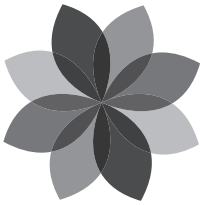
Year C, Volume 1

Advent through Epiphany



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship

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WJK Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville • Kentucky

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Publisher's Note

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

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

We at Westminster John Knox Press want to thank the superb editorial team that came together to make Connections possible. At the heart of that team are our general editors: Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, and Cynthia L. Rigby. These four gifted scholars and preachers have poured countless hours into brainstorming, planning, reading, editing, and supporting the project. Their passion for authentic preaching and transformative worship shows up on every page. They pushed the writers and their fellow editors, they pushed us at the press, and most especially they pushed themselves to focus always on what you, the users of this resource, genuinely need. We are grateful to Kimberly Bracken Long for her innovative vision of what commentary on the Psalm readings could accomplish and for recruiting a talented group of liturgists and preachers to implement that vision. Bo Adams has shown creativity and insight in exploring an array of sources to provide the sidebars that accompany each worship day's commentaries. At the forefront of the work have been the members of our editorial board, who helped us identify writers, assign passages, and most especially carefully edit each commentary. They have cheerfully allowed the project to intrude on their schedules in order to make possible this contribution to the life of the church. Most especially we thank our writers, drawn from a broad diversity of backgrounds, vocations, and perspectives. The distinctive character of our commentaries required much from our writers. Their passion for the preaching ministry of the church proved them worthy of the challenge.

A project of this size does not come together without the work of excellent support staff. Above all we are indebted to project manager Joan Murchison. Joan's fingerprints are all over the book you hold in your hands; her gentle, yet unconquerable, persistence always kept it moving forward in good shape and on time.

Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing Connections. President Theodore J. Wardlaw and Dean David H. Jensen have been steadfast friends of the project, enthusiastically agreeing to our partnership, carefully overseeing their faculty and staff's work on it, graciously hosting our meetings, and enthusiastically using their platform to promote Connections among their students, alumni, and friends.

It is with much joy that we commend Connections to you, our readers. May God use this resource to deepen and enrich your ministry of preaching and worship.

WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS

Introducing Connections

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOEL B. GREEN
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Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JENNIFER L. LORD
Connections Editorial Board Member


Connections

First Sunday of Advent

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

Jeremiah 33:14–16

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

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

This brief passage consists of three pronouncements, each of which begins by announcing a future that will come to pass and is already on its way. The phrase "the days are surely coming" is distinctive of Jeremiah. It introduces short declarations that articulate the prophet's eschatological vision, which encompasses judgment (7:32–34; 9:25–26; 19:6–9; 51:47), return (16:14–15; 23:7–8), and restoration (23:5–6; 30:3; 31:27–28, 31–32, 38–40). In this instance, the formula introduces a unit that speaks of a restored monarchy and priesthood and of the Lord's determination to fulfill divine promises (vv. 14–26). The unit concludes a collection of messages, generally referred to as the Book of Comfort (30:1–33:27), that looks forward to God's restoration of the people and land.

The passage speaks of a Branch that the Lord will cause to spring up for David. The epithet evokes Isaiah's image of the Branch that sprouts from the stump of Jesse. Isaiah envisions an ideal Davidic king who will reign with wisdom, understanding, and righteousness and preside over a renewed earth that knows no violence or destruction (Isa. 11:1–9). Jeremiah names righteousness as the salient attribute of this king and the land he rules. Righteousness in this context may be understood as the right ordering of the world necessary for life to flourish, specifically as this right ordering is manifested in the Torah by God's ordering of Israel through commandments, laws, and rituals. As a righteous king, the Branch rules in accord with the divine order. In contrast to the disordering kings of Jeremiah's time, the Branch extends the Lord's righteousness by executing justice.

Divine justice entails the maintenance of social and cosmic equilibrium that emanates from right ordering. Israel's kings were charged with executing justice and righteousness as a necessary condition for the blessing of the land and people (1 Kgs. 10:9; Pss. 72:1–3; 89:14). The king, in short, was to implement the Lord's mandate for justice among the people (Ps. 99:4; cf. Pss. 33:5; 89:14). Jeremiah echoes these sentiments elsewhere by calling the powerful to recognize that the Lord practices "steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth" (9:24) and admonishing Jerusalem's kings to do the same (22:3, 15). Although Judah's kings failed in their mandate, the Branch's reign will unite the people (the house of Israel and the house of Judah) and the land (Judah and Jerusalem) within the sphere of the Lord's beneficial order, so that the land itself may be called "The LORD is our righteousness."

As a whole, the vision of restorative righteousness looks back to and reiterates a prophetic pronouncement that occurs earlier in the book (23:5–6), the "promise" that the Lord confirms will be fulfilled, but with a significant change. In the first instance, the prophet declares that the

Branch will be named "The LORD is our righteousness." In this second utterance, the name is bestowed on the land rather than the king. Here Judah and Jerusalem are given the name. The change shifts the focus, from the character of the Branch (in the first case) to the result of the Branch's reign, that is, the righteous ruling that renders salvation and safety for the land.

The shift in emphasis toward the land becomes clearer when it is recognized that the passage stands between pronouncements of devastation and restoration set in Jeremiah's time (33:1–13), and emphatic declarations that the Lord will bring about every promise of healing and restoration in an unspecified future (33:17–26). The preceding passage presents a terrifying description of the destruction to come at the hands of the Chaldeans (vv. 4–5), abruptly shifts to promises that the Lord will bring restoration, healing, security, and forgiveness (vv. 6–9), and concludes by calling the doomed people to look beyond their devastated land and envision a landscape once again filled with merriment and grazing flocks (vv. 10–13).

The lection then pivots from the near historical horizon to the eschatological fulfillment of the Lord's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the establishment of salvation and security through the Branch (vv. 17–26). The historical particularity of the Chaldean invasion thus accentuates the failure of Israel's kings to bring salvation, providing the basis for the vision's emphatic declarations that the Lord will unilaterally accomplish this end through the righteous Branch.

The Book of Comfort as a whole strikes a note of hope against the pall of disaster, despair, and divine wrath that pervades much of Jeremiah. The oracles and messages within it declare that destruction and wrath, no matter how utter and complete, are not the Lord's last word concerning Israel. Rather, the catastrophic present must be seen as a pulling down and plucking up necessary for a building up and planting that will remake the landscape (1:10; 24:6–7; 31:28). Jeremiah 33:14–16 declares that the remaking will be the Lord's work through the Lord's king, a new and permanent king who will replace the impotent kings held captive by the moment. The vision of a future beyond the contemporary horizon, therefore, calls the people of God to look beyond the present moment, with its violence, disintegration, and failed leadership, to the restorative end toward which the Lord is moving, and so to orient faith and decision making within the context of God's ultimate power and purposes, rather than the clamoring demands of a paralyzed present. This is but one of many such visions in the prophetic literature that speak of the Lord's determination to renew the creation once and for all (e.g., Isa. 25–27; Ezek. 47:1–12; Hos. 14:4–7; Joel 2:23–32; Amos 9:11–15; Mic. 4:1–5).

The other three lections respond to the promise of eschatological justice with supplication and anticipation. Psalm 25:1–10 can be read as the human response to the promise whose fulfillment is announced by this passage. The psalm is, first of all, a declaration of trust and, second, a plea that the Lord ensure that a waiting people not be put to shame (vv. 1–2). The psalmist responds to the declaration that the Branch will execute justice and righteousness by asking the Lord for instruction in the ways and paths that reflect God's righteousness in the world (vv. 3–10).

The New Testament lections share a sense of expectancy. First Thessalonians 3:9–13 expresses Paul's eagerness to reunite with those whom he brought to faith and concludes with a reference to the coming of the Lord that will fulfill the prophets' eschatological vision. Like Jeremiah, Paul speaks of God's powerful working in the lives of believers, to make love abound and to strengthen holy hearts. Luke 21:25–36 looks directly toward the king that Jeremiah speaks about—the Branch, now the Son of Man—and exhorts diligent vigilance in the space between the historical now and the eschatological future. The parable of the fig tree and Jesus' admonitions to pay attention to the signs of his coming remind readers that God is not absent or inactive in the interim but, to the contrary, powerfully at work in every present moment to bring about the redemptive end foreseen by the prophets.

L. DANIEL HAWK

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The Advent season opens with a promise to Jeremiah that God will fulfill the divine promise to establish David and his dynasty forever (2 Sam. 7:11–16). To people in exile, this promise gains specificity. It focuses on "a righteous Branch to spring up for David" who shall "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (v. 15). This righteous one brings safety to the people, saving them. This one will be called "The Lord is our righteousness" (v. 16; cf. Jer. 23:5–6).

Liturgical Context. This word of hope is appropriate for the First Sunday of Advent and reaches out to us, always. It looks forward, anticipating an action of God in caring for the people of God. The promised one will embody what God most desires: carrying out justice and righteousness. This one will save the people, as God through Israel's history had been the "God of salvation" (Ps. 68:20), leading to the affirmation: "Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel" (Jer. 3:23). Restoration of the exiled people to their homeland and the safety of the land and its people rests in the work of the righteous one.

The Christian church has seen this prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In Advent, the church anticipates the coming Christ, finding in him the reality of all God's promises (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus Christ is the righteous one of David's line. He brings the strong hope of carrying out God's justice and righteousness in himself. He brings salvation through his life, death, and resurrection, establishing forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace with God forever. He protects and secures those who believe in him. He enables lives of safety marked by praise and thanks to Jesus, who is rightly called "The Lord is our righteousness." Liturgically, during Advent these words of promise find their reality in the coming Christ, who is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Jesus brings the blessings of God's continual presence with God's people. He enables new lives to be lived in relationships of love and trust with God and others.

Ecclesial Context. This Advent promise provides the church with its message and mission. The church proclaims there is a God of hope who has sent God's Son, the righteous one—Jesus Christ. The promise is that Jesus Christ does what is just and right. He shows us what living this way means in human life, giving us a model to follow. The church's mission is to continue this ministry and enact God's justice and righteousness in caring for the world and the needs of all people. Since Jesus himself is God's mission to the world, the church lives God's mission as it conveys Jesus Christ. As theologian Karl Barth put it, the church community is "the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ himself."[1] In and through the church, Christ's work is carried out.

To be the people of God means proclaiming there is salvation and safety in Christ. This is a message of power, hope, and peace for the world. The church declares that God's ancient promises to the prophet are now real in Christ. The God who has been Israel's salvation is also the God who saves us today. The church lives out its salvation by following the ways and will of Christ. We are led by the Holy Spirit to proclaim this good news in word and deed.

Social and Ethical Context. Advent is a time of hope that points us ultimately to God's coming reign or kingdom. Jesus Christ brings God's reign in himself. Early church theologians spoke of God's kingdom as *autobasileia*, a "self-kingdom"—a kingdom in Jesus Christ himself. God's righteousness and justice are found in Christ, as well as salvation and safety. This makes it possible for us to live in God's reign here and now. We can live in the freedom of serving God and receive the blessings of God's presence with us in Christ. This sustains us and launches us into participating in God's kingdom in Christ every day!

There is no greater impetus for the church and the Christian's involvement in the world than God's reign. This reign is with us now in Jesus Christ, the promised "righteous Branch,"

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), IV/1:661.

who carries out justice and righteousness. This reign is the coming kingdom for which Jesus instructed his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). We work and serve Jesus Christ as people of his reign seeking the justice and righteousness that he embodies for the people of the earth. What is most worth doing for Christ's disciples is investing ourselves for the sake of others in this world because "the Lord is our righteousness." We do what is just and right on their behalf and because of God in Christ.

We can live out God's promise to Jeremiah, especially in Advent, when we *look for signs* of God's reign in Christ around us, and when we *plant signs* of God's reign in Christ with others.

If Jesus is our model of justice and righteousness, we will see Christ's reign when what is just and right prevails in our society. When right relationships are established between persons and institutions and among groups and persons, we recognize that the righteous one, Jesus Christ, is present. We see the reign of Christ happening.

By joining the struggle for justice, human rights, and peace, we can plant signs in our culture of God's reign in Christ. This is what Jesus himself desires and embodies. As Christ's disciples in the church, we join in seeking the righteousness Jesus showed and was in himself. Despite the fact that these struggles have to be made continually—and that nothing stays won in these arenas—the church continues its witness and work. We are pulled forward in faith by the promise of God's coming reign, and by the promise that God's reign is already present in the person of Jesus Christ, the "righteous Branch," who is God with us. This is what enables us to keep on through life. We obey Paul's word: "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right" (2 Thess. 3:13).

Personal Context. The message of Jeremiah was a word of hope and comfort for Israel and Judah. In Jesus Christ, this is a word of hope and challenge for the church. God's promise in Christ also touches our human hearts. The promise to Jeremiah means the future is now. In Jesus Christ, we live in the reign of God as we anticipate further the fullness of God's reign in the eternal life Christ gives us (John 10:28). We look to Jesus as the model for how to live—doing what is right and just in God's sight. He is "the righteous Branch." In him we will be saved. We receive God's forgiveness and reconciliation, knowing the joy of Christ's presence, and being led by the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Christ by faith. We are kept in safety, as Jeremiah was promised. As followers of Christ, we are sustained by God's love in Christ. We are enabled to live as Christ desires. We are given the deep personal assurance that nothing in all creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

DONALD K. McKIM

Psalm 25:1–10

[1]To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
[2]O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
[3]Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

[4]Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
[5]Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

[6]Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
[7]Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

[8]Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
[9]He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
[10]All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

The season of Advent calls us to watch and wait, to prepare for God's coming again in judgment. The surrounding culture is not interested in this sort of Christmas preparation. The waiting is over by Halloween, as full-blown Christmas displays appear in stores, sales abound, and sidewalk Santas ring bells inducing generosity or guilt. Even those of us who observe the Advent discipline of waiting often "sweeten" the time. We count down the days with Advent calendars that help our children "wait" by opening something every day—a piece of chocolate, a tiny trinket, or a small picture window. Christian adults do not wait in penitential sackcloth. We don that Christmas sweater, tie, or pin, decorate trees, and attend parties. We await the birth of Jesus in all its Luke 2 joy, not the coming of the Son of Man in all its Luke 21 fear and foreboding.

Psalm 25:1–10 opens Advent with the desperate prayer of someone waiting on God to forgive and rescue. It begins with vivid contrasts. The psalmist prays: "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust" (vv. 1–2a). Despite this upturned beginning, the psalmist then sinks low, overwhelmed by the weight of internal shame and external threat: "Do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me" (v. 2bc).

We do not know what sins lie behind this shame or the fear that enemies will celebrate the psalmist's ruin. Like us, this psalmist keeps shameful things hidden. At one point, the psalmist urges divine selective memory: God should *remember* the commitment to mercy, but *forget* the psalmist's long rap sheet (vv. 6–7)!

Psalm 25 contains the three most important biblical words for sin. The words "sin" and "sinners" used in verses 7, 8, and 18 mean "to miss the target." Behind the term "transgressions" (v. 7) is the word "to rebel." In verse 11, "guilt" carries the sense of being twisted out of shape, bent over, bowed down. As one scholar puts it: "Here, then, are three dramatic pictures of a life that is not headed in the right direction, off target, a life of rebelling; a life twisted out of shape."[1]

These three understandings of sin reflect Jeremiah's prophecy to the nation of Judah, which is facing its own crisis of internal shame and external threat. The enemy Babylon exults over Judah, toppling its king, destroying Jerusalem and the temple, and forcing God's people into exile. Judah's own sinfulness brought this calamity upon them. They have missed the mark, rebelled against God, and twisted God's commandments to suit their own desires. Punishment looms. They cannot save themselves.

Luke 21:25–36 joins in painting a grim picture of our circumstances; yet none of these texts leave us at a dead end. We are not without hope, because we are not without God.

The psalmist waits in trust (v. 2) as long as necessary (v. 5). His waiting is not passive. To "untwist" his life, the psalmist must relearn and humbly re-place his feet in God's ways (v. 4). No matter how off-target we become, God's paths remain open, cleared by truth (v. 5) and marked by steadfast love and faithfulness at every turn (v. 10).

Desolate Judah receives comfort. Babylon and its king appear in control, but God has not ceded ultimate power. In Jeremiah 33:14–16, God speaks, and a future opens. Into a landscape of destruction, God sends a green shoot of hope. A new ruler will come from David's lineage to lead with justice and righteousness. "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (vv. 15–16).

Even Luke 21:25–36 offers hope. We stand up, raise our heads, because redemption is coming (v. 28). Creation greens again before the One coming to rule with justice and righteousness (vv. 30–31).

Psalms are often used for the Opening Sentences of a worship service, and Psalm 25:1–10 can be used in this way. A more robust contribution to the liturgy, however, would be as a prayer of confession and assurance of God's pardon. Composed by one overwhelmed by sin and shame, verses 1–7 could be adapted for a prayer of confession. Verses 8–10 shift abruptly from first-person to third-person speech. The waiting one becomes a witness. The psalmist becomes a liturgist. Imagine a congregation filled with the embattled people of Judah . . . or our own congregations filled with embattled survivors of other destructions: illness, grief, estrangement, addiction, violence, and sins undisclosed. Psalm 25:8–10 affirms that God creates a way forward marked by steadfast love and faithfulness. It becomes a responsive assurance of God's pardon to our confession of sin. It can also serve as an affirmation of faith elsewhere in the service:

> Good and upright is the Lord;
> therefore God instructs sinners in the way.
> God leads the humble in what is right,
> and teaches the humble God's way.
> *All the paths of the Lord*
> *are steadfast love and faithfulness,*
> *for those who keep God's covenant and decrees.*

Thankfully, we know that the gift of God's grace is not dependent on our ability to "keep the commandments and decrees." Psalm 25 and the book of Jeremiah emphasize our responsibility to walk in God's ways. Luke 21:34 lists behaviors to avoid, and 1 Thessalonians 3:13 prays that we will be found "blameless." Given this, the gracious words of Jeremiah 33 can fill out our assurance/affirmation as Advent begins:

> All the paths of the Lord
> are steadfast love and faithfulness,
> for those who keep God's covenant and decrees.
> The promise of God is fulfilled:
> The Righteous Branch springs up
> and we are saved.
> The One who has come
> is coming again
> in power and great glory!

KIMBERLY L. CLAYTON

1. James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 80.

1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

9How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel
before our God because of you? 10Night and day we pray most earnestly that we
may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.
11Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to
you. 12And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another
and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13And may he so strengthen your
hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the
coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

This brief lection invites us to read the texts for Advent 1 through the lens of joy: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" The reading was probably selected because of the reference in verse 13 to "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints," but the readings from Jeremiah and Luke also frame their messianic expectation with joy. Jeremiah assures that the Righteous Branch will bring righteousness and justice to the land so that God's people will be saved and live in safety (Jer. 33:15–16). In Luke, Jesus exhorts those who see the fearful heavenly signs to "stand up and raise your heads [a posture of welcome rather than fear], because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

Although the church in Thessalonica was not the first that Paul founded, it is widely agreed that this is the earliest of Paul's letters. Indeed, this letter may have initiated the practice of reading letters (and the Gospels) in Christian worship. Paul concludes this letter: "I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all" (4:27). Beverly Gaventa suggests that in so doing "the church entered into a permanent relationship with this text" and began the process of collection that led to the canonization of the New Testament.[1]

While we often think of Paul as a towering, solitary figure, seemingly always on the move planting churches, this letter makes it clear that Paul is part of a ministry team that includes Silvanus and Timothy (1:1). They, together, are writing this letter back to a community that they love deeply. The capital of the region of Macedonia, Thessalonica was an important Roman city on the Via Egnatia, a road stretching from the Caspian to the Adriatic Sea. A cosmopolitan city, Thessalonica had a wide range of religious options, including a major shrine to Caesar Augustus.

Much of what we consider religious language today originated in a political context. For example, the Roman emperor was referred to as "Father," "Lord," and "Savior." The term for a monarch's arrival was *parousia*, the term Paul uses for the second "coming" of Christ. When Paul uses these terms to refer to Christ, he walks a fine line between cultural appropriation and sedition.

Acts 17 presents a very different picture of Paul's activity. First, it says that Paul was accompanied by Silas (or Silvanus), but makes no mention of Timothy. Second, it says that they went to the synagogue (the ordinary pattern, according to Acts), but there is little or no evidence of a Jewish community in Thessalonica. Finally, it implies that Paul and Silas were only in town briefly before trouble erupted, and they had to leave town. By contrast, the letter implies that the missionary team must have been there long enough to establish a strong community

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 8.

("you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia," 1 Thess. 1:7). Further, by the time Paul and his colleagues write the letter, enough time has passed so that one of the questions is about the fate of those members of the community who have died before Christ's return (4:13). The letter gives us a much fuller picture of the relationship between Paul and the community and makes more sense of the depth of his prayers for them.

First Thessalonians may be divided into roughly two parts, and these verses conclude the first section with a summary statement (vv. 9–10) and a prayer (vv. 11–13), which serves as a bridge to the second half of the letter. Paul and his colleagues have been very worried about the Thessalonian community and whether their faith would stand in the face of rejection and persecution. Was the leadership strong enough? Were the practices of faith deeply embedded enough? Would the center hold? The affection that this ministry team has for the Thessalonians is also clear: "we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart" (2:17). Finally, Timothy was dispatched to visit the community. He returned with the good news that the community was thriving. Hence, the theme of thanksgiving (introduced in 1:2 and recapitulated here). The phrase ("how can we thank God enough?") echoes Psalm 116:12 ("What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?").

The team is overjoyed but still longs to see the community "face to face." This longing leads into the prayer, which can be read as one sentence (RSV) or divided into its three component parts (NRSV). First of all, the team prays that God will direct their way back to the Thessalonians. God is the one who leads not only this team but the spread of the good news, and so they pray that their future will again connect them to people for whom they feel deep affection. Paul's work is relationship building, not just "church planting."

The second prayer goes to the heart of Christian identity and community: "May the Lord make you . . . abound in love for one another and for all." It has been said that if there is only one believer, what you have is not Christian faith. Just as Jesus created a community of followers, so the apostolic mission was the creation of communities of faith and practice wherever they went. Embracing Christ as Savior and Lord meant stepping away from traditional loyalties, both civic and religious. It could and did lead to social ostracism and persecution. In return, believers found a new community and a new family: people once separated by race and class became brothers and sisters to one another in Christ.

In this prayer, however, Paul and his colleagues remind us that the love that creates this community is not simply for the sake of the in-group. The prayer is that they (we) will abound in love "for all." This Christian community is to show love, compassion, care, and respect not only to one another but also to those who have rejected them. Christian life is not a closed loop or zero-sum game. The beloved community is one that "abounds" and overflows with love, a place where the door is always open and there is always room for more.

Finally, the ministry team prays that God will strengthen them in holiness (that is, in the holy life to which they have been called in Christ) and prepare them to meet Christ when he comes. Here the authors anticipate the rest of the letter, which reminds the readers of what a life pleasing to God looks like and offers words of comfort regarding those who have died without seeing Christ's return.

This prayer reminds us that we live in the in-between time. Christ has indeed come and brought us the gift of transformed life—abundant life now and the promise of life eternal—yet the transformation is not complete. Both we and the whole creation long to see God's promises fulfilled. We yearn for justice that rolls down like mighty waters. We hope that one day the wolf will lie down with the lamb and swords become plowshares. We long for the day when mourning and crying and pain will be no more. We already know what God's future looks like, and in beloved community with one another we experience the firstfruits. Because all that will be is not yet, we need to be strengthened so that we may walk in the light.

CYNTHIA M. CAMPBELL

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The epistle lesson for this First Sunday of Advent is fittingly from the oldest document in the New Testament, Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. In this letter, Paul picks up his pen, thinks of that struggling church dwelling in Thessalonica—the cosmopolitan Roman capital of Macedonia sitting strategically on the Egnatian Way—and memorializes for the first time the term *ekklēsia* as he writes to the faithful gathered there.

Paul exults in this Thessalonian church and is demonstrably joyful in its survival, even in the midst of hard times, distress, and persecution. His love for this dear congregation is abundant. Earlier in his letter to them, his pastor's heart is on display in the way he describes himself as a "wet nurse" (2:7) and a "father" (2:11–12); and in this text he is effusive in his praise: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?" (3:9).

Here, in full view, is Paul's pastoral side. A planter of churches, he understands each one of them and their unique characteristics. Since the Thessalonian church is surely one of his favorites, his affirmations in this text are authentic and heartfelt.

In Acts 17:6, as the Reverend Rick Spalding, chaplain at Williams College, has written, "Paul and his cohorts are accused of being 'these people who have been turning the world upside down.' Paul would decline the honor of this marvelous phrase more readily than most of us would; he insisted that the intention of God was responsible for the vitality of faith in Christ wherever he found it. He would say that where preaching succeeds, God is already moving. We do not summon God in our sermons; God summons us."[2] God appears to be summoning that stalwart band of Thessalonian Christians, and this gives Paul joy.

Nonetheless, there is also a more sober note—a note of realism—woven in with the praise and affection. Speaking for himself and his partners in ministry, Silvanus and Timothy, Paul goes on to write, "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face *and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.*" Given Paul's apocalyptic understanding of reality, we are not surprised by this assessment. We do not learn specifically what is lacking, but we are reminded here that the Thessalonian church, just like your church and every other church dwelling in that creative tension between the "already" of the coming of Jesus Christ and the "not yet" of his return, is an ongoing work in progress.

Paul the pastor, like every other pastor across time who has shared with him the vocation of the gospel, has mixed emotions when he surveys even one of his most successful congregations. On the one hand, there is joy at the sheer contemplation of their being. The blood, sweat, and tears that went into the construction of the foundation of the gospel among them has not been in vain; to know that they are not floundering is good news for him, as it is for any pastor. On the other hand, he senses that there are some notes that are missing. So, however attached he is to them, he is willing to speak the pastoral truth in love regarding whatever is lacking in their faith.

Good pastors understand such truth-telling. At the funeral of a well-known and beloved parishioner, you get a special opportunity to tell the truth. Of course, you lift up the laudable things, the attributes, the noble aspects of that person's character. Because this is an occasion of grateful truth-telling, when perhaps your witness will be measured for its authenticity, maybe there is also occasion to lift up, with gratitude, the things that made him or her human. Paul here takes a risk, gently and in love, to tell the truth.

This sober note, though, is followed by an expansive benediction and a word of hope: "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (3:11–12).

He cannot stop being their good pastor;

2. From an unpublished paper on this text, by Rick Spalding, written for the annual meeting of the Moveable Feast cohort in January 1996.

and this drives him to the recognition of these things. He sees them as they are now, in the light of who they are meant to be when God has completed them. At the root of Paul's eschatological vision—however soon or delayed the redemptive completion of all things may be—is this claim: God holds the future, and God is pulling us, even now, toward that future. So it is that Paul yearns to lead that Thessalonian congregation toward restoring what yet is lacking in their faith.

At the beginning of Advent, when the world's grimness is somehow startled by new expectancy and hope as we begin another cycle of the Christian year, we are invited to take a fresh look at the ongoing work in progress that we in fact are. We are urged to consider who we are at our best—people who are forever "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6)—and to attend to what is yet lacking in our faith. Churches at their best are joyful, faithful, generous, courageous, and profound announcements, even embodiments, of what the realm of God looks like up close.

A number of years ago, a particularly beloved moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)—the highest-ranking officer of that particular communion—went on a somewhat controversial visit to sister churches in a particular eastern European country. The Berlin Wall, the defining symbol of the cold war, had recently come down, and she and her entourage made plans to visit a particular parish in a remote mountainous area, and to worship with them. Weather conditions were icy and harsh. Diplomatic relations between this country and the United States were strained, and there was not a great deal of enthusiasm there for this visit.

The moderator's plane arrived much later than scheduled, getting through customs took longer, and then there was the weather. At best, her arrival in this mountain community would be far later than envisioned. This woman with her strong missional heart was not deterred, though; so the long drive up into higher altitudes and even more snow began. When the group arrived in the town, far later than scheduled, there was no certainty that anyone would still be at the church. Someone in town gave them directions, and they started off again. As they neared the area of the church, they noticed up ahead a long line of lights; and as they drew nearer, they beheld, one after another, the members of that church—each one of them bundled up against the cold and holding a candle. One light pointed them to another—hundreds of lights!—and they followed the light for the rest of the journey and to the front door of the church.

When the moderator encountered the host pastor, she asked him through an interpreter: "How long were you planning to wait out here in the dark and the cold?" He replied: "Until you came."

THEODORE J. WARDLAW

Luke 21:25–36

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

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

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

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Our text belongs to a larger narrative unit concerned with calamity, redemption, and readiness (20:1–21:38). The whole is marked off by its location in the temple and its focus on Jesus as teacher—summarized well in verses 37–38: "Every day he was teaching in the temple. . . . And all the people would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple." Luke 20:4–21:4 emphasizes Jesus' status as the faithful interpreter of God's agenda, over against the Jerusalem leaders, generally portrayed as adversaries who use their positions to test him (20:1–44) and to tyrannize the helpless (20:45–21:4). Luke 21:5–36 portrays the coming calamity that marks the arrival of the new age.

Luke 21:25–36 has two parts. The first, verses 25–28, speaks of heavenly signs and earthly trauma in anticipation of the coming of the Son of Man. These verses signal the end of the longer discourse, in which Jesus responds to the request for a time line by which to track the coming disaster (v. 7). They show how Jesus moves from talking about the "sign" of the coming destruction of the temple (v. 7) to talking about the "signs" of the coming of the end of this age (v. 25). The second, verses 29–36, concludes the entire section by showing how these calamitous signs ought to be understood in relation to God's program of redemption and by calling Jesus' followers to readiness and faithfulness. It is not too much to say that Luke 21:25–36 has two interrelated focal points: (1) God's people can trust God; (2) therefore God's people exercise faithfulness—even in the face of disaster.

The OT functions as a treasure trove from which Jesus, in Luke, has chosen images of the pending disaster. Isaiah 13 is especially significant, with its reference to the Lord's assembling an army in preparation for the Day of the Lord, a time of judgment, destruction, and rescue (see esp. Isa. 13:4, 6–11, 13; also Isa. 5:30; 8:22; 17:12; Ezek. 32:7–8; Joel 2:10, 30–31). This is important for two reasons. First, it urges that we understand the tragic events Jesus sketches as meaningful within God's plan to set things right. On the one hand, these events do not catch God by surprise, or suggest that God has

forgotten God's people. On the other hand, they signal God's initiative to bring an end to arrogance, tyranny, and wickedness in all its guises. Second, whereas Isaiah anticipates the Day of the Lord, Jesus proclaims the coming of the Son of Man. In other words, Luke portrays the coming of the Son of Man as a theophany. Of course, throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself is identified as the Son of Man, but here the resonances with Daniel's vision ("I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven," Dan. 7:13) are especially strong. It is therefore worth reflecting on the consequence of the Son of Man's appearance in Daniel's vision: "To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed" (Dan. 7:14). Likewise, the Son of Man comes "with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27), and with him comes the final, decisive, universal establishment of God's reign.

Jesus anticipates three different responses to the calamitous events he has sketched. The nations react in bewilderment and "people will faint from fear" (vv. 25–26); these first two responses are inappropriate for God's people. In his address to them, Jesus counsels confidence (standing with raised heads), assured of God's intervention. For them, the Day of the Lord is not an occasion for dread, nor is it a day to be avoided. Rather, it is the realization of God's good news: "your redemption is drawing near."

What makes the difference is not a different set of events. They do not see different signs. They experience those events and read those signs quite differently. They grasp their significance as people whose frame of reference is guided by Israel's Scriptures, particularly as these have been interpreted for them by Jesus. Like fig-tree farmers who can set their calendars by observing their trees, those whose lives are shaped by Jesus' proclamation of God's reign grasp what time it is by what is happening around them. They see the same things as everyone else, but, formed in relation to Jesus' message, they see with different eyes.

Notice the repeated phrase: "When you see *these things taking place*, you know that the kingdom of God is near" (v. 31). "This generation will not pass away until *all things have taken place"* (v. 32). "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape *all these things that will take place*, and to stand before the Son of Man" (v. 36).

The first phrase is in the present tense, the second refers to a time yet to come, and the third uses the future tense. The future calls for present faithfulness. There is no one "season" for faithfulness; discernment, readiness, and prayer are always "in season." This is true even if the escalation of disturbing events, even harassment because of one's faithfulness to Jesus' message, tests the vigilant, expectant faith of Jesus' followers.

Jesus' pronouncement that "this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place" (v. 32) sometimes confuses interpreters. Which generation did Jesus have in mind? This confusion is misplaced, however, since the phrase "this generation" is less a marker of a set time and more a label for a particular kind of people. The phrase "this generation" is used of those who turned to violence and corruption in Noah's day (Gen. 7:1) and of the ungodly against whom the Lord guards the faithful (Ps. 12:7). In Luke's Gospel, "this generation" includes those who have rejected God's purpose for themselves (7:30–31), an evil generation that seeks signs and is set for condemnation (11:29–32), people who reject God's messengers (11:49–51), and those who reject the Son of Man (17:25). In other words, Jesus' followers can expect hostility and harassment from "this generation"—people who turn their backs on God's ways—until the very end. Those whose lives are determined, and sometimes rewarded, by this world will never be known for their hospitality to the new world, or to those whose lives are shaped by it.

Why would Jesus' followers need this firm reminder of the need for watchfulness? Perhaps they need to remember that God is faithful, that even cosmic calamity is no indication that God has forgotten God's people. The good news stands even when everything else falls. More pressing, perhaps, is the possibility that Jesus' followers share too much the inclinations and the practices of those who resist Jesus, that they too easily find their feet mired in the ways of

"this generation": "weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life" (v. 34). Faithful service in anticipation of the decisive revelation of God's peace and justice too easily gives way to a ho-hum attitude to everyday life. Jesus counters that the coming of the Son of Man and disclosure of God's reign will be sudden, unexpected, at any time, and global. For those who trust God and whose trust of God is mirrored in their own faithfulness, the coming of the end is not a calamity to be feared but redemption to be welcomed.

JOEL B. GREEN

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Jesus speaks the prophetic word to us. He draws us into the future that he sees. He is inside human history, inside the history of his people, Israel, but he also brings Israel inside his history, the history of God and the time of God. If we lose sight of Israel's history inside Jesus' history and human history inside the time of God, then we will never grasp the message of Jesus for us today.

Too often interpreters of this passage have read it in one of two less fruitful ways. First, some have interpreted Jesus only as a figure in human history and Israel's history. They see Jesus as just another example of a unique seer who prematurely imagined the cataclysmic. This reading grows out of a historical habit of mind that narrowly interprets Jesus against the backdrop of human history and forgets to read human history against the backdrop of the life of Jesus. Jesus is in history, real history; but he will not be understood if we attempt to squeeze his life into any writing of history or into the time lines we construct. His life shows those historical constructs to be only our usual attempts to make sense of our time. Jesus has come to guide us in making sense of our time.

The other less fruitful way of interpreting this passage has been to obsess over the idea of interpreting signs, trying to pinpoint in his, or our, time exactly the connection between his words and world events. Jesus' words are meant to focus attention not on events, but on his life in our time, and our lives in his future. Jesus the prophet is neither simply an object (figure) in history nor the one who points us to objects (events) in history. These ways of interpreting this passage both represent shortsighted visions of the end times, that is, shortsighted eschatologies that do not yet grasp the time of Jesus.

Jesus embodies God's own directing of our lives, not only in our space but also in our time. Jesus' stunning work intensifies what had been the case with the earlier prophets of Israel. The prophets always stood in a particular moment and invited the people of God to step into the depths of their faith by entering a future with God. They were asked to believe in a future that they could not see, because faith is never only for today. It is also always bright hope for tomorrow. Jesus describes the future; in so doing he is not trying to frighten us or to use fear as a tool for motivation. He describes the hour for the purpose of directing us toward the future.

God gives direction. In this passage, it has two implications. The first is that God is directing us in and through our time. It is always correct to place Jesus in his time, but it is never correct to limit him to his time. Jesus, like the other prophets of Israel, has entered that prophetic space, but now he claims it as his own space. Jesus expands that prophetic space to capture the entire cosmos, showing that God's direction is not thwarted by any events. Unlike a grand puppet master manipulating world events or even the events of our lives, God enters the everyday struggles of creatures and, from within the everyday, draws us toward our destiny in God. Jesus shows us the God of time moving in our time, walking with us in it and working with us through it.

Jesus is God's holy gift, a gift we need especially in times of uncertainty, especially when the world is shaking. In him we find a God who never keeps safe distance from chaos, holding the world at arm's length, but who will never be

overcome by it. Jesus invites us to bring our lives into the divine life by following God's time. We must enter into God's time so that we are not overwhelmed by our times. The actions that Jesus wants from his disciples in uncertain and unstable times are precisely the opposite of what one would expect. Disciples stand up and raise their heads (21:28). Such actions are not examples of insanely blind faith or tragic denial of destructive forces; they suggest the recognition that our lives are in the hands of a God who has taken back from death and destruction the power to determine our future.

The second implication of the direction of God is to anchor our daily actions in the purpose of God. God's direction orients us in faith, not in fear toward our world. Even the cataclysmic events (as suggested in vv. 25–26), involving both the environment and nations, should not disorient us but turn us toward God, who has not and will not abandon this world. This orientation centers our efforts and does not evacuate them. Too often people have read this text in ways that resource political quietism and acquiescence to destructive forces, whether natural or social, economic or political. The words of Jesus outline the order of discipleship inside a politics of reading the signs of the times: see what

For Whom There Is No Room

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because He cannot be at home in it, because He is out of place in it, and yet He must be in it, His place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst. For them, there is no escape even in imagination. . . . It is in these that He hides Himself, for whom there is no room.

The time of the end? All right: when?

That is not the question.

To say it is the time of the end is to answer all the questions, for if it is the time of the end, and of great tribulation, then it is certainly and above all the time of the Great Joy. For the true eschatological banquet is not that of the birds on the bodies of the slain. It is the feast of the living, the wedding banquet of the Lamb. The true eschatological convocation is not the crowding of armies on the field of battle, but the summons of the Great Joy, the cry of deliverance: "Come out of her my people that you may not share in her sins and suffer her plagues!"

To leave the city of death and imprisonment is surely not bad news except to those who have so identified themselves with their captivity that they can conceive no other reality and no other condition. In such a case, there is nothing but tribulation: for while to stay in captivity is tragic, to break away from it is unthinkable—and so more tragic still.

What is needed then is the grace and courage to see that "The Great Tribulation" and "the Great Joy" are really inseparable, and that the "Tribulation" becomes "Joy" when it is seen as the Victory of Life over Death.

True, there is a sense in which there is no room for Joy in this tribulation. In the last analysis, the "joy" proposed by the time of the end is simply the satisfaction and the relief of getting it all over with. . . . That is the demonic temptation of "the end." For eschatology is not *finis* and punishment, the winding up of accounts and the closing of books: it is the final beginning, the definitive birth into a new creation. It is not the last gasp of exhausted possibilities but the first taste of all that is beyond conceiving as actual.

But can we believe it? ("He seemed to them to be jesting!")

Thomas Merton (1915–1968), "The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 365–67.

is happening and continue to do the work. His words are never heard rightly if they are understood to mean only to see what is happening.

We who follow Jesus must learn to read the signs—a complicated and dangerous business. Much mischief has taken place and continues to take place when people read signs poorly. Poor sign-reading has meant that Christians have often been guilty of reading the world in constant declension, so that every social, cultural, economic, or political occurrence comes to be interpreted through a lens of the world in decline and degradation. Too many Christians have seen justification in this passage for an impenetrable pessimism that dulls their senses to the beauty of God's creation and the joy of being alive even in difficult times.

Certainly, we can see in some events the operations of evil and human sin, which must never be taken lightly. However, for too long Christians have failed to frame this world within God's love and embrace, and have instead framed the world in horror and impending doom. This impoverished way of reading our times or any time loses sight of the purpose of prophetic reading: to look for Jesus' return and not to look for our escape from the world. Imagining that there are no signs is not an option for disciples of Jesus. In expectation we read of his soon return in order to sharpen our work and clarify our effort. We read signs in order to monitor our own actions. We read always in hope and toward hope.

It is precisely this prophetic dynamic that characterizes the life journey of disciples. We are swept up into his vision of the future, which teaches us how to live in the present. This is a Jesus-shaped present in which we follow his own life of expectation and trust, and his own faith and hope in God. Just as he waited on God, so too we enter his waiting bound up in his work. He is with us in the waiting and in the work, sharing in our challenges but offering us strength.

WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1–4
Luke 1:68–79

Philippians 1:3–11
Luke 3:1–6

Malachi 3:1–4

[1]See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. [2]But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

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

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Malachi is a little scroll that deals with a large crisis. Communities enduring a crisis or disaster are faced with terribly difficult decisions after surviving the initial shock: what to rebuild first? Of course immediate needs are the priority: shelter and food and, hopefully, relative safety. Then? Then the fights break out—the arguments, and the forming of factions. How do you rebuild a sense of actually living life and community?

It is clear that the community addressed by Malachi (lit. "my messenger") faced similar questions. Hebrews were returning to their devastated homeland from the eastern regions of the Persian Empire after the fall of Babylon (see Ezra 1–6). Returning to what? Nehemiah (c. 450 BCE), long after the time of Malachi, took his famous nighttime horseback ride to survey the *still devastated walls* of Jerusalem some 150 *years* after the destruction by Babylon in 587 BCE. Rebuilding was slow. Close to the time of Malachi, Haggai and Zechariah were also dealing with disputes in the community about what to rebuild, and how. It is hardly a surprise, then, that the book of Malachi is divided into a series of "disputations" or hard questions about the life of faith and the priorities of the rebuilding community early in the Persian Empire (ca. 539–533 BCE).

The previous verse, 2:17, ended with a demand for "the God of justice" to act! Too quickly some proclaimed: "What we need around here is pious reform and justice!"—believing, of course, that this meant *others* have to change. In Malachi 3:1–4 the message is clear: Be careful what you ask for! ("who can endure the day of his coming?"). The prophet warns that demands for justice may not end well for many folks who think that it is always "the other people's fault" that life is not back on track ("as in the days of old," v. 4)! The prophet announces that God does indeed intend to act; an important emissary ("my messenger") is coming! However, Malachi suggests that "purification" will extend even to religious leaders, the "descendants of Levi"! Were some of them perhaps among those clamoring for judgment and even restoration to positions of temple privilege, only to face warnings about the "refiner's fire and fullers' soap" themselves? Malachi warns the smugly self-righteous: not so fast with calls for judgment!

Asking for judgment can be treacherous. The book of Amos also mentions foolish people who asked for the Day of the Lord—a day of judgment. Amos's famous answer amounted to another version of "You do not know what you are asking!" The prophet exclaimed: "It is

darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18b). Thus, in our passage, the messenger brings a portent of judgment (cf. the "messengers" who announce the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 19).

It is true that many commentators have suggested that the messenger in Malachi 3 is to be understood as an "eschatological messenger,"[1] announcing judgments at the end of present times (cf. Isa. 1:25; 48:10; Jer. 9:7; Dan. 11:35; 12:10; Zech. 13:9), including apocalyptic themes of "washing" and "refining"—processes that use harsh soaps (lye? cf. Jer. 2:22) or intense heat (as in metal forges, cf. Jer. 6:29; 9:7; Ezek. 22:17–22). However, it is *also* true that readers have an interesting habit of postponing to some distant future any events that are particularly controversial, like destroying weapons (see Isa. 2//Mic. 4)! In this passage, purification will come "suddenly" (*pit'om*), and thus unexpectedly. Isaiah announced such a sudden turn of events and judgment from God ("And in an instant, suddenly . . . with whirlwind and tempest," Isa. 29:5c–6), and Jeremiah warned of sudden turns of events (Jer. 6:26, and the "sudden" fall of Babylon, 51:8), but these were hardly events that were safely cast into the future! To the contrary, the impact of "sudden" events is that they are *not* expected or planned for, which is surely part of the power of this passage. Judgment is not in our control! Maybe tomorrow!

One particular aim of the judgment in Malachi 3, however, appears to be the temple, and "divine judgement of social abuses" there,[2] such as the injustices enumerated in verse 5, which (in addition to religious infidelities and practices) features a powerful attack on the oppression of the "hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien." Unlike other, earlier prophets who critique the sacrifice so thoroughly that scholars wondered if they had any use for it at all (Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8), Malachi appears to suggest that a time of purified worship will return, and even demands financial gifts to ensure the proper functioning of the revived and purified temple (Mal. 3:8–12). But equally clear is the theme that pure worship involves social justice! Yet how often are piety and justice seen as opposing emphases in church?

It is important to keep in mind that the temple emerges after the exile as the central institution of Jewish life. For centuries, including right up to the time of Jesus under the Roman Empire, the temple was the main institution of identity, inclusive of political and economic power. Corruption, therefore, in the temple had to do with political and economic abuses as well as religious and cultic abuses, and deadly arguments about temple leadership were constant.

The purification noted in Malachi is presaged by the arrival of a messenger. Because this figure began to be merged with the eschatological expectations of Elijah the prophet heralding the coming of the Messiah, as in the New Testament (Matt. 11:10//Luke 7:27; Mark 1:2; Luke 1:76), Malachi 3:1–5 is often considered an Advent reading. Some early church fathers (Theodore of Mopsuestia, 350–428 CE) interpreted the figure as Jesus himself, but this was not widely shared, given the tradition connected with Elijah, already established in the New Testament. However, this image in Malachi may have influenced the more strident portrayals of Jesus in Revelation.

The late professor of Old Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Millard Lind, was fond of saying, "You can't have exodus without Sinai." What he meant was that liberation must also bring discipline, so that the liberation itself is not squandered away! In many of the celebrations of a positive future, the prophets warn about refining, discipline, cleansing, and judgment. Careful discernment is, therefore, necessary in the application of celebratory passages—especially those that seem to indulge in vengeful wishes of punishment of others (e.g., Ps. 137!). The prophets often warn: be careful what you wish for, since the judgment can be universal!

Practically, this surely is a call to careful consideration of how we ourselves are a part of the very circumstances that we object to—even the conditions from which we seek liberation. In what ways have we contributed to social and

1. A. Cody, "Malachi," in *The Jerome Bible Commentary*, ed. R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, and R. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 349–61.
2. John Rogerson, "Malachi," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 616.

economic conditions about which we so easily become upset—even angry? It is far too easy to blame others (and historically, this has often fallen on foreigners, migrants, and the weak). The prophets often turn the mirror on ourselves. Who, indeed, can "endure the day"?

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Throughout Malachi, the prophet sets his oracles in the form of a disputation, a trial-like confrontation between God and the people. In the name of God, the prophet announces a charge, which is then challenged by the accused, prompting the prophet to return God's decisive rebuttal to the people's excuses. For the most part, Malachi levels his charges at the temple priests. The main accusations indicate a lack of integrity in worship, caused by insincerity and bad faith. To these main charges, Malachi adds broader secondary charges, namely, the social disorders that, in his view, follow on a corrupted cult: sorcery, adultery, perjury, defrauding the weak, and rejecting the migrant.

At one level, the protests of the accused priests over these charges simply serve to point out and deepen their guilt. They condemn themselves out of their own mouths. "You have spoken harsh words against me, says the LORD. Yet you say, 'How have we spoken against you?' You have said, 'It is vain to serve God'" (3:13–14). At another level, though, we hear an established bitterness, a people, disillusioned of their hopes, who despair of God's faithfulness: "'I have loved you,' says the LORD. But you say, 'How have you loved us?'" (1:2).

The scholarly consensus places these oracles in the period after Cyrus, the Persian emperor, allowed the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem (538 BCE). Understandably, many of those who took advantage of Cyrus's edict expected a new and blessed beginning. They would rebuild the temple, and God would triumph in glory, "The treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with splendor" (Hag. 2:7 RSV). By Malachi's time, however, life in the Persian province of Yehud had undermined this enthusiasm through a wretched economy, high taxation, fiscal corruption, savage inequalities, and intermarriage with those who had lived in the land prior to the exiles' return.[3] The high hopes and glorious visions of a renewed Zion had cooled into disappointment, then drifted into carelessness and, perhaps, a sullen, generalized resentment.

Malachi speaks to these conditions, bringing the words of God's judgment to bear on the religious decline under these dispiriting circumstances. For today's reader, though, this construction of Malachi's context raises a problem. Why rain down this furious series of denunciations on a culture already in despair? The contrast between this prophetic assault and Isaiah's promise of the servant who "will not break a bruised reed" (see Isa. 42:3) is painful. Is there, perhaps, a paradoxical blessing in Malachi's severity?

Among the condemnations, Malachi includes words of promise. In this passage, news of the coming messenger is one such declaration, following immediately upon another confrontation between God and his people: "You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD . . .' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'" (2:17). Turning directly to the messenger who "will prepare the way" for God to make his presence known in the temple, the prophet answers the question—"Where is the God of justice?"—with a vision of God purifying his people. The prophet castigates the Levites and the people for offering an impure worship, a worship where the heart is not in the voice, nor the will in the action. Only a people purified by God himself, whose sacrifice aligns with the fullness of hearts and minds, can speak to God without "wearying" God.

When God comes then—ironically, the God "whom you seek" in such empty self-justifying questions—God comes, not to reward, and certainly not to justify God's self, but to purify. Here Malachi introduces something distinctive into

3. For a thorough discussion of the historical context, see Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 51–77.

his vision of the Day of the Lord. God's coming initiates neither ruinous destruction nor vindicating triumph but rather an interim period of refining, turning the corrupt and double-minded back to faithfulness and just dealing. That refining, moreover, will continue until God has restored the Levites—and those whose worship they present—to their integrity. Thus, the purified shall once again be fit to receive God's promise, "They shall be mine."

In Malachi, then, the word of judgment includes the promise of purification and, thereby, restoration to a covenantal relationship with God (3:1). Why, though, such fury of judgment in a situation arising, it seems, from disillusion and disappointment? This is where Malachi's words have a peculiarly sharp relevance for contemporary Western society. In God's judgment, the Levites and the people are asked to see themselves, not just as they have become, but as they are created and called to be. The blessing hidden in the intensity of condemnation lies in the seriousness with which God's judgment takes his people. God's call establishes a people who may and must live justly, who lift and protect the lowly, who speak a larger wisdom through their laws than self-interested prudence, who maintain faith in marital promise (2:14–17), and, above all, who approach the living God with confidence and joy (4:2). God's judgment insists on all of this, and refuses to let go the vision that the people have lost.

Among the most influential voices of our culture—politicians, journalists, entertainers, public intellectuals, especially natural scientists—some advocate, with vivid image and great passion, a morally and spiritually reductive account of our humanity. Beyond their destructiveness, humans are barely distinctive and have no more dignity than complex animals. The sense of moral freedom and responsibility is an illusion, and even our self-consciousness, a mere by-product, hides neurological processes ungoverned by any center. Viciousness and violence belong to us by nature, and altruism is always misdiagnosed self-concern. Religion is a cover story for oppression, neurosis, and an obdurate denial of reality, while tales of the trustworthy or of faithful love are only a pleasing opiate. As for politics, manipulative rhetoric barely covers the nakedness of power. A sense of cultural deflation, lost ideals, even cynicism, is quite widespread and has some spiritual analogy with Malachi's context.

Often churches promote their own versions of this loss of wonder over humanity. Human beings demand wonder: even our dealings in devilment stand out in their true horror only insofar as we keep catching glimpses of a divine calling, given in our making. The church, above all, cannot afford to fall for the popular disparagement of the species. Admittedly, the church version of this disillusion with humanity is generally a more upbeat one, but it equally misses the point.

Christians urge the love of God but forget God's desire. God yearns for a just and righteous and faithful humanity; if we ignore that, then we offer a cheap grace that sides with those who see so little in human beings. Listening, therefore, to such words of judgment as Malachi's reminds us of the blessing of God's desire, the intent of holiness. The church, therefore, must seek the strange blessing in the words of God's judgment, listening intently to this word that purifies and never flatters. When Christians accept God's calling, it is good news for the world, because the church, when it is willing to bear God's refining, represents the glory of humanity as it exists in God's desire. In the end, of course, what sustains the church, and all human beings touched by God's grace, lies beyond the words of judgment, in the faithfulness with which God shall complete the loving work of creation.

ALAN GREGORY

Luke 1:68–79

68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, 75 in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

In place of a psalm, the Second Sunday of Advent offers the canticle of Zechariah, one of three canticles in Luke's Gospel. Zechariah's canticle is the soaring poetic conclusion to a wonderful and detailed story concerning the birth of John, which Luke alone provides. Indeed, the first chapter of Luke uniquely braids together, in balanced strands, the foretelling of John the Baptist's birth followed by the foretelling of Jesus' birth, each announced by the angel Gabriel; the story of Elizabeth and Mary meeting in the joy of their unexpected pregnancies; and the birth of John the Baptist, which provides the final overlay of prophecy fulfilled.

John is a singularly striking figure who has the daunting task of turning "the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). In recognition of this weighty calling, two of the four Sundays of Advent are devoted to his story. John is still at work, it seems, turning our hearts and making us ready to be "a people prepared for the Lord."

According to the witness of Luke–Acts, John was spectacularly successful. Crowds flocked to him in the wilderness, finding him so persuasive they wondered if he might be the Messiah (Luke 3:7, 15). John continued to draw people to his compelling message, garnering his own disciples (Luke 7:18ff.). The book of Acts mentions people who, years after Jesus' death and resurrection, still identified themselves with John, like Apollos (Acts 18:24–28) and a community of John's disciples living in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–7). Such a powerful messenger could not be ignored in Luke's time, so John is afforded a place of honor in the opening chapter of the Gospel. It ends there, however. Jesus is the Messiah and the focus of the good news being told.[1] With

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 31–32.

Jesus' birth in Luke 2, John recedes and never again stands on equal footing. John himself acknowledges as much in Luke 3:16: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Zechariah, the proud papa, acknowledges the divine differential in his canticle: He begins by praising of the God of Israel who "raised up a mighty Savior" (Luke 1:69) and lingers there for eight verses. Only after the Messiah is lifted up does Zechariah turn his attention to his own child for four verses. As "the prophet of the Most High," John will go before the Lord, preparing the way, giving knowledge of salvation by forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:76–79).

For the church, Zechariah's prophecy becomes the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1–4. Long ago, Malachi (a name that means "my messenger") prophesied that God would send a messenger "to prepare the way" for the Lord. Malachi addresses people who have returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, but whose worship life lies in ruins. From the priests to the people, there is corruption. Their sacrifices and offerings are unacceptable, and the people are wearing out God's ears with their questions and complaints. Into this state of apathy and corruption, someone is coming who will prepare the way for the Lord. Malachi's messenger does not sing the soft refrain of Isaiah 40:1, "Comfort, O comfort my people. . . . speak tenderly to Jerusalem." This messenger speaks not a word in these few verses, but is all action. The people and priests become harsh metaphors: the dirtiest stained cloth will be scrubbed until it is restored to its intended cleanliness and luster; the roughest metal dug from the earth will be placed in a blazing hot fire. The refiner will not be satisfied until we glint like 24-carat gold in the sunshine and sparkle like silver finer than sterling.

John not only speaks of cleansing and fire, but uses other painful metaphors as well. Although he appears in the wilderness, he has his eye on the temple and the empire itself. Just look at the names that crowd the way before him: an emperor, a governor, a Jewish ruler and his two brothers holding sway over their little fiefdoms, and a couple of high priests (Luke 3:1–2). Against these earthly and corrupt powers John, son of Zechariah, appears, preparing the Lord's way of light and peace (Luke 1:79).

On this Second Sunday of Advent, the narratives regarding Zechariah's prophecy and John's birth are lively contributions to the more formal account of Luke 3:1–6. Insights from that backstory can fill out a sermon on John's character and role.

The canticle can be a unison reading by the congregation between Malachi 3:1–4 and Luke 3:1–6. Alternatively, Zechariah's prophecy can also be sung. "Blest Be the God of Israel," text by Michael Perry, sung to MERLE'S TUNE is one option. This rather lilting tune is ironically at odds with the painful preparation Malachi and John portend.

For a different approach, read the canticle in unison after a sermon on John the Baptist. The congregation then has the chance to read backward into this prophecy with greater insight.

Select lines from Luke 1:68–69 or Luke 1:78–79 can be used for the Call to Worship/Opening Sentences. Who better to bring us to a prayer of confession of our sin than John the Baptist?

> John the Baptist came to prepare the ways of the Lord; and to give us the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 1:78–79 offers an evocative declaration of forgiveness:

> By the tender mercy of our God,
> the dawn from on high will break upon us,
> to give light to those who sit in darkness
> and in the shadow of death,
> to guide our feet into the way of peace.
> Let us walk in the ways of the Lord.

This canticle is beautiful in bits and pieces, but it is exquisite as part of the larger story of this singularly striking figure who needs two Sundays of Advent if we are to do him justice at all.

KIMBERLY L. CLAYTON

Philippians 1:3–11

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

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Perhaps one of the reasons that some Christians do not talk much about the coming Day of the Lord (or the second coming of Christ) is that we have fallen into the trap of thinking that it is all about doom and gloom. Because we reject the notion that faith in Christ is an insurance policy against eternal damnation, and do not believe that fear is an appropriate motivator for faithful living, we may avoid texts that seem to lift up the gloomy or fear-filled Day of the Lord. When we do that, however, we miss the joy that stands at the heart of Paul's proclamation of that day. For Paul, the second coming of Christ is a day in which all of God's promises will be fulfilled, God's people will be redeemed, and resurrection life will reconcile all to one another and to God (see Rom. 8:18–25). It is precisely the anticipation of that "day" that fuels the joy that pours out of his letter to the Philippians.

The readings for the Second Sunday of Advent are full of anticipation. Malachi asks, "Who can endure the day of [God's] coming?" He also says that God is the one whom the people *seek* and in whom they *delight*. The purpose of the refiner's fire is renewed and restored worship, surely a joyful thing. The Song of Zechariah celebrates the fulfillment of God's promises made to Abraham. Israel will be able to worship God without fear, and the dayspring (Luke 1:78 KJV; "dawn" NRSV) will guide the people into the ways of peace. In the Gospel reading, the ministry of John the Baptist is introduced with the words of Isaiah, which celebrates the promise that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." In all of these readings, the Day of the Lord is anticipated with joy and longing.

The reading from Philippians follows immediately on the salutation and announces the themes that shape this letter: thanksgiving, joy, deep affection, partnership, and readiness for the "day" of Jesus Christ. Paul is in prison as he writes, but this in no way diminishes his sense of connection to the people of Philippi. The purpose of the letter is to reassure the Philippian community of his well-being, to thank them for their generosity, to encourage them in their faith and life together, and to warn them against false teaching. Paul is sending the letter with Epaphroditus and hopes to send Timothy later on. This letter is not abstract theology. Its purpose is not primarily instructive. This is a letter that shows what Christian friendship looks like and how deeply joyful it is.

Fred Craddock suggests that Philippians 1:3–11 can be divided into three sections reflecting Paul's relationship to the Philippian

congregation over time.[1] In verses 3–6, Paul looks back in gratitude to God as he remembers this community, and his prayer is full of joy. In particular, Paul gives thanks for their "sharing in the gospel from the first day until now," which he (and his coworkers) have experienced with the Philippian community. *Koinōnia* can also be translated as "participation in" or "partnership" or "fellowship." This is a rich and important term for Paul that is far beyond what we think of as "fellowship activities" or even small-group ministries in the modern church.

Fundamentally, it means a shared relationship in Christ. Those who are baptized into Christ become a new community where boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic status are overcome (Gal. 3:28). In Christ, those separated by the world's categories become sisters and brothers, a new family in God. Baptism is the entry into this new relationship, and it is sustained by the *koinōnia* (or "sharing") in the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor. 10:16). Paul goes on to describe what the new community looks like as he exhorts them to "have the same mind" with one another as they have in Christ. The partnership Paul celebrates is relationship grounded in and shaped by the person of Jesus Christ.

This partnership in the gospel is deeply theological, but also immediately practical. The Philippian community has not only shared spiritual fellowship and active ministry by building up their community. They have also been deeply generous to Paul and his colleagues by supporting their ministry in other cities. At the end of the letter, Paul expresses his deep gratitude for their financial support while he was starting the community in Thessalonica: "No church *shared* with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone" (4:15). Spiritual transformation is evidenced by generosity. Paul concludes his remembrance of what God has begun among the Philippians by affirming that God will "bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (1:6).

Paul then turns to the present time in verses 7–8. The theme here is the affection Paul has for these friends in Christ. The Philippians are not only partners with him in God's grace. They are also in solidarity with him during his imprisonment. "I keep [or hold] you in my heart," Paul says. The Greek can be read either this way (as in the RSV) or as in the NRSV ("you [Philippians] hold me in your heart"). In context, the RSV seems to make more sense, because Paul is speaking of his affection. The other reading would imply that this affection is conditional on the affection or support of the Philippians for him. Clearly, Paul's care for those with whom he has shared Christian community is based on God's work among them. Indeed, he says that he longs for his friends with the "compassion" of Christ. The root of this word is the gut-wrenching feeling of "suffering with" that God in Christ has for humankind. Paul can hold the Philippians in his heart because he participates in the suffering of Christ as he longs to share in Christ's resurrected life (see 3:7–11).

Finally, Paul looks to the future in verses 9–11. Paul has told the Philippians that he remembers them in his prayers. Now he prays for them and for their future. What he wants for them is an intensification and deepening of mutual love, out of which, Paul says, will come wisdom, which will enable them to know how to live with one another and in the world. As God enables them to live ever more deeply into the "mind of Christ" and his self-emptying love, they will become the community that God intends. This is what will prepare them for "the day of Christ."

Paul is confident of this outcome, not because of the efforts that the Philippians have shown in the past or will continue to put forth in the future. Their readiness for "the day" does not hang in the balance, dependent on the amount of their faith. Paul's hope is grounded in what God has been doing with and among his friends. "For Paul, God is the power of good beginnings and good endings in all things, not the least in our relationships with one another," writes Dan Migliore. "The work that God has begun in us will be completed by God. It is the faithfulness of God, not our own or our friend's faithfulness, that is the source of the unwavering confidence that the goal of our life and that of our friends in Christ will be reached."[2]

CYNTHIA M. CAMPBELL

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 15.
2. Daniel L. Migliore, *Philippians and Philemon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 32.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

The letter that Paul writes to the church in Philippi does not bear the formality, nor is it laced with what some might negatively identify as a mantle of authoritarianism, associated with more serious pieces of Pauline correspondence. Instead, this letter is intensely personal. In this portion of it, the salutation and introduction, there is an unusual warmth and informality—as if Paul is writing to a church that he obviously knows very well. Here he sets aside any sense of stiffness or attention to convention, and relaxes into a style of communication that signals he is clearly comfortable with these people to whom he is writing. This is a congregation with which, in a way that maybe happens just once in a pastor's life, he has fallen in love. "It is right for me to think in this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus" (1:7–8). This is not simply the sort of acknowledgment letter of a financial gift that, in any institution, is just spit out of a computer. It is a personal, handwritten letter that is laced with love.

It is not uncommon for pastors, perhaps on a continuing-education retreat with their feet kicked up at the end of the day, to go around the room sharing stories about that one special, favorite parish. As they each take their turn, that particular church is generally one that they are no longer serving—one that they look back to fondly, and remember the grace and generosity extended to them by laypeople who coaxed them patiently into the rhythms of ministry. Specific names are remembered, specific faces are conjured up, specific stories are told about

Renewing the Divine Image

Once again, a merely human king does not let [his] lands . . . pass to others to serve them, nor go over to other men; but he warns them by letters, and often sends to them by friends, or, if need be, he comes in person to put them to rebuke in the last resort by his presence, only that they may not serve others, and his own work be spent for naught. Shall not God much more spare his own creatures, that they may not be led astray from him and serve things of naught? Especially since such going astray proves the cause of their ruin and undoing, and since it was unfitting that they should perish which had once been partakers of God's image. What, then, was God to do? Or what was to be done save the renewing of that which was in God's image, so that by it men might once more be able to know him? But how could this have come to pass, save by the very image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ? For by men's means it is impossible, since they are but made after an image; nor by angels either, for not even they are [God's] images. Whence the Word of God came in his own person, that, as he was the image of the Father, he might be able to re-create afresh the man after the image. But, again, it could not else have taken place had not death and corruption been done away. Whence he took, in natural fitness, a mortal body, that while death might in it be once for all done away, men made after his image might once more be renewed. None other, then, was sufficient for this need, save the image of the Father.

For as, when the likeness painted on a panel has been effaced by stains from without, he whose likeness it is must needs come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood, for, for the sake of his picture, even the mere wood on which it is painted is not thrown away, but the outline is renewed upon it; in the same way also the most holy Son of the Father, being the image of the Father, came to our region to renew man once made in his likeness, and find him, as one lost, by the remission of sins; as he says himself in the Gospels, "I came to find and to save the lost."

Saint Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria (d. 373), *On the Incarnation,* §§13–14, in Edward R. Hardy, ed., *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 67–68.

important mercies extended to a green, young pastor, and specific teaching moments are remembered and recited, often accompanied by tears or by frogs in the throat. "That was my Philippi," one or another of them may say.

Paul's Philippi—a church that is predominantly Gentile, marked by the leadership of women playing various significant roles, and noted for its repeated acts of generosity—is on his mind while he is in prison. He addresses his Philippi as colleagues in the gospel; and while there is the matter of his gratitude for money they have sent him, this letter is far more than a thank-you note. It is a deeply personal word of encouragement: "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (1:9–11).

There are moments when, in the midst of utter ordinariness, something breaks through; seen with the eyes of faith, that which is rudimentary is suddenly transformed into something holy. Sometimes people of faith are fortunate enough to see all of it, even themselves, with the eyesight of God; the only fitting response to it all is a great, unimaginable gratitude.

I was recently in Cuba with a group of seminary students. We went there to spend a week immersing ourselves in what is beautiful and inspiring and complicated and tragic and hopeful about that little nation—so near to our own shores and yet, in multiple ways, so far away. We encountered many churches and their people, and various mission agencies, and a variety of landscapes. Then, on our last day, a Sunday, with our hearts and heads full to overflowing, our last stop was a Catholic church near our hotel. We would be there for their 9:30 mass and would then have time to gather up our luggage and board a bus taking us to the Havana airport. When we entered the church, we quickly discovered that the service we had expected was an hour later, which meant that we were virtually alone there in that largely empty, soaring space. We decided to stay, to sit quietly and prayerfully, and to simply soak up its beauty.

About a half hour later, I witnessed the unfolding of a parable. Two or three elderly regulars in the life of that parish came in slowly—walking with canes—and settled quietly in the front rows of the church. Then a few more, and a few more, and finally they were seventeen people—sixteen women and one man, all of them sitting up front. In a little while, the place would be almost full, but these were the intrepid ones, the ones who came early.

They were there, along with a lay officer in that church, to join in a preparatory recital of the rosary. When the antiphonal liturgy between the lay leader and the people commenced, I was captured by its trance-like rhythm—almost like the sound of an energetically throbbing beehive—that for centuries has helped people enter the silence of their own hearts, where Christ's spirit dwells. In the midst of all those back-and-forth "Santa Marias" and "Gloria Patris," it dawned on me that this was a picture of "the church"—the people who stay, in this case the people who have stayed a long time, even as the clergy have come and gone. These were the people who came early, before the rest of the congregation gathered, to claim that empty space, once again, and to make it holy with their presence and their prayers.

It reminded me of what happened all over that country during the early days of the Castro revolution, after the new regime declared itself a secular, communist country. After that declaration, many of the wealthiest people took what they could and walked out the doors of their houses and fled the country, and many clergy did the same thing. The churches they left behind, which might otherwise have been seized and repurposed by the government, were saved if it could be demonstrated that religious activities were going on inside. So, across the denominations, the people in those churches went into their sacred spaces—certainly on Sunday but also daily—to pray, and to recite in their various ways the substance of their faith, and to hold meetings and Bible studies and certainly worship, so as to continually lay claim to those spaces in that difficult time, and to make them holy with their presence.

On that Sunday morning in Havana, I saw, in the ordinary act of devotion on the part of

those faithful people, the embodiment, once again, of a kind of "Philippi"—indeed, the very spirit of Philippi—and I was filled with gratitude at the sight of it.

Before the letter to the Philippians is over, Paul is going to address some tough issues. The letter, though, begins with the assumption of relationship, which is strong enough to sustain difference of opinions. "I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (1:3–5).

THEODORE J. WARDLAW

Luke 3:1–6

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

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
[5]Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
[6]and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

With its prominent chronological and geopolitical references, Luke 3:1–2 marks a new beginning for the Lukan narrative. Luke 1–2 tells the stories of the births and summarizes the childhoods of John and Jesus. Now Jesus is in the background, John in the foreground, as Luke unveils the character of John's prophetic ministry (3:1–20). Gabriel, the angel of the Lord, had given John's job description to Zechariah, John's father: "He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (1:16–17). Celebrating John's birth, Zechariah's prophecy proclaimed that John "will go before the Lord to prepare his ways" (1:76). Now we discover, this is in fact what John does.

Luke has carefully structured John's appearance in verses 2b–3 by setting the stage in two quite different ways. The first, with its list of rulers, is sociopolitical (vv. 1–2a). The second, a citation of Isaiah 40:3–5, is redemptive-historical (vv. 4–6). Foreign rule and powerful rulers characterize the world into which John enters, but it is precisely in this world that God intervenes to bring about the long-awaited restoration of God's people.

The onset of John's ministry in 3:1–2 reads like the beginning of several OT prophetic books—for example, Hosea 1:1: "The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri, in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel" (see also Jer. 1:1–4; Ezek. 1:1–3; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1). This suggests that Luke's first concern was not to provide modern readers with a precise dating for the beginning of John's ministry (the data Luke provides actually allows a window for dating the onset of John's ministry between 27 and 29 CE) but, instead, to portray John as a prophet who worked and spoke in the real world of human authorities.

On the one hand, Israel lives, sharply put, under foreign control. Even the references to the priestly dynasty of Annas and Caiaphas (Annas's son-in-law) further this image. After all, Mary's song had pronounced judgment on the rich and powerful, and the names of these two high priests are spoken in the same breath

as the rich and powerful emperor of Rome and his appointed rulers. Indeed, in Luke's world, Rome controlled the appointment of high priests, who therefore exercised authority in civil affairs.

On the other hand, even though John enters an oppressive, top-heavy scene, his role as a prophet serves as a counterpoint to Roman authority. God's word does not find John in urban centers of power, but in the wilderness, a space where the power and privilege associated with emperors and their appointees have little currency and their pronouncements enjoy little cachet. God's word comes not to rulers, not even to ruling priests, but to John, a wilderness prophet.

The second introduction of John, in 3:4–6, does not compete with the first introduction of 3:1–2, but develops further what Luke has already begun to reveal. John's wilderness location stands in contrast to the elevated status and power of those who lord it over the civilized world from their urban hubs. With words borrowed from Isaiah 40:3–5, Luke reminds us that God's people too are wilderness dwellers; that is, they are not at home, but in exile. What is more, speaking directly to his audience, Luke declares that John's prophetic ministry sets in motion the end of exile by introducing the promised, hoped-for restoration. Drawing on Isaiah's vision of exile and return, Luke underscores his theological perspective that God's saving purpose—not human rulers or the way humans distribute power and privilege—shapes the history of the world in truly decisive ways.

Luke grounds John's appearance in Isaiah's vision with the phrase "as it was written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah" (3:4a). It is as if the Isaianic words come alive, as though they animate John and his prophetic ministry. John is the voice crying in the wilderness (vv. 3–4). John's repentance-baptism prepares "the way of the Lord" (vv. 3–4). John's proclamation of the forgiveness of sins (v. 3) makes good the messenger's promise of salvation (v. 6). Isaiah's announcement of good news (Isa. 40:9), realized in the coming of God in power (Isa. 40:6–11), comes to life in John's words regarding the coming, powerful one (Luke 3:15–17) and Luke's summary of John's mission as one of "proclaiming good news" (v. 18).

What kind of "baptism" does John practice? There are no clear precedents. In Jewish purification rites and in proselyte baptism (if proselyte baptism was a Jewish practice in the first century—a contested point), people bathed *themselves*; with John's baptism, they were washed *by John*. Ritual purification was directed toward specific impurities, whereas John's baptism was nonspecific and was for the forgiveness of sins. Ritual washings occurred again and again, whereas John's baptism seems to have been nonrepeatable. Without clear precedents for John's practice, we turn instead to the important and long-standing link between physical cleanliness and moral purity. In the opening chapter of Isaiah, for example, we read, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:16–17). Ezekiel writes, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be cleansed of all your pollution. I will cleanse you of all your idols" (Ezek. 36:25 CEB). As Ananias told Paul, "Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16).

From this perspective, "baptism" would be an embodied act that marks a religious-ethical new start. This is fully consistent with the way Luke describes this central aspect of John's ministry: it is a "baptism of repentance," that is, a repentance-baptism. This realignment of hearts and lives in relation to God's agenda is the means by which God's people "prepare the way of the Lord" and "make his paths straight."

Isaiah's vision assumes an obstructed road, an uneven road, even a crooked one, when what is needed is a smooth, straight road. Roadwork is required; hence the call to make the road ready. The work of road repair is nothing less than repentance. In Isaiah 35, the "road" is for those who return from exile and a holy way on which only the "clean" shall walk. This road is for those who have embraced God's ways as their pattern of life. Isaiah's image in chapter 40, of "the way of the Lord," thus points both to God's restoration of God's people (the return from exile, portrayed like a second exodus) and to the way of life embraced by those people whom God

restores. We therefore recognize that the repentance John proclaims is marked by baptism but it is not a one-time event. It refers to a continuing journey on an obstructed path requiring ongoing roadwork. God's people begin the conversionary journey with baptism, but baptism is not so much the arrival at one's destination as it is the beginning of a journey.

JOEL B. GREEN

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

God speaks to those unimagined as recipients of the divine word. We tend to imagine those with power and wealth to be the ones who should be the first to receive the divine word. Surely, if God would speak directly to them, the world might be changed for the better. God is not averse to such direct speech. God spoke to the rulers and kings of Israel and other nations; but, even in Israel, God's preferred recipients of divine address were the prophets, who most often lived among the common people or at the edge of society. In this text, God again aims holy words in a remote direction—away from the centers of power and toward people outside of their influence. This word is bound for the wilderness.

This text illuminates a juxtaposition—power and powerlessness—that has always been crucial to understand. Emperor, governor, rulers, and high priests are on the one side, and a prophet in the wilderness on the other side. The emperor and the other rulers represent the world as it is with its structures of military, economic, political, social, and religious power fully intact and functioning. They collectively imagine that they already embody the will of God and that they have the word of God in hand. They need to hear no new word because they conceive that they are enacting such a word.

The prophet in the wilderness is under no such illusion. John knows that he lives in the vulnerability of reception, waiting to hear God's word and looking and listening to the land for his daily sustenance. It is a vulnerability he might have learned from his father Zechariah, whose voice was silenced until after John's birth and who only then received from God his voice again (1:62–64). The wilderness that John inhabits is not his undoing. It is the place that prepares him to hear the word that God will give, not one he will contrive. The word of God often comes to us in such places and times of vulnerable reception, when we are ready to hear what God will say, even if we do not think we are ready.

Prophets always need wilderness. The new will emerge out of the wilderness. John preaches an old word made new by the time. He is fulfilling a promise and making visible ancient prophetic word. This is the story of Israel's God, who now appears in redeeming light. God calls through John to a wayward people, inviting them to turn afresh to their loving Creator and to receive the gift fit for God's children, forgiveness of sins. God will once again draw life from the water. Their baptism will signal that the new has begun in them, not by their own efforts but only through the action of God. John shows us a renewing God whose faithfulness extends across space and time, overcoming every obstacle we might erect against grace. God renews Israel and in this moment reveals the divine love in its eternal power to be completely new each morning and ready for communion.

Who John is and what he is saying merge in this moment. He is John the Baptizer, and that identity means he is the one who announces that the time has come, a time that has captured him and all the rulers of this world, from the emperor to the high priests. While there is always the danger of confusing the messenger with the message, here John is not using the prophetic word to draw attention to himself. The energy moves in the opposite direction: John's life has been taken up into God's dramatic appearance in Israel. God has always worked in an economy of humility, where the divine life has been joined to human life, God's voice flowing in and with human voices. In this text, that economy is moving to its greatest strength as the one voice

that cries from the wilderness is simultaneously the prophet's voice and the voice of God.

God's voice, woven into the voices of the prophets, is what love sounds like. God will be known and heard, seen and experienced. John announces what Israel longs for and the world needs: to see God. All that has obstructed the sight of God will be removed. Indeed, the world itself will make room for its Creator. Valleys filled, mountains and hills made low, crooked roads made straight and rough ones made smooth—all will be made to angle toward the divine life present in the world. There will be no need for an alternative route to God, no need for more maps to the Divine, because God has come to us, clarified the way, and sharpened the view. John announces a new question. No longer do we need to ask, "Where can God be found?" Now the only question is "Do you see the God who is coming to you?"

God comes to Israel, not simply to be seen, but to change the world. Divine visibility implies holy justice in the world. John announces the future that is coming. This is the salvation of God: Israel freed from oppression and a world made right under God's own rule. If God will be seen, so too will the clandestine operations of evil and injustice. They will no longer hide in the shadows and behind closed doors. Plans made and structures created that destroy the creation and damage the creature will no longer be able to hide through their political and social rhetoric or through those mechanisms that blind people to what is in front of their eyes. All flesh (3:6) means that all creatures—not only all peoples—will see and experience God's salvation.

This text refuses any privatization of salvation. It pushes against reading habits that would constrict gospel concern to the saving of souls and the healing of bodies. While life with God certainly means the redemption of body and soul, it expansively reaches out to the cosmos, to show the claim of God on a beloved creation. John heightens an expectation already present in Israel, that God will come and turn this world right side up. This expectation of Israel should never be spiritualized and used to escape John's urgent claim—that God is coming and will change this world. The time of salvation is upon us, and all who believe John's word have prepared themselves to see the change. The text invites us to enter the tension of this expectation. We live in its hope, yet are always edging toward frustration as we wait for a world filled with the sight, sound, and knowledge of God and shaped in the divine rule.

Jesus heard John. Jesus heard the voice from the wilderness speaking to him, and he too responded as John invited all of Israel to respond. We read this text poorly if we bypass this hearing as though it was inconsequential, as though Jesus would have come forward even without John. The text will not allow us such a poor reading of history. It was precisely this word of John that Jesus heard and took to heart. Jesus heard the urgency of John's message and realized that the time of God was indeed his time to act in obedience to God. John spoke a word from God about the overturning of this world and all its rulers, and Jesus, this child of Israel, heard that word. So too must we hear this word to be addressed to us.

WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS