborates in metaphorical form on the "reward" mentioned in each of the examples. The transience and insecurity of earthly "treasures" encompass not only literal treasures that can be stolen or destroyed, but also the praise and honor accorded by one's culture, which can prove utterly fickle. Those treasures define the goals of the people whose actions provide the negative examples of each act of *dikaiosynē* that was discussed. "Treasures in heaven," on the other hand, do not refer to rewards reserved for after death. Instead, as a good Jew, Matthew uses God's name and even explicit words for God very sparingly. Just as he writes of the "kingdom of heaven" where Mark and Luke refer to the "kingdom of God," so also here (where God is not named) the valuable treasures are those that one finds in company with God, and in accord with God's sovereign will. The quest for that accord, rather than any outward show of discipline or religious behavior, gives shape to our Lenten devotion as we prepare to follow Jesus in a life committed to God's reign.

SHARON H. RINGE

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verses 2, 5, and 16. The text is explicitly tendentious: Jesus has an argument with how some of his fellow Jews practice their faith. When Matthew's readers, likely Jewish believers, first heard this text, they would have received this not as wholesale condemnation of Jewish life and practice, but as a word from a Jewish messiah about how Jewish believers were to act. Not so our congregations, who likely have few if any Jewish believers. The preacher should be aware of how this text can reinforce ugly stereotypes. Even if the congregation is not likely to hear the text with anti-Semitic ears, it is always easier to rush to the condemnation of others than to condemnation of the self. Protestants might point to Catholics as hypocrites, or evangelicals to mainliners, or vice versa on all counts. The preacher should resist any such temptation. Jesus' warning is meant for us "in here," not others "out there." If we concern ourselves with ourselves, we will have more than enough to worry about. The dangers of hypocrisy lie close to the surface.

The final danger, always present on Ash Wednesday, is that the preacher might focus only on sin and its consequences, or only what we are to do, while neglecting the promising character of life in Christ. If we concentrate only on the possibility for self-centeredness, it might leave the congregation wondering, "So why should I be here?" These words come from the One whose cross and resurrection defeat sin and its power. Self-centered though our piety may become, forgiveness is available through the grace of Christ. This forgiveness transforms self-centered people into God-centered people! When this happens, the disciplines of Lent—almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, among others—can be received more deeply as gifts of God that point us to God's presence in our lives and in our world. In the end, that is what faithful observance of Lent is—a grace-filled return to the Lord our God.

KIMBERLY M. VAN DRIEL

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

¹When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there

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Why does the church have to do theology? That may seem a strange question to raise for folk who have come to worship on the First Sunday in Lent, or on any occasion, but it is a question this text forces upon those who will hear it. For many worshipers, doing theology does not seem the most urgent task required of them on a Sunday morning. Is this what Lent is getting us into—theology?

The text in Deuteronomy 26 describes a liturgical act that is confessional and doxological, full of individual affirmation and corporate memory. It is an act of gratitude for God’s particular grace that ends in a celebration whose embrace extends beyond Israel’s own life (“the aliens who reside among you,” v. 11). It describes a moment that is rooted in memory (“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor,” v. 5), shaped by a journey (“The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand,” v. 8), and defined by joy (“shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you,” v. 11). In rehearsing this story and affirming that *today* a declaration is made—“I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us” (v. 3)—worshipers are committing theology. They are confessing that the faithfulness of God to Israel is the basis of their own life, the provision by which they may now voice their own gratitude and even claim

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These days it is hard to know how we ever got along without computers and cell phones. A generation has now emerged that never knew a world without these appliances. We live in a world where the wisdom of the past is easily trumped by the latest bid for our loyalty. Are we the happy slaves of the new technologies? To whom do we belong?

The Deuteronomy passage provides an important perspective on pastoral care. There is the giving of the first fruit of the harvest and then a recitation of the story of deliverance. These are inseparable in the passage, suggesting that the meaning of the one (thanksgiving) frames the meaning of the other (recitation of God’s acts of liberation).

What happens to a people’s sense of self and history when their priorities are organized around material possessions and shifting market values? They may no longer know why they give thanks or to whom they give it. Their identity as God’s people delivered from bondage may be lost so that certain acts of thanksgiving become meaningless. Hence this passage of Scripture is relevant to an understanding of ourselves as human beings who are the subjects of God’s continual care and creative love. The text may help counter the illusion that we can deliver or save ourselves through our own technologies. Deuteronomy knows that when a people forget their past, they

he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Exegetical Perspective

These verses in Deuteronomy are among the best known in the book. At the center of the unit is something like a creedal affirmation (vv. 5b–10a) that rehearses the redemption and guidance of Israel from the descent into Egypt until the entry into Palestine. This recital has been placed within liturgical instructions for presenting the offering of firstfruits (vv. 1–5a, 10b–11). There is some debate whether two traditions are reflected in these verses in that verses 4 and 10 seem to indicate two different points at which the priest in charge is given the offering, and verses 3 and 5 seem to suggest two different affirmations to be made. Nonetheless, verses 1–11 should be read as one unit that is differentiated from the preceding verses (a curse against Amalek, 25:17–19) and those that follow (instructions concerning the paying of the tithe each three years, 26:12–15; cf. 14:22–29).

Chapter 26 as a whole marks the conclusion of the main body of Deuteronomy that begins with chapter 12. The section begins with instructions concerning where (at “the place that the LORD your God will choose”: 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21) and when (a variety of times when offerings are brought) Israel is to worship. The section closes, after the statement of numerous ordinances, with a return to the presentation of offerings at the place chosen by God

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Each Lenten season we thoughtfully revisit the legacy of the cross and the defining miracle it wrought for each of us as Christians. Once again we seek to ready ourselves for the inbreaking of God’s radical grace and abundance. Today’s reading is a valuable summary of the story of God’s promise of fulfillment for Israel after forty years of desert wandering. The themes of faithfulness, covenant, and abundance are all easily available for preachers, but the idea of inheritance may be the richest to pursue.

This passage has a rich heritage in the Jewish community. It begins with a liturgical recitation that was to become one of the essential identity stories in the “remembering” of Jewish society. This ancient narrative has a defining role for Israel and the understanding of its covenant with YHWH. It is the Israelites’ inheritance; they are heirs to God’s enduring promise that is now spread before them.

This is the climax of the exodus story. Imagine this: after thirty-nine years, eleven months, and one week in the wilderness, the Israelites are gathered on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the promised land. After nearly forty years of feeling lost and unsure, having had to learn a mountain of laws and rules, after being chastised for bad behavior (often well deservedly!), and after having spent a good deal of their sojourn being confused, underfed, and

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this story as their own. As George Herbert noted in his poem about Israel's struggles in entering the promised land, "their story pens and sets us down,"¹ that is, their story reads those who remember and retell it, marking us by the same journey and shaping us by the same faithfulness.

The Greeks believed that the goddess of memory (*Mnēmosynē*) was the mother of imagination. For Israel, memory was more often the mother of faith, the way God's promises were rehearsed and named and claimed anew. To remember like that was not simply to rummage through archival or antiquarian documents, much less to preserve the past in some academic tome. The genealogies and stories ("A wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . .") identified Israel as belonging to the God who, in Calvin's words, "never forsakes his people in the middle of the journey"² and whose grace makes of such memories the stuff on which faith feeds. There are more than faint echoes of this passage in the words that celebrate another meal by which God's people are fed: "This do, in remembrance of me." Could theology be about a journey to that Table?

In any case, this journey marks us as people of a particular way. The church dares to undertake theology, to confess its faith, because on this journey the church believes that God has drawn near to us, spoken to us, even made provision for us out of the abundance of God's own life. Like a love letter, theology does not hunt up an excuse for professing its love or expressing its gratitude. Rather, it risks speaking the foolishness of love because it is convinced it has heard the language of love in God's passion and compassion for God's people. Remaining silent—or worse, conjuring up reasons to chatter among ourselves—is a sign of deafness, a sign that in seeking to avoid this word we have become captive to some deep and terrible power. The church confesses its faith by confessing that it has been loved, and thus has been liberated from the hell of self-absorption into the freedom of life as God's gift—the freedom to welcome "the aliens who reside" in our midst as gifts, the freedom to *know* God on the basis of God's extravagant, unwarranted, ever-surprising self-giving.

So what is one to say about all of this—that the journey of these Lenten weeks means that we really have to think long and hard about our story; that we have to practice some daily or weekly disciplines to

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lose their present and future. This means that creeds and stories are part of the church's collective memory. Celebration and recitation are ways we fashion our identity as people of God. Ash Wednesday is an invitation to fashion anew our identity by reenacting the saving events that mark the Christian story.

There are three important pastoral themes to be discerned here.

Experiencing and expressing gratitude. Have you ever known people who seldom say, "Thank you," or express a sense of gratitude for the things done for or given to them? Some live as if they are entitled to the goodwill of others. Ash Wednesday is an opportunity to reverse this way of being in the world. Lent is a time to take stock of our life and that of the community, to remember the unmerited good that has come our way and to repent of the wrongs we have done. In this way we express gratitude by opening our lives to examination, purification, and correction. We express gratitude by seeking to live in right relationship with God, world, and self. Developing and expressing the attitude of gratitude, then, can become a spiritual discipline.

Remembering the ancestors. In this text, the ancestors are the particular individuals who stood out as exemplary figures for the people. Verse 5 reads, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . ." Ash Wednesday and Lent offer us opportunities to recall those who have gone before us. These may be treasured friends, beloved relatives, or others who left their imprints on our lives and the life of the community. Our gratitude extends to them because through their faith they still speak and encourage us to work for a better world. We are challenged to remember global oppressions and the ancestors who resisted them. The work of our ancestors is furthered through our faithful efforts.

Remembering the past. The past represents the events that shaped us directly and indirectly, in recognized and unrecognized ways. We must struggle to remember the past so that we can learn the lessons of history and move toward a future with a greater sense of wisdom and appreciation of past struggles. When we ignore the past or fail to learn the lessons of history, then we are likely to repeat past tragedies on a different scale. When we do not learn from the past, the future becomes the past revisited.

This truth may be seen in experiences of violence and oppression. The question has been asked, "How

1. George Herbert, "The Bunch of Grapes," in *The Temple*, ed. Henry L. Carrigan Jr. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001), 128.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 4:238.

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(26:2), accompanied with liturgical instructions and creedal affirmation (vv. 3–10), and a celebration of the covenant (vv. 16–18).

There is one very noticeable omission in the historical recital that accompanies the ritual act of presenting the firstfruits, namely any reference to Horeb/Sinai, the mountain of God. This has been explained in a number of ways. Some believe that 26:5b–10a represents a form of the confession by one group of Israelites who had not participated in the events at Horeb. Others, however, believe the omission results from the fact that the early chapters of Deuteronomy assume the Horeb tradition as the setting for the giving of the statutes and ordinances that constitute the bulk of chapters 12–25. Thus, there was no reason to make reference to Horeb in the recital. The problem has not been resolved among scholars. As the text now stands, it does represent a strange deviation from what could be expected from a creedal statement that in other respects so closely reflects the historical memories preserved in Genesis–Numbers.

The historical setting of Deuteronomy has at least two distinct phases, one before the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and one after that pivotal event. Sometime in the seventh century, probably after the destruction of the northern kingdom Israel by the Assyrians, the core of the book of Deuteronomy was brought to the southern kingdom Judah. The commandments and statutes preserved in it reflect a settled community engaging in a variety of agricultural endeavors. The sanctuary initially was identified only as the place God chose for the divine name to dwell (26:2; cf. 12:5–7; 14:23–24; 16:2, 6, 11; et al.). Later the “place” came to be identified as Jerusalem. There was a “prophetic” edge to the core that emphasized care for the orphan, widow, and resident alien (Deut. 14:29; 16:11; 24:17, 19; 26:12–13; cf. Isa. 1:17, 23; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zech. 7:10).

The second historical setting is in the midst of the Babylonian exile (the middle-late sixth century BCE), when the core of Deuteronomy provided the foundation for the theological critique of Israel/Judah’s history of failed loyalty to the Lord preserved as Joshua through 2 Kings. Deuteronomy 26 was remembered at various points along this line of tradition and even after the return of the exiles from Babylon. No doubt it meant different things to the many different people along the way, but to each group it was at least a vivid reminder of the expectation that proper worship of the Lord entailed the regular offering of gifts and self to God.

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poorly housed—wondering why in the world they left Egypt in the first place—here they sit on the highlands overlooking the Jordan River Valley, the promised land lying in the distance! Everything they have endured, worked, and sacrificed for is at long last within their reach. The sense of God’s grace and blessing in return for their faithfulness must be overwhelming.

Verses 1–4 speak of the firstfruits that are to be gathered in the new land. The tradition that emerged in Israel was that as the barley crop ripened (around Passover) the official harvest began and continued for another two months as other fruits matured. The first ripe fruit on any tree was picked and offered (with a ribbon tied around the branch) at the temple. While there is much to be said about the connection of this offering to the concept of tithing (which follows in vv. 12ff.), there is another important theme for preachers here that should not be overlooked: offering a harvest crop in worship presumes that the community not only has access to fertile ground, but that it is *settled*.

Up until this moment the people of Israel were wanderers without a land of their own; they were a people who lived in tents. It is not insignificant then that the liturgical passage that begins in verse 5 describes Israel’s ancestor Jacob (and through him, Abraham) as a *wandering* Aramean (northern Syria). From this long legacy, painfully underscored by forty years in the wilderness, the people have come to this moment when they are about to be settled in their own land. Possessing land is the necessary prerequisite for any offering of firstfruits. It is the emotional and spiritual taproot of what the offerings mean and these actions cannot be understood apart from it.

There is opportunity here to explore two additional themes: our contemporary spiritual wanderings, and the irony of living in a country that seems to know no limits to the abundance it enjoys. Despite the fact that our nation is the wealthiest and most powerful on earth, there has never been a time in our history when more people have been consumed with a search for meaning. Anxiety and fear abound—our souls are unsettled—and while spiritual fixes proliferate, the signs of our rudderlessness grow. This wandering begs for a vision of a spiritual promised land that only faith—and faithfulness—can provide. There is a corollary we should not overlook: ours is a society that takes its amazing physical and financial abundance for granted. We have a promised land, and too often we take this as a sign of a special blessing from God,

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keep that story ever fresh; that we have to work harder to be more sincere Christians; that we have to give more, practice more effective self-restraint? Is that the journey this text describes and to which Lent beckons us? Or is this text really about the celebration of God's abundance—to wandering Arameans and other confused types; to folk who live in a strange land and find themselves oppressed by hard taskmasters; to folk who feel trapped in impossible situations yet find themselves, surprisingly, delivered; to folk who are struggling clumsily to say thank you with their lives? The provisions of our God who never abandons us on the journey are, according to this text, bountiful (v. 11). That is why it is so important for the church, especially at the beginning of Lent, to undertake, above all, its theological task, which is to sing. This story in Deuteronomy ends in celebration and praise, which through its long and circuitous way, Lent prepares us also to offer. Theology is, in its purest sense, doxology—a way of singing, a way of offering praise to the One who will not let even death silence God's love for this world.

Of course, we do not *have* to sing. The church often thinks there are more important things to do. However what if we are set free to sing, what if we are set free to offer doxology, what if “this bounteous God” really is near us, offering joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us, keeping us in God's grace and guiding us when perplexed, freeing us from all ills in this world and the next?³ Not to sing in the company of this God would be to fail miserably in understanding where Lent seeks to take us. It would be to starve ourselves on our own sufficiencies, rather than taste the banquet that has been prepared. Why not, rather, offer to God our thanks? Why not sit and eat? Why not do theology?

THOMAS W. CURRIE

Pastoral Perspective

can anyone who has experienced cruelty or harsh treatment oppress others?” Yet this is exactly what can happen when awareness of the past is denied or suppressed, dimmed or lost. The effects of the past can linger and influence the future in ways that escape our awareness. When we become historically aware of our situation and take responsibility for it, we have a better chance to address and correct cruel practices and the damaging effects of past experiences.

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent provide opportunities for pastoral care at the individual, communal, and societal levels. Lent provides opportunities for individuals to gather in faith communities to remember and take responsibility for our collective history and our role in it. To do so can unleash redemptive possibilities for social transformation. We remember that Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission met to address the tragedies of individuals and families by calling perpetrators to account. In so doing, the community could address issues of long-standing suffering. Certain practices of social institutions around the world were challenged by this process and social transformation became possible, both in South Africa and elsewhere.

Pastoral care is not only for individual sufferers; it must extend to the communities and societies in which individuals and families live, move, and have their being. It includes care for the natural environment. We are relational beings, so that our care of persons and our care of nature are inseparable.

Celebration and recitation can be powerful symbols of and witness to what God has done in our midst. We may gather to give thanks and confess past wrongs of commission and omission, to acknowledge personal and collective participation in the wider dramas of life, and to seek to amend our ways. This is our appropriate response to the generous God who is ever ready to deliver us from various forms of bondage and give us resources beyond measure.

ARCHIE SMITH JR.

3. Obviously a paraphrase of the second verse of Martin Rinkart's hymn “Now Thank We All Our God.”

Exegetical Perspective

The recital (26:5b–10a) stresses at least three things. First, God made the first move in claiming Israel for a people. Their forebear Jacob was a “wandering Aramean” with nothing to commend him (v. 5b). The term translated “wandering” in this context probably suggests the idea of becoming lost (Deut. 22:3) or going astray like roaming livestock (1 Sam. 9:3, 20). This echoes the insistence in the opening chapters of Deuteronomy on the total graciousness of God’s election of Israel, a people without any merit whatsoever (Deut. 7:7; 9:4–7).

Second, the confession makes clear that Israel was victim of great oppression in Egypt, treated “harshly” and afflicted by “hard labor” (v. 6). As emphasized in the early chapters of Deuteronomy, God rescued them and brought them out of Egypt with great power (“a mighty hand and an outstretched arm”) and with “signs and wonders” (v. 8; cf. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:2–3; and Exod. 6–12). God did so in order to give Israel a land (vv. 3, 9), an “inheritance” or possession (v. 1; cf. 4:21; 15:4; 19:10; 20:16; 24:4; 25:19). There was indeed a promise to the forebears, but Israel received the land as a gracious gift of God (v. 9; cf. 6:23; 8:7–10; 11:31).

Third, the intent of the recital was to make clear that the land Israel “possessed” still belonged to God. They were to “possess” and “settle” it (v. 1), but only because God gave it to them. This is an important point in Deuteronomy. The verb “possess” occurs more than thirty times in the first eleven chapters of the book (Deut. 1:8, 21, 39; 2:24, 31; 3:12, 18, 20; et al.). Israel was given land to “possess,” but this did not mean that Israel owned the land. In acknowledgment, at each harvest time (probably the festival of Ingathering, held late in the summer or early fall) the worshiper was to return to God the “first of all the fruit of the ground” given by God (vv. 2–3, 10a). This was a sacrifice indicating that the God of Israel was the true owner of the land, and it was to be celebrated with the priestly functionaries, one’s family, and all the resident aliens present (v. 11).

W. EUGENE MARCH

Homiletical Perspective

rather than a sign of special responsibility. Ours is a rich inheritance, but daily we rob future generations of their inheritance. In this Lenten season what does it mean to be heirs of God’s promise?

Finally we come to verse 9, which remembers the language of YHWH’s first promise to Moses from the burning bush (Exod. 3.8: “I have come down to deliver them . . . and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, . . .”). These are the poetic symbols of fullness and fertility. Honey is made by bees and bees thrive only where flowers and fruit are abundant. Milk, drawn from cows and goats, implies the presence of good pasture land for grazing. Through the centuries, milk has signified a special privilege and blessing: it is the abundant knowledge of heavenly things, which is given in the promised land. Honey is the gift of happiness and delight that accompanies such knowledge. Interestingly, bees were among the first symbols adopted by Christians: the fervent activity of the beehive suggesting the church, the hibernation suggesting the resurrection, and the honey offering a symbol of the abundant new life in Christ.¹ Milk, honey, and firstfruits are all metaphors for God’s grace. Americans have a tendency to literalize these images (as we do so often with the Bible), thereby robbing them of the deeper message they carry.

At the beginning of the Lenten season, this passage from Deuteronomy provides an important perspective. Despite our spiritual wanderings God has remained faithful and, through Christ’s sacrifice, has brought us in grace to a land of spiritual milk and honey. Yet our failure to remember this truth puts us at risk of squandering our remarkable inheritance. How might we be more worthy of God’s abundant grace and love that the good news of Easter lays before us? What remembering might we do?

NICK CARTER

1. Suzetta Tucker, “ChristStory Bee and Honey Page,” *ChristStory Christian Bestiary*, <http://ww2.netnitco.net/users/legend01/bee.htm>.

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
²will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;
 my God, in whom I trust."

.....
⁹Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
 the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰no evil shall befall you,
 no scourge come near your tent.

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

Theological Perspective

Psalm 91 describes God as a "refuge," "fortress," and protector. Seen in the context of the Lenten journey, this psalm offers the comfort that God journeys with individuals and the larger community of faith. Lenten practices are intended to raise religious believers' awareness of the role of sin in our own lives and in our society and culture, and to prepare us to celebrate Easter. Lent is a time to contemplate what is at the center of all reality and to balance our awareness of sin with an understanding of God's care, loving-kindness, and compassion as our ultimate hope. The words of the psalmist will encourage people to perceive God's creative and creating presence at the center of all reality and to reorder their own priorities.

Throughout history, many religious believers thought of Psalm 91 as a magical formula that protected them from danger. The psalmist believed that no harm could come to those who called upon God's name. Both Jews and Christians copied passages of the psalm, particularly verses 11–13, enclosing them in amulets to be worn as protection.¹ The story of Jesus' temptation shows how the psalm was viewed in the ancient world as protection from danger. Luke's author tells about the devil tempting Jesus to jump

Pastoral Perspective

Psalm 91 suggests that it is possible to choose to live in safety, security, trust, and refuge with God—that is, to "abide in the shadow of the Almighty" (v. 1). The psalm offers the opportunity to make "the Most High your dwelling place" (v. 9), but can we take this invitation seriously in the twenty-first century? We live in a world that is insecure, frightening, and unsafe. In the United States, some experienced years of relative prosperity and safety until 9/11. Others have lived in fear, experiencing unjust treatment for most of this country's history. How can we "buy into" the idea that we can dwell in the shelter and shadow of the Almighty, despite international terrorism, questionable financial security, wars and rumors of wars, religious and racial hatred, and the rampant fear and anxiety that have led to a myriad of addictions and dysfunctional behaviors?

Today is the first Sunday in the part of the church year designated as Lent. How does Psalm 91 speak to the Lenten experience? Is not Lent a time of deprivation; a time of concentration on Jesus' suffering and death; a time to face our own unworthiness and our sinful nature; a time to fast and pray? Introspection and self-examination are certainly important Lenten rituals, but as Psalm 91 suggests, there may be a more productive way to

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr., "The Book of the Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 3:1048.

- ¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
- ¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
- ¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
- ¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
- ¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

Exegetical Perspective

This complex psalm may have its inspiration in some form of temple liturgy, though its present form does not seem to be a direct liturgical composition. Scholars offer widely variant interpretations of the life setting for the work, largely since we know very little about the way written prayers were employed in regular temple service in ancient Israel. Some have argued this work functioned as a prayer uttered by pilgrims upon entry to the temple precinct itself, and others that it functioned as some sort of blessing to ensure safety on a journey. It may be best to think of this psalm as a form of instruction, offering a confession of trust in God's continual care, a trust witnessed by a third party who also describes its consequences, and finally God's affirmation to the confession of trust. It is hard to fit this format with any other known form of liturgy, hence the suspicion by many that the psalm represents a creative literary adaptation of some liturgical form.

The use of pronouns allows a ready division into three main sections, though many modern English translations offer homogenous pronominal references in the interest of avoiding confusion for contemporary readers. Verses 1–2 open with a series of active participle forms that shift to first-person references. The participles are best rendered by a general reference: "One who dwells in the protection

Homiletical Perspective

Psalm 91 is at once beautiful and troubling. It offers some of the most comforting language in all of Scripture, but it also suggests a linkage between invoking the name of God and avoiding harm, a connection that rightly causes discomfort for many Christians. To look at the homiletical possibilities and requirements of Psalm 91, we will look at both facets.

Any family psychologist worth his or her salt will tell you, in one way or another, that security, freedom, and love are indispensable for raising children who will function happily in life. If these elements of caregiving are present in a child's life, that child will not have to struggle through the challenges of life in quite the same way as one who was reared in a less protective or less supportive environment.

Newborn infants like to be tightly wrapped when clothed for the day. Mothers in the know snuggle their babies up close to give them a sense of the womb. Children at play love forts, where a simple blanket over cardboard boxes can resemble a mother bird safeguarding her young. Jesus speaks of gathering the people of Jerusalem under his care, much as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings. Why all of these images of protective care? It is because we human beings, whether children or adults, crave a sense of security. We love to be

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

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from the pinnacle of the temple by citing Psalm 91:11–13. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you’” (Luke 4:9–10). Jesus responds with these words: “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Luke 4:12).

In his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, John Calvin referred to the story of Jesus’ temptation and its relevance for interpreting Psalm 91. Calvin argued that when the “whole human family were banished from Divine favour. . . . It was Christ, and he only, who, by removing the ground of separation, reconciled the angels to us.”² Calvin thought that the overall meaning of the psalm was best understood in terms of God’s providence. He observed that people sought refuge in a variety of hiding places according to the tragedies that threatened them, but the psalmist spoke of God as the only safe and impregnable fortress. For Calvin, the protection and security of God contrasted with all other confidences.

The doctrine of providence has been used to support the idea that God is working out God’s purposes in the world, even if God’s purposes are advanced through evil and suffering. Theologians such as Calvin and C. S. Lewis have suggested that we may never fully understand evil and suffering because of the limitations of our own human insight and the mysteriousness of God’s work in the world. Significant and enduring questions have been raised with regard to God’s providence, especially when human beings face tragic situations caused by natural disaster or as we inflict suffering upon one another. How could God, who cares so much for the world, let such bad things happen to good people? If we believe in God’s infinite goodness, it is difficult to make the case that God’s purposes can be furthered through social and economic structures that discriminate against people on the basis of race, gender, or class, or through the genocide that the world witnessed in the Holocaust. In these and many other examples, people are unable to find God’s protection. So much suffering exists today that it is sometimes hard to believe that there is anything greater than us that can protect us or the world we live in. Sometimes it seems that God fails us. How can we continue to pray with the psalmist that God is our refuge, fortress, and protector, in light of these horrific events?

To claim that God cares for the world and continues to be involved in creation does not

Pastoral Perspective

experience Lent than to view this season as just a period of deprivation and self-criticism.

Psalm 91 proclaims God’s bold invitation to us to live in the divine presence with protection, safety, and love. In her book *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness*, Nan C. Merrill reframes Psalm 91, presenting it as a conversation between God and us. Beginning the conversation with words of praise and trust, she describes our relationship with God as being “sheltered in infinite light” and “abiding in the wings of infinite Love.”¹ The psalm continues to praise God for providing strength for living and a protective environment of safety and salvation.

God responds to this verse of praise and trust by acknowledging the love of those who call upon God’s name. God assures the psalmist of deliverance, protection, rescue, and a reverence for our lives. During good times and in times of trouble, God promises to dwell in each heart, “as Loving Companion Presence, forever.”²

As we read Merrill’s interpretation of Psalm 91, we experience God as one who provides a shelter for each of us. This protective environment is a “safe house,” in which God’s abiding presence with us is eternal. This shelter not only protects us from danger but also is a place of love, nurture, and care. During Lent, this becomes even more meaningful as we grow in our awareness that God dwells in our hearts. In times of trouble, joy, sickness, health, vibrancy, sadness, loneliness, and death, we have a divine friend who walks with us, cries with us, loves us with a continuing, deep, and abiding love.

Lent is a time to acknowledge and respond to God’s offer to dwell in our hearts. It is a time to pour energy into increasing our awareness of God’s presence with us, no matter what the circumstances of our lives. Our prayer during Lent could be to ask God to let divine love open our hearts and increase our awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We might furthermore ask God to increase our courage as we respond to God’s love by loving and protecting others. We need to learn to listen for God’s voice as our relationships with God unfold. We need to seek and expect God’s presence, guidance, and protection, while being continually grateful for the work of God in our lives. We need to be vulnerable to God and God’s action in our lives.

Our response to God’s continual invitation to relationship is really our lifetime spiritual journey.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 3:486.

1. Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 190.

2. *Ibid.*, 191.

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of the Most High, in the shadow of Almighty, stays for the night.” This chiasmic opening verse then shifts quickly to the first person: “I say to YHWH, ‘My refuge and my fortress! My God! I trust in him!’” The petitioner is giving expression to his ultimate devotion to the God of Israel.

In verses 3–13, an anonymous narrator confirms the veracity of the opening speaker’s trust in God. This narrator may reflect a priestly response to the confession of the petitioner. The lectionary skips over verses 3–8, which are cast in the voice of this outside confirmation of the petitioner’s expression of trust in God. “So he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler,” verse 3 declares, apparently reflecting the consequences of the affirmation made in verses 1–2. Having mentioned a fowler, the metaphors used in verse 4 touch on images of a mother bird protecting her young and closely parallel the description of God’s actions toward Israel in Deuteronomy 32:11–12 (see also Pss. 36:7; 57:1; and 61:4). In verse 6 the narrator makes special point of the provision of divine protection from various illnesses. Verses 7–8 seem to suggest if the one with trust in God should see disaster happen, all they are seeing is God’s punishment of the wicked, not something that would threaten the one who has placed trust in God.

The lectionary rejoins the psalm at verse 9, which, in a complex formulation, reverts briefly to the first-person statements that opened the psalm: “So for you—YHWH is my refuge—you have made the Most High your dwelling place.” The first-person expression refers to the confession of verses 1–2 and then goes on to draw on the imagery of these verses in a slightly different formulation. So while there is a connection to the petitioner’s expression of trust, the third-party confirmation introduced in verse 3 continues to give voice to the veracity of the petitioner’s confidence in verses 9–13. It continues to offer these observations in the form of a direct address to the petitioner: “no scourge will come near your tent” (v. 10), recalling the protection of Israelite dwellings during the final plague that brought their liberation from Egypt (Exod. 12:13). In a striking image, the narrator goes on to state God will order angels to bear the believer up “so that you will not dash your foot against a stone” (v. 12). This is the promise Satan quotes during the temptation of Jesus (see Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:11), possibly reflecting how cherished this promise was to the faithful in the first century CE. The narrator concludes with assurances that the one trusting God will overcome cosmic forces of evil, expressed in metaphorical form and

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sheltered, warmed, and embraced. When the psalmist talks about abiding “in the shadow of the Almighty,” and says, “Under his wings you will find refuge,” we relax into a smile. This is the promise of security.

To the imagery of a large protective mother bird with wings, the psalmist adds powerful language about the Lord’s retinue of angels picking us up when we stumble: The Lord “will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways” (v. 11). These same angels “will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone” (v. 12). Picture the confidence that would come upon the elderly in our day if they knew an angel would scoop them up every time they came close to losing their balance. Such is the comfort of Psalm 91.

We must also reckon with another side to this same psalm: the language of condition in verses 9–10. “Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.” This is essentially “if–then” language. If you do or believe this, then you can be assured that a certain divine protection will be yours.

What is wrong with this setup? Why do some of us wince when we read these two verses? Because these verses appear to propose a relationship with God that has some basis in magic. They feel manipulative. These words give the impression that God hands out protective favors to those who have the Lord’s name on their lips. “Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name” (v. 14). No wonder some rabbis refer to Psalm 91 as an “amulet psalm.” Recite it over and over again, and it may help you attain or feel the presence of God. This is the feeling that is conveyed. Wear it around your neck like a protective charm, and you can ward off evil, harm, and illness all in one.

If you are balking at this theology, consider your instinct a good thing. There is plenty of scriptural evidence elsewhere that suggests God is much more than a lucky coin in one’s pocket. The world is tired of hearing God’s name invoked as the author of victory on this football field or that battlefield. Yet we persist in speaking this way, largely because it feels comforting to have God on our side.

When the devil tempted Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple one day, these words of Psalm 91 are the very ones the devil quoted. Jesus refused to jump, saying in reply, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut. 6:16). It was Jesus’ way of saying, “You do not play lightly with God. You do

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

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necessarily mean that God uses human and environmental suffering as a teaching tool. As we interpret this psalm, we must acknowledge that our worldview has changed since this psalm was written. The psalmist had a much simpler view of the universe and causality. Scientific study has opened up for us new ways of thinking about the creation of the world and God's involvement in it.

As God lives in relationship with the world, God is also limited in what God can determine as the end of particular events. Process theologian Burton Cooper describes God as "boundless, yet limited." Cooper encourages us to use the metaphor of the universe for the extensiveness of God's power: "As the universe is not in space but creates space, and is therefore boundless, so God's power is not simply in the universe but creates the universe and extends through it. As the universe is dynamic and yet, at any given time, has outer limits, so God's power is dynamic and yet limited."³ It is not simply that God can act upon the world and protect us like a magical formula that saves us from danger. We also have to recognize our own responsibility and potential to help God realize God's hopes and dreams for the whole creation.

The words of the psalmist teach us that we should not be tempted to vest our interests in our own limited abilities to bring about transformation, in isolation from God's larger vision for the common good. Neither should we retreat and seek to find false refuge in theologies that have been used in the past to disregard human responsibility for the suffering of others or our planet. So much suffering that exists today *is* caused by human hands. As we reflect on Psalm 91 during Lent, we can reevaluate our way of thinking and refocus our practices, so that we can move closer to a celebration of the day that reminds us that our comfort and protection are found in fully participating in God's redemptive work in the world.

ELIZABETH L. HINSON-HASTY

Pastoral Perspective

We can focus on new ways to trust God's promises to us. We can experience God as a living, active, loving presence in our daily lives. We can center our lives on what it means to be in love with God. Here are some practical ways to use the Lenten season to deepen our relationship with God:

- Read the Scriptures in Lent as if you were one of the disciples present with Jesus as he ministered to others and fulfilled his mission on earth. Use the words of Scripture to paint pictures for you. Visualize yourself with Jesus—in the desert, with crowds of people, in the garden praying, or as the thief on the cross. Write in a journal about these experiences.
- Write a letter to God expressing your love for God and your desire to deepen your relationship with God. Tell God about your daily life experiences. Express how much you need God's guidance in your life. Tell God what it is like to live through Lent and Holy Week with Jesus.
- Write a poem, a hymn, a psalm, or a short story about your relationship with God.
- Draw or paint a picture that expresses your love for God or your feelings about the Lenten season. Draw or paint a picture that expresses God's love for you.
- Spend some time "hanging out" with God. Feel God's presence as you go through the daily routine of your day. Experience God as your Loving Companion daily. Be honest with God about your joys, sorrows, and frustrations in life.
- Contemplate what it means to make your home with God and to have God dwell in your heart. Think about how you can change and grow as a result of God dwelling in your heart. Work and pray to bring about that change in your life. Imagine yourself as that changed person. How would you act and feel?

Opening our hearts to God can increase our trust in God's invitations and promises. We can spend each day in the quiet shelter of God's love and protection and listen to the prayer of the Holy Spirit for our lives.

KATHERINE E. AMOS

3. Burton Cooper, *Why God?* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 85.

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precise parallelism: “you will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot” (v. 13).

Verses 14–16 return to the first-person form of the opening verses: “because he has bound himself to me, I will rescue him” (v. 14a), but the role is reversed: rather than the first person expressing the petitioner’s perspective, it now expresses the divine response to the petitioner’s trust. The confirmation of God’s beneficence as a response is not marked by specifics. Rather, it offers fairly stock refrains of God’s actions in response to the faith expressed by a believer. God declares the intent to execute a series of actions on behalf of the petitioner: “I will deliver him because he has known my name” (v. 14b).

The use of the expression “known my name” is a common reference to those who offer worship to Israel’s God (Ps. 9:10). God promises an answer when called upon and to be present in the midst of distress. God will deliver them and honor them (v. 15). God concludes this pledged response with the promise of a long life for the petitioner, and that God will show salvation to the one trusting in God (v. 16). Some commentators take this last phrase as a summation of all the actions, and count seven specific actions by God, a metaphor for the completeness of God’s response to the petitioner’s trust. Just as the psalm opened with two verses expressing trust, it closes with two verses completing God’s response to that trust.

In the context of the Lenten season, this psalm offers the believer reassurance that trust in God brings about the assurance of a positive response from God. To call upon God, with the knowledge that God remains with us even in distress, is great comfort in this season of contrition.

KENNETH G. HOGLUND

Homiletical Perspective

not treat God willy-nilly, just because God pledges a sheltering providence for your life.”

An inexact analogy might go something like this: Parents of a 17-year-old pledge to care for their child throughout life, affirming and supporting her through every major stage of the journey. The child clearly benefits from their generous love in a continuous way. As a teenager the child receives a used car through the kindness of the parents. They pay the insurance. They oversee its care. Now, when the daughter goes out for a spin one night, there is a difference between her testing the limits of the car at high speed around a curve and losing control, *and* this same girl driving quite considerably around the same curve, doing the best she can to maintain the car’s course, and still losing control. The reckless choice is nothing less than playing lightly with all that the parents have entrusted to her.

So it is with the psalmist’s reference to “no evil befalling” those who love the Lord. This pledge of God is not a promise with which we are permitted to play lightly.

In the end, a preacher will probably want to view Psalm 91 as only one expression of faith. There are other expressions that need to fill out the picture, other passages of Scripture we need to draw upon when truly bad things happen to us in life. It seems appropriate to allow the psalmist to show some exuberance for the sheltering providence he feels on this day. To know that no *final* evil will befall any one of us, even if there is no cure for that tumor in the brain of the person we love most in the world, is its own amazing comfort.

PETER W. MARTY

Romans 10:8b–13

^{8b}“The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart”

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

Theological Perspective

Lent laments the pervasive presence of sin among human beings. For forty days we take account of the times we have “missed the mark” (a word study of *hamartia* would be a fruitful project), done what we should not have done (Rom. 7:14–20), and not only committed sins, but have lived “in sin” (Rom. 6:1–12). Bowed like weeping willows, we admit freely that we have borne carnal fruit (Gal. 5:16–21). An ashen stigma announces our state of being, our sincere sorrow, and our intention to amend our ways.

In our text for today, although we are knee-deep in the ashes of our burned-out lives, an impossible possibility illumines the dark sky that is clouded by our smoldering sins. Paul, who self-confessedly kneels with us in our plight at the altar of sorrow, announces that near us, even in us (Rom. 10:8b), is a transforming word of salvation (v. 8c). He declares that if we call upon the Lord, we will be saved from the plight of our sin (vv. 12b–13). If, with our entire beings, we confess and believe (v. 9), we will no longer be shamed by the sooty residue of our sin (v. 11), but rather will be enlivened, forgiven, renewed, and enriched (v. 12). Furthermore, the whole world is invited to join in being raised from the ashes of sin into the luminous presence of God (vv. 12a, 13).

The theological underpinnings of this passage contain core themes of Paul’s gospel. An initial

Pastoral Perspective

Want to divide a room fast? Just start talking about who is saved and who is not. Set up the criteria, then point out who is in and who is out. Soteriology is a hotbed of religious controversy. It is tempting to shy away from questions of salvation in an effort to avoid arguments. Yet these questions are on the minds and hearts of people all along the spectrum of religious belief, particularly during the season of Lent, with its focus on sin and sacrifice. Questions of soteriology are worth engaging from the pulpit. Obviously, we are not the first to ask such questions, and the voices of others can help us preach in this delicate terrain.

Did you know that righteousness has a voice? Paul gives it a voice in Romans 10:6: “But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart . . .’” The fact that Paul has chosen to personify “Righteousness by Faith” and has this character speak in Romans 10 signifies more than meets the eye. In these verses, the character Righteousness by Faith is sharing its autobiography, including what it means to be and have and live out righteousness by faith.

Righteousness by Faith is a hard worker, a relentless companion. It stirs up faith through the Word of God (v. 8). This is no small feat when you consider the thickheaded disciples, most people in

Exegetical Perspective

Lent asks us to consider what it means for us to live out the faith that we hold in our hearts. For Paul, that faith is not a generic sentiment (spirituality, as it is called today). It is not limited to a humanistic ethical code (“help others,” “work for a better world for everyone”). It is not even exhausted by the confession that there is only one God who created all things. Of course these three—spirituality, helping others, and recognizing God as the source of our being—are all important to the life of faith, but the Christian message focuses on Jesus. As Paul puts it briefly (v. 9): Jesus is more than an admirable human being. He embodies God’s reality as Lord (Phil. 2:9–11). God demonstrates that by raising him from death (1 Cor. 15:45). The riches of salvation are extended through Jesus as Lord to all humanity (v. 12).

Romans 10:8–13 expresses these basic Christian truths but does not argue for them. Paul assumes that the Christians in Rome share those beliefs with him, even though he has never visited that church. At this point in the letter, Paul is engaged in an argument that seems quite foreign to most Christians today, explaining why the gospel is being embraced by non-Jews but rejected by most Jews (9:1–5; 10:1–4). Accustomed to thinking of Christianity and Judaism as separate religions, we have a hard time seeing why that matters so much to Paul.

Homiletical Perspective

The fact that this reading from Romans is paired with the temptation story in Luke makes it underused on the First Sunday in Lent. The story of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days being tempted by the devil is so definitive for the Lenten season that most preachers will find it very difficult not to gravitate in Luke’s direction for the sermon on this particular Sunday in the Christian year. The reading from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, however, also has much to say to a congregation at the beginning of the season of preparation for the Christian Passover.

One way to focus a sermon on Romans 10:8b–13 would be to highlight the fact that there is more than meets the eyes when reading any one verse or passage from the Bible. These few verses, only four and a half to be exact, wonderfully illustrate the depth and breadth of Paul’s teaching. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Paul’s backdrop for this small passage is the entire story of God’s covenant with the Jews. This passage, coming as it does in the middle of Paul’s wrestling with the fact that many of his fellow Jews have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah (Rom. 9–11), reflects the fact that Paul’s mind and faith are profoundly shaped by his deep understanding and familiarity with the Old Testament and the grand narrative of the people of

Romans 10:8b–13

Theological Perspective

theme is the universal inclusiveness of the message. “All” are included; “no one” is excluded (vv. 11–13). Earlier, in chapters 1 to 8, Paul has already made his case for all persons to recognize their need (“all have sinned,” Rom. 3:23). No one, he claims, is righteous according to the law. At the same time, he declares that no one is hopeless. If one confesses/believes/trusts, one can be transformed by a spiritual renewal (Rom. 10:9). Harping on sin in the pulpit, however, may sound a sour note. Seeking to create a sense of guilt and shame is hardly where the theologically astute preacher wants to focus this text. The best the preacher can do with the self-righteous, the self-indulgent, and the narcissistic is to nudge them toward the recognition of their faults, in the hope that they will see through their self-rectitude and self-centeredness, into the darkness of their own lives and the emptiness of living “for me.”

While attending to the faux-righteous who are blind to their need, this text also challenges the preacher to make clear that Paul’s “all” includes those in the congregation who are totally convinced of their sin, unworthiness, and alienation from God and grace. These shrouded souls often feel rejected and unloved. Paul addresses both groups, including both in the category of “sinner.” That is the bad news: sin happens. All fall short.

A second theological theme in our passage is this good news: salvation is near, and it is near for all (v. 8b). Like the reign of God in Mark 1:15, salvation is “at hand.” For some, this involves not resting in our false perception of our righteousness; for others, not being mired in unworthiness. Paul bids those in both groups to open ourselves to receiving the riches (v. 12) endowed by salvation. He is talking about an event, a happening, an experience of transforming grace. In the preaching event we proclaim the nearness of God, in the hope that hearers experience it in their heart (v. 8b) and confess it with their lips (v. 9).

Karl Barth, for one, urges the preacher not to attempt to stage, manipulate, or induce the manifestation of the saving God who is at hand. Rather, in his commentary on Romans,¹ he cautions against seeking to employ artificial human means (argument, persuasion, etc.) to convince sinners of their sin. The preacher needs to announce God’s saving presence and proclaim that God is indeed among us. Barth says this means that no human pretense may be privileged. All the “means” of

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 377–82.

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the pews on Sundays, and all the rest of us as well. However the work of righteousness goes on, evoking a confession from the lips of believers. Only then, Paul explains through this character, is righteousness by faith complete (vv. 9–10).

Now for the chicken-and-egg question: Which comes first, belief or confession? One could rightly argue that you should confess, “Jesus is Lord,” only if you truly believe it. Otherwise these are merely shallow words, spoken along with the masses but lacking a foundation of substantial belief.

Imagine someone who is deep in the valley of doubt and despair. With hands thrown up in desperation, she shouts, “Jesus, are you even there?” Can this be considered an attempt at a confession of faith? Are these the words that Righteousness by Faith has placed on her lips? Is not addressing such a plea for help to God a statement of loyalty and trust, even when the plea is uttered with a shaking voice? Stated another way, if we name our places of doubt, are they not somewhere on the path of confessing that Jesus is Lord? The one who calms the storm and shows his wounded hands can also hold our doubts. If the person facing doubt and despair is surrounded by a confessing community—one that names what it believes—perhaps the community can confess on behalf of the doubting one, even as he or she navigates the path toward trusting God.

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v. 13). The sticking point for many Christians is that we think we know exactly what that call sounds like, what pitch it is, how the sentences are formed, and what words are used. In your community, how does it sound when people call on the name of God? As you watch the news, what does it look like when people cling to the name of Jesus? Many images that come to mind are of those with broken spirits, whose wind has left their sails and who are trying to stay afloat. Sometimes we call on Jesus with strong, confident voices—and often we call on Jesus with sighs too deep for words.

“The word is near you,” Paul writes, “on your lips and in your heart” (v. 8b). God is doing the heavy lifting here—bringing the Word near, planting the seeds of faith in our hearts, placing words tenderly on our lips. We do the telling—setting free those words already in our hearts and on our lips, sharing the questions central to our faith, in order to build up one another.

Confessing our faith takes practice. It is an ongoing act that changes as faith evolves throughout life. How might we help people articulate faith in a

Exegetical Perspective

He makes the task harder by employing forms of argument that are well known in ancient Jewish texts but unfamiliar to outsiders. Paul's audience in Rome comprised Christians of Jewish background, who still observed Jewish holidays and food laws, as well as a growing majority of non-Jewish believers. Paul later asks the two groups to live in harmony, accepting their differences and acknowledging their common faith in Christ (14:1–15:13). He also warns non-Jewish Christians against adopting an arrogant attitude toward Jews who do not accept Christ. Their refusal has served God's plan by spreading faith to the nations. At the end of the process, God will see to making God's people one in Christ (11:11–36).

Romans 10:8–13 continues a section that began with verse 5. There Paul had argued that fellow Jews rejected the gospel because they thought God required scrupulous observance of Jewish law and custom. They did not understand that the goal of the Law was a righteousness based on faith in Christ (vv. 1–4). Therefore Paul turns to the Law itself to prove his point. He does not deny that there are passages in the Law that demand such obedience. Moses pointed to that sort of righteousness in Leviticus 18:5 (v. 5). Then Paul shifts to a familiar rhetorical device, a "speech in character." Only this time the character speaking is "the righteousness which comes through faith" (vv. 6–7). Where does she speak? She speaks in Torah, in Moses' final speech to the children of Israel (Deut. 30:12–14).

Having set up the apparent contradiction in the words of Moses, Paul follows an established Jewish practice: find an interpretation of Torah that resolves the tension. Such arguments often hang on just a few words or phrases in a text. So Paul picks out phrases from Deuteronomy that he interprets as references to the gospel he preaches and the faith it calls for. The "word" said to be near in heart and mouth is the gospel "word of faith," being preached. The "mouth" becomes the response of believers who acclaim Christ as Lord in baptismal and worship contexts (Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Cor. 12:3). The "heart" is their conviction that God has raised Jesus from the dead (vv. 8–9). With a delicate rhetorical flourish Paul rounds out the pair in verse 10. Belief in the heart produces righteousness; confession with the mouth produces salvation. The biblical practice of synonymous parallelism (by which the same sentiment is repeated using different phrases) keeps us from concluding that there is a sequence of lesser to greater in the "righteousness—salvation" pair. Both designate the fullness of salvation.

Homiletical Perspective

Israel. These few verses in Romans 10 can take a reader on an illuminating journey through many different books in the Old Testament.

Any good reference Bible will allow a reader to discover that in these verses Paul is reworking a passage from Deuteronomy 30, where Moses speaks to the Israelites about the accessibility of the Law. Moses tells the people that the Law is not out of reach in heaven and or beyond hearing across the sea (Deut. 30:12–13). Paul takes this story of Moses and the Law and uses it to speak of the fact that faith is accessible through the proclamation of Christ—"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)." Paul goes on to quote from Isaiah 28:16: "No one who believes in him will be put to shame" (v. 11). Paul takes the point of accessibility to salvation through Jesus a gigantic step forward by proclaiming that in Jesus there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because "the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him" (v. 12). To reinforce this declaration of generosity, Paul quotes from the prophet Joel, who had already written, "Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:32). Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Joel are all referenced in these four and a half verses!

Paul came to his understanding of Jesus by way of the Old Testament. On the First Sunday in Lent, then, this passage can be a fine illustration of the Christian discipline of reading and meditating on the entire Word of God in Scripture. To understand the real depth of these verses is to follow the references into the whole story of God's redemptive work through the Jewish people, finding fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of the Jew Jesus Christ. In a phrase, a sermon on this passage might be titled "A Lenten Journey into the Scripture: Take, Read, and Follow the References."

It is interesting and important to note that Jesus too was shaped and strengthened in ministry by his deep reading of the Old Testament. Jesus matches the temptations of Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy (a reference Bible will take the reader to Deut. 8:3; 6:13; and 6:16). Reading and meditating on Scripture is a practice that equips followers of Jesus to face the allure of lesser gods and dead-end pathways in life. Disciplined and prayerful reading of the sacred stories of the Hebrew people; the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and the birth and early life of the church leads to wholeness and strength for the living of these days.

At least one warning should attend this call to read and meditate on the fullness of the scriptural

Romans 10:8b–13

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marketing the gospel must be denied. Every expectation that we can manipulate the fulfillment of God's promise must be renounced. The Word of our salvation is announced in the silence of searching and longing hearts—as, perhaps, the impossible possibility becomes present among us. “Because it is the Word of Christ, it is beyond our hearing and our speaking, for, to hear it and to proclaim it—we must wait.”² As, during Lent, we await Easter morn.

A third theological theme in this text is that our repentance and salvation begin and end with God. Sin is our problem; salvation is God's answer for our situation. To experience God's saving presence, we must believe in our hearts (v. 9) and confess with our lips (v. 10). A bounty of spiritual gifts accompanies God's presence (v. 12; see also Gal. 5:23–25). All this is of God, the author and agent of our salvation, as an act of grace.

The French painter John-Claude Gaugy came to America in 1966 and developed an art medium of works carved into wood. His most famous work, “The Awakening,” consists of more than 400 brightly painted wood panels, depicting the personal awakening that may visit us when we ponder the prospect of the love of God and new life in Christ. Until recently, it was on display in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where visitors silently watched and listened to the unspoken word of this work of art.³

By grace, sometimes—by words heard and sights seen—the Word is heard and new life arises. During Lent, sober darkness clouds our lives for forty days, only to be replaced by the impossible possibility—the luminescent brightness—of the resurrection of new life in Christ.

DONALD W. MUSSER

Pastoral Perspective

culture that discourages the sharing of faith? How might we help to draw out the words that God has planted in hearts and set gently on lips?

This passage is a call to individual confession of faith in response to Christ. This passage is also a call to communal confession of belief. Creeds are sticky for many Christians. Some denominations use the Apostles' Creed or another creedal text each week. Some congregations have written their own statements of faith. Other churches recognize such diversity among members' theologies that they have chosen not to use a formulated creed. It may be helpful, as Romans 10 is read this week, to consider the many ways we call on the name of God during worship. What names do we use for God? Which images for God have been given priority in our liturgy? Have we left room in our worship for people to express their faith in creative ways?

If we view worship planning through this lens, then each particular word or act in worship may become our corporate confession of faith. Romans 10 reminds us of the care with which we are called to plan worship on behalf of a community. We also have the opportunity to remind the congregation of the many ways in which they confess their faith together, from the call to worship to the hymns.

All who call on the name of God will be saved, whether this call is perfectly in tune or just a jumbled joyful noise. Practicing this call is our task this Lenten season. To learn to make this joyful noise, we can listen to the voices of those who have gone before us: ancestors in the faith, hymn writers, and confessors. We can also listen to the voice of Righteousness by Faith, personified by Paul, which assures us of our salvation, no matter how small the mustard seed of faith may be.

CALLISTA S. ISABELLE

2. *Ibid.*, 380.

3. See www.theawakeningmuseum.org.

Exegetical Perspective

In the second half of our passage (vv. 11–13) Paul makes another move characteristic of Jewish interpretation. He begins to argue from the prophets, who in Jewish tradition are treated as commentary on the Torah. Paul opens with Isaiah 28:16, a passage already quoted in Romans 9:33, and he closes with Joel 2:23. Even these two citations match the “heart—mouth” pairing of Paul’s rhetoric. The first affirms that belief in “him” will not be disappointed. The “him” is deliberately vague, as it can refer both to God and to Christ as Lord. The Joel citation shifts to the mouth, that is, “calling upon the name of the Lord.” This phrase too could be used in its common Old Testament sense of prayers or appeals addressed to God, or in the new Christian sense where the “Lord” in question is Christ.

Paul sandwiches a hot-button issue between these two prophetic quotations: the equivalence of Jew and non-Jew in God’s plan for salvation. Belief in Christ is the sole requirement, he says. As far as God is concerned, it makes no difference whether a person remains devoted to Jewish traditions or is a non-Jew, turning to the God of Israel from the polytheistic cults of the day. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul lashed out angrily at the suggestion that non-Jewish believers should adopt Jewish practices. His tone in Romans is milder. There is no threat of Judaizing here. Paul provides a framework for Jewish and non-Jewish believers to form a harmonious community in their one Lord.

At the same time, Paul’s theological insights should lessen conflicts between Christians and Jews. Israel has not lost her covenant with God. Even though Paul holds that “righteousness through faith” is the teaching of the Law, he points out that the conversion of Israel remains part of God’s plan. For Christians who take their cue from Paul, the Reformation slogan “righteousness through faith” could be a path toward reconciliation in divided communities, calling us to heal what is divided by fierce devotion to rules and ethnic claims to be the people of God.

PHEME PERKINS

Homiletical Perspective

narrative: We do *not* read the Bible simply in order to know facts and to be able to draw charts of connecting stories and people; rather, *we read the Bible to let the ongoing relationship of God to us and to the world settle into our hearts and minds.* We practice a deep, open, and disciplined reading of Scripture so that we can come to a place of trust in God’s love for us expressed in Christ Jesus—and to a place of understanding of God’s call upon our lives through this same Lord. To memorize verses and passages without allowing the love of God to be written on our hearts is work even the devil can do (see Luke 4:10–11 with references).

Another way to preach this passage from Romans is to proclaim with Paul the faithfulness of God to God’s promises. For Paul, Jesus is the fulfillment of Torah. Jesus embodies God’s abiding commitment to the salvation of God’s creation. For Paul, the Law came to its proper conclusion in Jesus and thereby opened up for all people the possibility of being in right relationship with God and neighbor. The focus here is on God’s faithfulness throughout the generations and toward the whole world. God’s promises to God’s people will never be revoked or go unfulfilled, and God’s generosity is expansive beyond our imaginations. Our calling as followers of the One who embodied God’s generosity is to live generous lives in response. The Lenten season invites us to self-examination regarding the extent to which God’s generosity is written upon our hearts.

ROBERT W. PRIM

Luke 4:1-13

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

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

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

Theological Perspective

The nature of evil, the nature of Christ, the power of temptation: each of these ideas has been named, over time, as a possible theme for the opening verses of the fourth chapter of Luke’s Gospel—and for good reason. The first two verses alone suggest the possibilities. “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” Here Jesus is described in relationship to the Spirit, evil is personified as the devil, and temptation lasts for forty days. It is all there.

No wonder, then, that when my gregarious middle son—just shy of four years old—encountered this text during a Lenten children’s liturgy, he learned something about all of these themes, especially the one about temptation. I did not accompany him to this children’s worship, but stayed in the main worship service. The congregational leader who led the children that day is a very dynamic speaker and storyteller, so I was not surprised when my son pulled me aside later that day to ask me some questions. “Hey, mom,” he started, “what do you know about the devil?” My mind immediately jumped to a spectrum of theological views and theodicies. Should I start with Augustine? Should I couch my answer in general terms of conservative and progressive or liberal interpretations of the text?

Pastoral Perspective

There is a spiritual depth and power for life and ministry that is made possible as we respond in faith to trials, trouble, temptation, and testing. If given a choice, most of us will not intentionally choose a path filled with difficulty. Our prior choices may cause us to stumble onto this path. Similarly, the choices of others around us may create harsh and hostile circumstances that force us onto this path, but most of us are slow deliberately to choose the path of discipline.

Yet in the season of Lent we are invited to embrace an intentional way of life. For the forty days of Lent (not including Sundays), we follow the example of Jesus who was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (vv. 1–2). The Spirit does not just “drop him off” in the wilderness to fend for himself; the Spirit continues to abide with him, enabling him to grow stronger through this season. In Luke 3:21–4:13, we see that the Spirit’s anointing of Jesus in baptism and his faithfulness to God amid testing constitute Jesus’ preparation for his mission. Being chosen and anointed is not sufficient preparation either for our ministry gathered or for our ministry scattered. We must be tested, often by being led to places of hunger and despair. Only then do we learn dependence on God, who graciously provides for all of our needs in all of life’s seasons.

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

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

¹¹and

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

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

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

Exegetical Perspective

What did I just hear? The Gospel text assigned for the First Sunday in Lent, the season of preparation to accompany Jesus through the events of Holy Week, is the final episode in Luke’s introduction to Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus has already been baptized and heard the voice from heaven say, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). We now witness Jesus sorting out what those words might mean for him. “Witness” is a problematic word, though, since Jesus is said to be alone in the wilderness, with only the Holy Spirit for company as he and the devil spar with each other with biblical texts. How do we “know” about it? The narrative is not presented as something Jesus taught, but rather as something that the “omniscient narrator” tells about Jesus. In other words, it is part of Luke’s theological portrait of Jesus. Luke presents this as a real deliberation in which the devil pushes Jesus to look at three powerful possibilities his religious tradition offers to interpret God’s words to him. These would certainly have been possibilities that his followers and members of the early church would have wondered about as they struggled to find categories by which to understand Jesus.

Luke assures us that Jesus is not separated from God’s love, for the Holy Spirit fills him at the end of this episode (4:14) as well as at the beginning (4:1),

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Luke’s account of Jesus’ resisting temptation in the wilderness invites reflection on the way the text presents the Son of God and the world in which his ministry is accomplished. For congregations observing Lent, the forty days of fasting, penitence, and prayer that mark the season will echo the forty days of Jesus’ wilderness wandering. One does not, however, need to observe Lent in order for this text to work its power on the hearers. By trying to draw the congregation into the narrative, the preacher will encounter a number of opportunities for a lively preached word.

One such opportunity involves forging a connection between the wilderness experience of Jesus and that of the church. Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness recalls Israel’s forty years of wandering—a point underscored by his repeated quotation of Deuteronomy. In the harsh environment of the wilderness, habits formed by slavery in Egypt are discarded and new ways of complete trust in God are formed. The preacher might ask, we are not the people of Israel, but in what ways have we experienced the wilderness? A number of different answers might surface in a congregational Bible study: time in recovery, a prison sentence, unemployment, or even the suffering of a whole community. The preacher, however, must push

Luke 4:1-13

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Is he ready for process theology? (Am I ready for process theology?) Then I looked at him again and remembered that he was three.

“What do *you* know about the devil?” I asked in classic mom/professor mode. His response was instructive.

“Well,” he began, “the devil talked to Jesus.” Good, I thought. He was paying attention. “The devil was mean,” he continued. *Mean*. I began to wonder about the relationship of “mean” to “evil.” What is the difference between “mean” and “evil”? Was the devil really mean? Perhaps it is possible to be mean without being evil, but is the opposite true? Is it possible to be evil without being mean? Or did the beloved children’s leader decide that her young audience could understand “mean” in ways they could not understand evil, so that my semantic questions had little importance relative to her rhetorical choice?

My musings were cut short as my son continued his hand-me-down exposition of the text. Leaning closer to me and dropping his voice to a loud whisper, he said, “if we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and”—his hushed tones became downright conspiratorial at this point—“there was candy . . .” He paused for effect. “The devil would say, ‘You should take some!’”

I am not sure what was most startling to me in this retelling of the story of Luke 4:1–13 by my three-year-old: that he could, in fact, retell it—especially in such dramatic fashion—or that the version he had learned placed such heavy emphasis on the temptation and the personified tempter. In line with theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I take my hermeneutical cues for reading this story from verse 8, in which Jesus quotes a passage from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” It is a demanding passage, but Jesus quotes it and abides by it, knowing that the very meaning and shape of his role as Messiah are at stake.

With Bonhoeffer in mind, I started to respond to my son’s statement with a message about Jesus’ obedience to God. I thought about telling him that the story is more about the responses Jesus gives to the temptations than to the temptations themselves. Jesus’ responses underscore his faithfulness to God, setting the stage for the whole of his ministry and, ultimately, his sacrifice. His responses come with the full knowledge that obedience to God will bring persecution, misunderstanding, and the cross. Many followers of Jesus wanted him to free Israel, to

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This passage is helpfully read in relationship with Deuteronomy 6–8. There we see the Lord putting Israel in humbling circumstances and testing what is in their hearts. The first danger that Israel faces amidst its new freedom is the complacency of believing that God is no longer necessary to protect them from hunger and hostile threats. Even today, prosperity, provision, and a secular worldview that interprets all of life apart from a covenant relationship with God are often far greater temptations to spiritual forgetfulness than hardship. Comparing the testing of Jesus with the testing of Israel in the wilderness, sketched in Deuteronomy 6–8, we see a close parallel, except that Jesus’ response is faithfulness. He renders to God the obedience that Israel does not give.

Looking toward the end of the Gospel narrative, the “last temptation” of Jesus is seen in Luke 22:39–46. Here Jesus’ faithfulness to God’s will is fully embraced in the context of his perseverance in prayer. By contrast, the disciples, like Israel, fail in the time of great trial and testing. Jesus had warned them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (22:40 RSV). Much more was at stake than practicing spiritual discipline on the Mount of Olives in the face of their sorrow, however. Faithfulness to the divine mission involved persecution, suffering, and death. Hence this was a difficult path not easily embraced. Only by “joining Jesus”—being in total solidarity with him and his mission—could the disciples grow to “walk the talk.”

A popular notion of the season of Lent is that we must “give up something.” We are often asked, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Various responses are expected: red meat, sweets, or perhaps excess television or Internet browsing. Perhaps we need to give up that simplistic notion of Lent. Reflecting on some implications of Lent, liturgical scholars Hickman, Saliers, Stookey, and White write: “Lent is thus not giving up something but rather taking upon ourselves the intention and the receptivity to God’s grace so that we may worthily participate in the mystery of God-with-us.”¹ “Intentionality” and “receptivity to God’s grace” are two things to take upon ourselves during Lent.

Intentionality in repentance, fellowship, prayer, fasting, Scripture meditation, acts of piety, acts of justice, and concentrating on our baptismal covenant are examples of things to “take upon

1. Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 106.

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even in this moment of encounter with the devil. Unlike other cultures where a person on the verge of adulthood goes off alone on a vision quest to find a name and an identity, Jesus has already had the visionary experience. This is rather a time of sorting: what did that experience mean for his future? The account is set in the wilderness, a place where prophets like Moses and Elijah also began their ministries. It is the place where Israel itself was birthed as a people on their trek to the land that had been promised to them. Jesus' time there was a time of fasting and presumably of prayer.

That much of the story is shared by Mark and Matthew. Jesus' time in the wilderness is a time of "testing" (*peirasmos*). These are not "temptations" to do things that are desirable but not good for him (like our "temptation" to eat an extra piece of cake). Rather, these are tests to see whether even good things can lure Jesus from a focus on God's will—or can lure believers into following a more comfortable messiah. Matthew and Luke share the account of the three specific tests, albeit with the second and third in different order. In two of the three the devil's hook to catch Jesus is the challenge "if you are the Son of God . . ." Does Jesus really believe what he has heard? Will God make good on the implied commitment? Let's find out before you go charging off into dangerous places.

To feed the hungry. The devil's challenges to Jesus are not to do bad things. The first, to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, would assuage his hunger after the long fast. By implication, if he can do that, he can also turn the abundant stones that cover Israel's landscape into ample food to feed the many hungry people in a land often wracked by famine. The challenge is to be a new Moses for the people. Jesus' reply draws on Moses himself, by citing Deuteronomy 8:3. Bread is good, but not sufficient to define Jesus' mission.

To rule the world with justice. The second test in Luke's account portrays the devil in the role of "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) who can manage the governance of the world's kingdoms. For the price of "worshiping" or honoring that authority, the devil will hand it all to Jesus. Remember that most of the known world in Luke's day was under the heavy-handed control of Rome and its economic, administrative, and military empire. Surely a "regime change" can only be for the world's good! Yet again Jesus' answer is no. The price is too

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beyond sheer identification to press the question of faithful engagement of the wilderness experience. Where have we experienced God's faithfulness in the wilderness? How has our relationship with God been transformed? How strong are the temptations of returning to old ways—to ways of relying on ourselves?

Into this mix of questions comes the person of Jesus, in whom the line between the old and the new is made unquestionably clear. The devil comes with tempting offers: to turn a stone to bread and thus sate his hunger, to worship the devil and gain influence over the world, and to test God's promises in a free-fall faith experiment. These Jesus rejects, preferring instead to trust God's word alone. Can we truly say that his experience and ours are analogous, or do we often find ourselves tested beyond our strength? The good news, however, is that the one who was tempted in the wilderness is also the crucified and resurrected one, in whom God's new life is made available to those who cannot, by their own resources, withstand temptation. The one who was tempted in the wilderness thus strengthens us in our weakness.

In addition to preaching on the wilderness, the preacher also has an opportunity to explore the dynamics of testing and temptation. The text tells a story about how evil works on the basis of distortions and lies. The devil presents wants as needs, falsehoods as truths, distrust as faith. The devil's second pitch—that all the kingdoms of the world have been given to him—*sounds* as if it could be true. That it is false, however, is revealed by the demand for false worship. At stake is who will be trusted and worshiped. Preachers might ask, where else do we hear lies that sound truthful? In advertising? From politicians or the media, or the pulpit? In the commonsense "advice" we teach our children? How might clinging to God's word unveil such lies as lies? The preacher could ask similar questions of the first and third temptations: Where else do we see wants presented as needs? Where are we tempted to think of faith as something God must earn?

Sermons exploring the dynamics of temptation could be built in a number of different ways. Their primary goal, of course, would be to teach the congregation to see the world in a new way. After all, that the devil comes with temptations is not something the world readily admits; we see it only through God's word. A preacher might focus on all three temptations, building a sermon in three parts, each exploring a different facet of temptation. Alternatively, the preacher may choose to focus on

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restore an earthly kingdom marked by honor and glory. To say yes to the world would have required Jesus to say no to God, to the way of God, and to an idea of God's kingdom that those followers simply did not understand. It would have required him to say no to the freedom and love for humanity that are the marks of his death and resurrection.

Then it occurred to me. Maybe my little boy—who had already taken in so much—understood these very points about the story. So I asked him. “Honey, if we were at a store, and Dad and I were in one aisle, and you were in another aisle, and there was candy, and the devil said, ‘You should take some!’ What would you say back to the devil?”

A genuinely sweet grin lit up his entire face and without hesitation he replied, “Oh! I would say thank you!”

It is not surprising that a three-year-old missed the point, but lots of us miss the same point all the time. It is far easier than not for us to say, “Thank you,” when temptation comes calling; however, the story is only partly about temptation. Today's text is also about Jesus' choice—and ours—to be obedient to God. Certainly, it is the more difficult choice for him to make, but it marks the beginning and frames the whole of his public ministry, particularly as it is described in Luke—from his initial rejection at Nazareth at the end of chapter 4 to his arrest and crucifixion in chapters 22 and 23.

Maybe one day my son will be able to understand the difficult idea that the way of God is simultaneously the way of obedience and the way of freedom. Personally, I am still working on it.

LORI BRANDT HALE

Pastoral Perspective

ourselves.” Similarly, in the season of Lent, it may be helpful to recall or enact the historic practices of preparing new converts for initiation into the Christian faith at Easter. This is intentional evangelism aimed at new converts. We should always be reminded that conversion is best understood as a process and not as an event. Evangelism as initiation into discipleship in response to the reign of God² is primarily concerned with faith formation and not with membership recruitment or institutional survival. In partnership with the Holy Spirit, evangelism engages the whole people of God in habitual practices.³

By taking on “intentionality” and “receptivity to God's grace” during Lent, new converts and members gain the spiritual depth to be faithful to “the mystery of God-with-us” even in our unexpected trials and temptations. Jesus did not ask for trials and temptations; he accepted that they could not be avoided if he would do God's will. Jesus' season of testing was not for a day or two; his season of forty days of temptation suggests to us that we may have faithfully to endure seasons of long and protracted difficulty. Jesus did not have just one encounter of diabolical testing; he overcame multiple temptations. His temptations were real and riveting.

Would Jesus exploit his status and power before God as the Son of God to satisfy his own needs and desires? Would Jesus compromise his relationship with God by failing to acknowledge the ultimate sovereignty of God over all things? Would Jesus accept the bait of Satan, who interpreted the Scriptures outside of intimate knowledge of the ways of God? Jesus' intentionality and receptivity to God's grace show us the way to turn toward God, rather than away from God, during our trials and temptations. If we choose the Lenten struggle to be intentional and receptive to the grace of God, we will encounter a faithful God who leads us not only into the wilderness but also through the wilderness.

JEFFERY L. TRIBBLE SR.

2. Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 114.

3. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner, eds., *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xxvi.

Exegetical Perspective

high, even to acknowledge the self-evident power of the devil in the political arena. Jesus' reply is from Deuteronomy 6:13, the *She'ma Israel*, which Matthew places as the last and pinnacle of Jesus' replies. *All* authority belongs only to God. Implicitly, even playing the world's game for a good purpose would be to risk serving something less than God.

To serve God faithfully. Luke's sequence of tests concludes in Jerusalem, the place where Jesus' ministry will culminate in his passion and resurrection appearances, and where the church will begin (Acts 1). The devil's challenge is compounded by a quotation from Psalm 91:11–12, which promises God's protection to those who are righteous. The temple is the place where the presumably most righteous—the priests—carry out their work. “Go there,” the devil challenges, “and test it!” Many of those professionally righteous folks in Jesus' day, however, were living out their role among Israel's elites by working hand in glove with the Roman occupiers, to the detriment of Israel's poor and suffering. Surely reform is in order! Again Jesus' reply comes from Deuteronomy: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deut. 6:16).

No, but Yes. Jesus' successful completion of the tests sends the devil packing until the “opportune time” when he enters Judas to launch the events of the passion (Luke 22:3). In Luke's account of the passion and of Jesus' earthly ministry, the meaning of Jesus' baptismal commission unfolds, recalling the three tests he has undergone. Though he refused to turn stones into bread, he does feed the hungry (Luke 9:10–17). Though he refused political power, the proclamation of God's empire of justice and peace is the focus of his preaching and teaching. Though he refused to jump off the temple to see if God would send angels to catch him, he goes to the cross in confidence that God's will for life will trump the world's decision to execute him. Game, set, and match to Jesus!

SHARON H. RINGE

Homiletical Perspective

one temptation, probing it in depth. Since the passage is itself a narrative, using stories—from movies, books, or experience—would be particularly appropriate. The congregation may need help to see with transformed vision this world in which evil's tantalizing lies abound.

Finally, preaching this passage becomes an opportunity to explore the identity of Jesus. Much exegetical ink has been spilled about whether or not this incident ever really “happened.” In the text, no one witnessed it. In the reading of the story in the liturgy, however, we *become* witnesses to who Jesus is. That Luke places the temptation narrative where he does makes questions of Jesus' identity apparent. As in the Gospel of Matthew, this story follows the baptismal narrative, in which Jesus is declared Son of God. Unlike Matthew, Luke inserts a genealogy of Jesus in between the stories, tracing Jesus' lineage to Adam, who is also in Luke's telling “a son of God” (3:38). In the story itself, the devil's come-on line begins with “*ei huios ei tou theou*.” This could be translated, “if you are the Son of God,” but most likely means “since you are the Son of God.” The appearance of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism has answered the question of *whether* he is the Son; the question now is what kind of Son he will be. Luke's theological point here is unmistakable: this one is unlike Adam (and unlike us); the powers of evil will have no sway over this one, in whom God's saving purpose is made plain.

These exegetical details will not preach very well, but the theological point is worth developing. One common pastoral-theological question concerns the reality of evil: why it exists and why God seems to do nothing about it. In this story, that could be easy to dismiss, Luke assures us that evil will have no charge over the Son. Moreover, because God's saving purpose in Jesus was meant for the whole world, evil does not have ultimate charge over us. One common Lenten refrain is, “Return to the LORD your God” (Joel 2:13). In this story, we see that we have a God worth returning to, for in God alone is the tempter defeated.

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