# PREACHING GOD'S TRANSFORMING JUSTICE

A Lectionary Commentary, Year C

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# Contents

*Note: Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, are in regular type; Holy Days for Justice are in boldface.*

# Preface

The editors are grateful to the members of our households—spouses and children—not only for love and understanding during the preparation of these volumes but also for conversation, child care, and running to the store for necessary supplies of chocolate, coffee, and other things important to editorial work. We recognize our presidents, deans, and colleagues for encouragement, questions, and suggestions. The editors particularly thank the ninety persons who wrote for this series. To their already overflowing lives as activists, ministers, and scholars, they added responsibility for preparing the articles for these volumes. We honor Jon Berquist for his formative role in this project and for multiple forms of support. The editors express appreciation to J. B. Blue and Song Bok Jon, graduate students at Boston University School of Theology, who sacrificed time from their own academic responsibilities to engage in research on the Holy Days for Justice; to Vanderbilt University graduate students Casey Sigmon and Nathan Dannison for their editing gifts down the homestretch; as well as to Matthew Charles, a student research assistant also at Vanderbilt University. The editors and contributors are responsible for the limitations that result from not following the suggestions of these learned colleagues.

We send this book forward with the prayer that God will use it to help recreate the world as a community of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, respect, security, and abundance. May it be a resource for preaching that, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, empowers social transformation.

# Introduction

Many people today yearn to live in a world of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, respect, security, and abundance for all. The Bible calls this combination of qualities justice. The best of the Bible and Christian tradition envision the heart of God's own mission as re-creating the world as a realm of love and justice. Joining God in this mission is at the heart of the calling of the preacher and the congregation. The aim of this three-volume series is to empower sermons as active agents in God's mission.

Ninety preachers and scholars contribute to this work. These writers are known for their insight into social dimensions of the divine purposes as well as for their capacity to interpret the social vision boldly and sensitively. Approximately half of the writers are women and half are men; about 40 percent of them African American, Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American.

## Preaching for Justice: A World of Love, Peace, Freedom, Mutuality, Respect, Security, and Abundance

This commentary is a resource for preaching for a world of justice from the deepest theological convictions of biblical texts. *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* is distinctive in two ways. First, while other aids for preaching from the lectionary sometimes discuss matters of social justice, this series is the first commentary on the Revised Common Lectionary to highlight God's

life-giving intentions for the social world from start to finish.[1] *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* is not simply a mirror of other lectionary commentaries (such as the impressive *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*) but concentrates on how the lectionary readings can help the preacher identify and reflect theologically and ethically on the social implications of the biblical readings. Second, this series introduces twenty-two Holy Days for Justice. Explained further below, these days are intended to enlarge the church's awareness of the depth and insistence of God's call for justice and of the many ways that call comes to the church and world today.

The comments on the biblical texts are intended to be more than notes on contemporary social issues. The comments are designed to help preachers and congregations develop a deep and broad theological vision out of which to interpret the social world. Furthermore, this book aims to provide practical guidance for living more justly as individuals and communities.

## Special Feature: Twenty-Two Holy Days for Justice

This commentary augments the traditional liturgical calendar by providing resources for twenty-two special Holy Days for Justice. The title for these noteworthy days, suggested by Professor Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University, requires explanation. God's mission for justice is holy. Consequently, the church's commitment to justice is holy. Some of the events, however, that call forth these special days are not holy. Indeed, some days—such as Yom haShoah (which remembers the murder of six million Jewish people by the Nazis)—are occasions for mourning. However, at the same time these days also call the church to take bold and powerful actions to join the holy work

1. The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) was developed by the Consultation on Common Texts, an ecumenical consultation of liturgical scholars and denominational representatives from the United States and Canada. The RCL provides a collection of readings from Scripture to be used during worship in a schedule that follows the seasons of the church year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany Day, Lent, Easter, Day of Pentecost, Ordinary Time. In addition, the RCL provides for a uniform set of readings to be used across denominations or other church bodies.

The RCL provides a reading from the Hebrew Bible, a Psalm response to that reading, a Gospel, and an Epistle for each preaching occasion of the year. It is presented in a three-year cycle, with each year centered around one of the Synoptic Gospels. Year A largely follows the Gospel of Matthew, Year B largely follows Mark, and Year C largely follows Luke. Selections from John are also read each year, especially during Advent, Lent, and Easter.

The RCL offers two tracks of Hebrew Bible texts for the Season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time: a semicontinuous track, which moves through stories and characters in the Hebrew Bible, and a complementary track, which ties the Hebrew Bible texts to the theme of the Gospel texts for that day. Both tracks are included in this volume.

For more information about the Revised Common Lectionary, visit the official RCL Web site at http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/ or see *The Revised Common Lectionary: The Consultation on Common Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

of God in attempting to transform the circumstances that led to lamentation. We can never undo pain and suffering, but we can try to reshape the world to minimize the danger of such things recurring, and to encourage possibilities for people and nature to live together in justice.

Each Holy Day for Justice derives from either a person or an event that helps the contemporary community become aware of arenas in the world that cry for justice. These Holy Days bridge significant phenomena in our history and present culture that do not receive adequate attention in the church's liturgical calendar or may not otherwise be noted in the congregation. They draw our attention to circumstances in need of social transformation.

Each Holy Day for Justice has a different focus. In *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* these days are placed close to the Sunday on which they occur in the Christian year and the ordinary calendar. When reaching a Holy Day for Justice in the lectionary, the preacher can choose whether to follow the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary or to work instead with the readings and themes of the Holy Day for Justice.[2] The concerns highlighted in these special days may also inspire preachers to bring those concerns to the fore in sermons prepared in conversation with the traditional lectionary readings.

In the list of Holy Days for Justice below, the editors place in parentheses a date or season when the congregation might naturally observe a Holy Day for Justice. The dates for many of the Holy Days for Justice are already widely accepted, such as the dates for World AIDS Day, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Salt March, Earth Day, Yom haShoah, and the Fourth of July. The editors assigned the dates for other Holy Days for Justice in conversation with scholars who work closely with the concerns of those days and with communities closely related to the origin of the person or concern at the center of the day. Of course, preachers and worship planners are free to observe the Holy Days for Justice on other dates that fit more naturally into the congregation's local calendar.

The Holy Days for Justice are:

1. World AIDS Day (December 1)
2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10)
3. Martin Luther King Jr. Day (January 15)
4. Asian American Heritage Day (February 19)
5. International Women's Day (March 8)

2. In addition, the Revised Common Lectionary already sets aside possible readings for All Saints' Day and Thanksgiving. The specific dates of some of the Holy Days for Justice change from year to year. These days are placed in the commentary in the season of the lectionary year when they typically occur.

6. Salt March Day: Marching with the Poor (March 12)
7. Oscar Romero of the Americas Day (March 24)
8. César Chávez Day (March 31)
9. Earth Day (April 22)
10. Holocaust Remembrance Day: Yom haShoah (27th of Nissan, usually from early April to early May)
11. Peace in the Home: Shalom Bayit (second Sunday in May)
12. Juneteenth: Let Freedom Ring (June 19)
13. Gifts of Sexuality and Gender (June 29)
14. Fourth of July: Seeking Liberty and Justice for All
15. Sojourner Truth Day (August 18)
16. Simchat Torah: Joy of the Torah (mid-September to early October)
17. International Day of Prayer and Witness for Peace (September 21)
18. Peoples Native to the Americas Day (fourth Friday in September)
19. World Communion Sunday (first Sunday in October)
20. Night of Power (27th Night of Ramadan: From 2011 through 2020 the date moves from September to August, July, June, May, and April)
21. World Food Day (October 16)
22. Children's Sabbaths (third weekend in October or another date that works for the congregation)

The discussions of these days in the commentary are distinctive in three ways. (1) In the case of almost every special day (with the exception of Simchat Torah: The Joy of the Torah), the editors selected four biblical texts that relate to these special emphases, including a reading from the Torah, Prophets and Writings, a reading from a Psalm, a reading from a Gospel, and another from an Epistle. The editors chose the texts for each day in the hope that the passages can become good conversation partners in helping the congregation reflect on how the day enlarges the congregation's vision and practice of justice. Most of the texts were chosen because they support potential emphases in the day, but some were chosen because they give the preacher the opportunity to enter into critical dialogue with the text or with the way the biblical text has been used in the church or the culture. While a few of the biblical texts for the Holy Days for Justice duplicate passages in the Revised Common Lectionary, most of the texts for the Holy Days for Justice are not found in the lectionary. (2) Each day is introduced by a brief paragraph offering a perspective on why that day is included. We repeat the same introductory paragraph in all three volumes. (3) Each day also includes a quote from a figure or document in the past or the present that voices a provocative perspective on the concerns represented by that day. For example, in Year A on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the preacher is presented with an excerpt from the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

Some readers may initially be put off by some of these selections, especially days that also appear in the civic calendar in the United States, such as Fourth of July: Seeking Liberty and Justice for All. These days are not intended to promote uncritical celebration of present culture. On the contrary, the appearance of these days can become the occasion for the preacher to reflect critically with the congregation on the themes of those days. Some of the motifs associated in popular culture with Fourth of July, for instance, run against the grain of God's best hopes for the human family. In the name of being faithful, some preachers studiously avoid speaking about days suggested by the civic calendar. However, the congregation may too easily construe such silence as the preacher's consent to the culture's prevailing mind-set. The sermon can attempt to redress the prevailing cultural mind-set that either neglects attention to questions of justice or actively promotes injustice.

The Holy Days for Justice address the criticism that the Revised Common Lectionary does not adequately represent biblical texts that deal with matters of justice as fully as those texts are represented in the Bible. Such special days might also enlarge the vision of the preacher and the congregation while offering preachers a venue for addressing matters that are sometimes hard to reach when following the lectionary. For the congregation that may be hesitant to consider such matters, the appearance of these emphases in a formal lectionary commentary might add to the preacher's authority for speaking about them.

## God's Vision for the Social World

The purposes of this commentary series are rooted in the core of God's vision for the social world. To be sure, the Bible is a diverse document in the sense that its parts were written at different times and places, in different cultural settings, and from different theological and ethical points of view—for example, Priestly, Deuteronomic, Wisdom, and apocalyptic. Nevertheless, the different materials in the Bible share the common perspective that God intends for all individuals and communities (including the world of nature) to live together in justice.

The Priestly theologians begin the Bible with the vision in Genesis 1 by picturing God creating a world in which each and every entity has a particular place and purpose and in which all entities—the ecosphere, animals, and human beings—live together in covenantal community. The role of the human being is to help the different entities live together in the mutual support that God envisions. The aim of the Ten Commandments and Israel's other laws is to create a social community that embodies how God wants

people to live together in blessing. The Priestly theologians show special concern for ensuring that the poor and marginalized experience providence through care practiced by the community. Israel is to model how God wants all peoples to live together in blessing (Gen. 12:1–3). Israel is to be a light to the nations in these regards (Isa. 42:6). The church later understands its message to be grafted onto that of Israel (e.g., the church shares in the mission of being a light in the world, Matt. 5:13–14).

The Deuteronomic thinkers envisioned Israel as a community not only in covenant with God, but also as a community whose members were in covenant with one another so that all could live in love, peace, and security. Deuteronomy 15:7–8 epitomizes this attitude. "If there is among you anyone in need . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be." The Deuteronomic monarch is to rule with a copy of the Torah present at all times and is not to be "above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment" (Deut. 17:19–20). The monarch is responsible to God and to the community for seeing that justice is enacted in all aspects of Jewish life. The covenant includes nature such that when the people are faithful, nature blesses them, but when they are unfaithful, nature itself curses them (Deut. 28:1–45).

The Wisdom literature encourages practices that not only provide for individual and household prosperity but also build up the community. The wise life shows respect for the poor as full members of the community (Sir. 4:1–10). The Wisdom literature cautions the prosperous not to become self-absorbed by their possessions but to use their resources to strengthen the community. Indeed, the wise are to "speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute . . . [to] defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Prov. 31:8–9). Moreover, the sages thought that God charged the natural order with wisdom so that by paying attention to the way in which the elements of nature work together, human beings can learn how God wants human beings to live as individuals and in community, as we can see in the case of the ant modeling wisdom (Prov. 6:6).

The apocalyptic theologians believed that the present world—both the social sphere and nature—is so broken, unjust, and violent that God must replace it with a new world, often called the realm of God. The apocalyptic book of 4 Ezra (2 Esdras) vividly expresses this hope:

> It is for you that Paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is revealed, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established and wisdom perfected beforehand. The root of evil is sealed up from you, illness is banished from you, and death is hidden; hell has fled and corruption has been forgotten; sorrows

> have passed away, and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest.[3] (4 Ezra 8:52–56)

In this new world all relationships and situations manifest God's purpose. Those who defy God's desires through idolatry, exploitation of the poor, and violence are condemned.

Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and most other early Christian writers share this general viewpoint (e.g., Rom. 8:18–25; Mark 13:24–27). These first-century theologians believed that the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus signaled that the final and complete manifestation of the realm of God had begun in a limited way in the ministry of Jesus and would come in its fullness with the return of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus both points to that realm and embodies it. Jesus' disciples are to alert others to the presence and coming of the realm and to live in the present as if the realm is fully here. The church is to embody the transformed world.

From the perspective of the Bible, God's vision for the interrelated communities of humankind and nature is, through and through, a social vision. It involves the intertwining relationships of God with humankind and nature, of human communities with one another, and of human communities with nature. Marjorie Suchocki, a major contemporary theologian, uses the evocative phrase "inclusive well-being" to sum up God's desire for every created entity to live in love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance in a framework of mutually supportive community.[4] Anything that threatens the well-being of any entity in the created world goes against the purposes of God.

## Individual Bible Readings and Implications for Social Justice and Transformation

Every passage in the Bible has social implications. In connection with each text in the lectionary, the commentators in this series help the congregation envision God's purposes for human community. Some texts are quite direct in this way. For example, Amos exhorts, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The prophet wants the people to practice justice. Other texts are less direct but are still potent in their implications. According to the book of Acts, Priscilla was a teacher of the gospel alongside her spouse, Aquila (Acts 18:24–28). From this and many

3. "The Fourth Book of Ezra," trans. Bruce M. Metzger, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 1:544. Fourth Ezra was written in the late first century CE and is sometimes known as 2 Esdras.

4. Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 66.

other texts, we glimpse the vital role of women in the leadership of the earliest churches (e.g., Mark 16:8; Luke 8:1–3; Acts 9:36–42; 16:11–15; Rom. 16:1–3, 6, 7, 12; 1 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 4:2–4).

The contributors to these volumes articulate what the biblical writers hoped would happen in the social world of those who heard these texts in their original settings and point to ways in which interaction with the biblical texts helps today's congregations more fully embrace and enact God's intent for all to experience inclusive well-being. The following are among the questions the writers consider:

- What are God's life-giving intentions in each text?
- What does a particular text (in the context of its larger theological world) envision as a community that embodies God's social vision, a vision in which all live in inclusive well-being?
- What are the benefits of that vision for humankind and (as appropriate) nature?
- How do human beings and nature fall short of God's possibilities when they do not follow or sustain that vision?
- Do individuals or communities get hurt in the world of the text or in the way that text has been interpreted?
- What needs to happen for justice, healing, re-creation, and inclusive well-being?

At the same time, writers sometimes criticize aspects of the occasional biblical text whose social vision does not measure up to the fullness of God's intentions. For example, according to Ezekiel, God ordered marks placed on faithful people who lamented abominations that took place in Israel. God then commanded some of the faithful to murder the unfaithful. "Pass through the city . . . and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut down old men, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark" (Ezek. 9:5–6). This passage invites the reader to believe that God commanded murder. The first letter of Peter asserts, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly" (1 Pet. 2:18–19). This passage assumes the validity of slavery and encourages recipients to accept being abused.

Texts such as these do not measure up to the Bible's highest vision of God's desire for a just world; hence, many preachers cannot commend such barbed texts as positive guidance for today's community. Instead, such a preacher critiques the passage. However, even when the preacher cannot fully endorse what a text invites the congregation to believe and do, the appearance of theologically and ethically problematic texts in the lectionary can open an

important door for a conversation among preacher and congregation regarding what they most truly believe concerning God's social vision. The text may not be directly instructive, but the congregation's encounter with the text can be an important occasion of theological and ethical reflection.

## Naming and Confronting Systems that Frustrate God's Purposes

Individuals acting alone and with others can defy God's purposes for humankind and nature. But beyond individual and small-group actions, a key insight to emerge in recent generations is that systemic forces distort God's purposes for humankind and the larger created world. Ethicists often refer to such phenomena as systemic evil.

A system is a transpersonal network of attitudes, values, and behaviors that shape the lives of individuals and communities. Systemic evil creates force fields that push individuals and communities to distort God's purposes in the social world. Systems can affect communities as small as the Wednesday night prayer group and as large as nations and transnational associations. Examples of systemic evils that subvert God's life-giving purposes are racism, sexism, neocolonialism, ageism, nationalism, classism, heterosexism, and ecological destruction.

Preachers need to recognize and name systemic distortions of God's purposes for the social community. While this analysis is important, it sometimes leaves individuals and congregations feeling impotent in the face of massive structural forces. When possible, the writers in this series urge preachers to give these concerns a human face and to offer specific insights and stories that help congregations envision practical steps that they can take to join God in seeking to transform the social world. What attitudes and actions can individuals and congregations take to become agents of transformation? These writers want congregations to feel empowered to make a difference. We hope that each comment will offer a horizon of hope for the preacher and the congregation.

## The Preacher Speaks from, to, and beyond the Local Context

The importance of taking account of the context of the congregation is a permeating emphasis today in preaching and more broadly in theological scholarship. The preacher is called to understand the congregation as a culture in its own right. The preacher should conduct an exegesis of the congregation that reveals the events, memories, values, practices, attitudes, feelings,

patterns of relationship (especially power relationships), physical spaces, and larger systems that combine to make the congregation a distinct culture.

This commentary does not intend to provide the minister with prepackaged ideas for sermons but urges ministers to begin their approach to preaching on matters of justice from inside the culture of the congregation. The local pastor who has a thick understanding of the local community knows much better than a scholar in a far-off city how the life of that congregation needs to develop in order to witness more fully to God's purposes.

The preacher should typically speak *from* and *to* the local context. Rather than impose a social vision that the preacher has found in a book of theological ethics, on the Internet, or at the latest clergy network for peace and justice, the preacher can approach matters of social justice from inside the worldview of the congregation. Hence, one can usually identify points of contact between the world of the congregation and the need for transformation. The preacher can then use the base of identification and trust between the pulpit and the pew to speak *to* the congregation. To help the congregation participate more fully in God's transformative movement, the preacher will typically need to help the congregation think beyond itself.

From this point of view, the contributors to *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* intend to be conversation partners in helping preachers identify particular areas in which the congregation might reinforce patterns of thought and behavior that manifest their deepest theological convictions. We hope the book will help congregations to grow in the direction of God's social vision and to find steps they can take to become agents of justice.

Recent literature in preaching leads preachers to think of the congregation not just as a collection of individuals but as a *community*, the *body* of Christ. While sermons should help individuals imagine their particular social witnesses, sermons should also be addressed to the congregation as community and its corporate social witness.

Moreover, the congregation is itself a social world. While the larger goal of the book is to help preachers move the congregation toward reflection and mission in the larger social arena, some texts may lead the preacher to help the listeners reflect on how the internal life of the congregation can more fully witness to God's life-giving purposes.

## Prophetic Preaching with a Pastoral Goal

In the broad sense, this book calls for prophetic preaching. We think of prophetic preaching in contrast to two popular notions. From one popular perspective, prophetic preaching predicts specific future events, especially those

that point to the return of Jesus. This way of thinking does not catch the fullness of prophetic preaching in the Bible itself. A second popular viewpoint associates prophetic preaching with condemnation. This prophetic preacher identifies what the text is against and what is wrong in the social world, sometimes denouncing the congregation and others. These sermons can chastise the congregation without providing a word of grace and empowerment. This perspective is also incomplete.

The editors of *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* regard the purpose of all preaching as helping the congregation and others interpret the world from the standpoint of God's life-giving purposes. Preaching seeks to build up the congregation as a community of witness and to help the world embody the divine realm. The goal of all preaching is pastoral in the root sense of building up the flock so that the congregation can fulfill God's purposes. The word "pastoral" derives from the world of flocks and shepherds in which the shepherd (the pastor) did whatever was necessary to maintain the health of the flock.

From the perspective of the Bible, the prophet is a kind of ombudsperson who compares the actual behavior of the community with God's purposes of inclusive blessing. The special call of the prophet is to help the community recognize where it falls short of those purposes and what the community needs to do to return to them. On the one hand, a prophet such as Amos concentrated on how the community had departed from God's purposes by exploiting the poor and, consequently, faced judgment. On the other hand, a prophet such as Second Isaiah called attention to the fact that the community in exile did not trust in the promise of God to return them to their homeland. In both cases, the community is not living up to the fullness of God's purposes. While the prophet may need to confront the congregation, the prophet's goal is to prompt the congregation to take steps toward transformation. Prophetic preaching ultimately aims at helping the congregation to identify what needs transformation and how to take part.

## Representative Social Phenomena

*Preaching God's Transforming Justice* urges preachers and communities toward conscious and critical theological reflection on things that are happening in the contemporary social world from the perspective of God's purpose to recreate the world as a realm of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, abundance, and respect for all. Nevertheless, some preachers refer to a limited number of social phenomena in their sermons. A preacher's hermeneutical imagination is sometimes enlarged by pondering a panorama of representative social phenomena that call for theological and ethical interpretation, such as the following:

Abortion
Absent fathers
Addictions
Affirmative action
Aging
Animal rights
Anti-Semitism
Arms sales
Church and nation
Civil religion
Classism
Colonialism
Consumerism
Death penalty
Disability perspectives
Diversity
Domestic violence
Drugs
Ecological issues
Economic exploitation
Education
Empire
Energy
Eurocentrism
Exclusivism
Flight to the suburbs
Foster care
Gambling
Gender orientation LGBTQA
Geneva Convention
Genocide
Gentrification
Glass ceiling
Greed
Gun control
Health care
Homelessness
Housing
Human rights
Hunger
Idols (contemporary)
Immigration
Islam and Christianity
Islamophobia
Judaism and Christianity
Language (inclusive, repressive)
Margins of society
Militarism
Multiculturalism
Nationalism
Native American rights
Neocolonialism
Peace movements
Pluralism
Police brutality
Pollution
Pornography
Postcolonialism
Poverty
Prisons
Public schools/private schools
Racism
Repression
Reproductive rights
Sexism
Socialism
Stranger
Systemic perspectives
Terrorism
Torture
Transnational corporations
Tribalism
Unemployment
Uninsured people
U.S. having no single racial/ethnic majority by 2040
Violence
White privilege
Xenophobia

This catalog is not suggested as a checklist of social issues that a preacher should cover in a given preaching cycle. Returning to an earlier theme, the minister who is in touch with the local culture can have a sense of where God's vision for justice interacts with particular social phenomena. Nonetheless, such a list may help some ministers think more broadly about possible points of contact between the core theological convictions of the church and the social world.[5]

5. A preacher might find it useful to review regularly the social forces that are current in the sphere of the congregation and in the larger world. Preachers can easily slip into thinking about social perspectives from limited and dated points of view. Preachers may find it helpful

## Index of Passages in the Order of Books of the Bible

For preachers who do not regularly preach from the lectionary, and for preachers who want to look up a particular passage but do not know where it is in the lectionary, an index of passages discussed in the commentary is at the end of the volume. This index lists biblical texts in the order in which they are found in the Bible.

The contributors typically discuss the biblical texts in the following order: first lesson(s) from the Torah, Prophets and Writings; the Psalm(s); the Epistle; and the Gospel. However, a writer will occasionally take up the texts in a different sequence as part of his or her interpretive strategy for the day.

## Inclusive Language, Expansive Language

This series uses inclusive language when referring to humankind. In other words, when contributors refer to people in general, they use language that includes all of their intended audience (e.g., humankind, humanity, people). When a writer refers to a particular gender (female or male), the gender-specific referent is used.

We seek to use expansive language when referring to God. In other words, the contributors draw on various names, attributes, and images of God known to us in Scripture and in our individual and corporate encounter of God in worship. We avoid using exclusively masculine references to God. When a Scripture passage repeatedly uses language for God that is male, we have sought more gender-inclusive emendations that are consistent with the intent of the original. Readers searching for an entire inclusive-language translation might try *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*.[6]

The Bible and Christian tradition use the term "Lord" to speak of both God and Jesus. The word "lord" is masculine. The English word "Lord" derives from a time when much of the European social world was hierarchical, with the lord and lady at the top and with human beings arranged in a pyramid of descending social power with the upper classes at the top and with males having authority over women. People in the upper reaches of the pyramid are authorized to dominate those below them. While we try to minimize the occurrence of the title "Lord," occasional writers in this book use "Lord" for God to call attention to God's absolute sovereignty; these writers do not

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to interview members of the congregation regarding the social phenomena that are most in the consciousness of the congregation.

6. Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

intend for the use of the expression "Lord" to authorize masculine superiority or the detailed social pyramid implied in the history of the word. Indeed, this book sees the purposes of God pointing toward a human community in which hierarchical domination is dismantled and power is shared.

Although the historical Jesus was a male, he announced the coming of the realm of God, a social world that is egalitarian with respect to gender and social power. In the hope of evoking these latter associations (and minimizing the pyramidal associations with "Lord"), we have shifted the designations of some historic days in the Christian Year that highlight aspects of the ministry of Jesus from lordship language to the language of "Jesus" and "Christ": Nativity of Jesus, Baptism of Jesus, Resurrection of Jesus, and Reign of Christ (in place of Nativity of the Lord, Baptism of the Lord, Resurrection of the Lord, and Christ the King).

We have also tried to speak expansively of the realm of God (NRSV: kingdom of God) by using terms such as realm, reign, rule, dominion, kin-dom, and holy commonwealth. The word "kingdom" appears where the author has specifically requested it.

## Language for the Parts of the Bible

The contemporary world is a time of experimentation and critical reflection regarding how to refer to the parts of the Bible that many Christian generations referred to as the Old and New Testaments. The discussion arises because in much contemporary usage, the word "old" suggests worn-out and outdated, while "new" often implies "better" and "improved." Many Christians believe that the unexplained use of the phrases Old Testament and New Testament can contribute to supersessionism: the conviction that new and improved Christianity has taken the place of old and outdated Judaism. The old covenant is no longer in force, but has been replaced by the new covenant. When used without interpretation, this way of speaking contributes to injustice by supporting anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. In an attempt to use language that is more just, many people today are exploring several ways forward.

As a part of the contemporary exploration, the writers in this series use a variety of expressions for these parts of the Bible. There is no fully satisfactory way of speaking. We note now the most common expressions in this series and invite the reader to remember the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Some leaders think that today's community can use the expressions Old and New Testaments if the church explains what that language does and does

not mean.[7] In antiquity old things were often valued and honored. Moreover, the words "old" and "new" can imply nothing more than chronology: The literature of the Old Testament is older than that of the New. The church would then use the terms Old and New Testaments without casting aspersion on Judaism and without suggesting that God has made Christianity a much purer and truer religion. Occasional writers in the series use the phrases Old Testament and New Testament in this way. However, a growing number of speakers and writers think that the words Old Testament and New Testament are so deeply associated with negative pictures of Jewish people, writings, institutions, and practices that, even when carefully defined, the language feeds negative perceptions.

"Hebrew Bible" and "Hebrew Scriptures" are popular ways of referring to the first part of the Bible. These titles came about because English versions are not based primarily on the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek in the third and second centuries BCE) but are translated from Hebrew (and Aramaic) manuscripts in consultation with the Septuagint. However, the designation "Hebrew Bible" raises the question of what to call the twenty-seven books that make up the other part of the Bible. We cannot call the other books the "Greek Scriptures" or the "Greek Bible" because the Septuagint is also in Greek. We cannot call them the "Christian Scriptures" or the "Christian Bible" since the church honors the entire Bible.

Occasionally Christians refer to the Old Testament as the "Jewish Bible." This nomenclature is unsatisfactory because people could understand it to mean that the first part of the Bible belongs only to the Jewish community and is not constitutive for the church. Furthermore, the Christian version differs from the Jewish Tanakh in the way that some of the books are ordered, named, and divided.

The designations "First and Second Testaments" are increasingly popular because many people see them as setting out a chronological relationship between the two bodies of literature—the First Testament came prior to the Second. However, in competitive North American culture, especially in the United States, "first" can imply first in value while "second" can imply something not as good as the first. The winner receives first place. Second place is often a disappointment. Moreover, "second" can imply second best or secondhand.

Seeking a way of referring to the Bible that respects its diversity but suggests its continuities, and that promotes respect for Judaism, writers in this

7. On this discussion, see further Ronald J. Allen, "Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters: A New Name for the Old Book," *Encounter* 68 (2007): 53–63.

series sometimes refer to the parts of the Bible as Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, and Letters. This latter practice adapts a Jewish way of speaking of the scriptures as TANAKH, an acronym derived from the Hebrew for Torah, Prophets, and Writings (*torah*, *neviim*, *ketuviim*) and adds the categories of Gospels and Letters.[8] To be sure, the books in Tanakh are divided and arranged differently than in the Christian Bible. Furthermore, while some may object that the books of Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation do not fall into these categories, we note that Acts is less a separate genre and more a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. In the strict sense, Revelation has the form of a letter. Although scholars today recognize that Hebrews is an early Christian sermon, it likely circulated much like a letter.

All designations for the parts of the Bible are vexed by the fact that different churches include different books. We should really speak of a Roman Catholic canon, several Orthodox canons, and a Protestant canon. As a concession to our inability to distinguish every permutation, we ask the reader to receive these designations with a generous but critical elasticity of mind and usage.

The designation "son of man" is challenging in a different way, especially when it is used of or by Jesus. Interpreters disagree as to whether the phrase "son of man" is simply a way of saying "child of a human being" or "son of humanity" (or, more colloquially, simply "human being") or whether the phrase has a specialized theological content, such as "apocalyptic redeemer" (as in Dan. 7:13–14). Since individual contributors interpret this phrase in different ways, we sometimes leave the expression "son of man" in the text of the commentary, with individual contributors explaining how they use it.

## Diverse Points of View in the Commentary

The many writers in this commentary series are diverse not only in gender, race, and ethnicity, but also in exegetical, theological, and ethical viewpoints. Turning the page from one entry to the next, the reader may encounter a liberation theologian, a neo-orthodox thinker, an ethnic theologian, a process thinker, a socialist, or a postliberal. Moreover, the writers are often individually creative in the ways in which they see the forward movement of their texts in calling for social transformation today. While all authors share the deep conviction that God is even now seeking to lead the world toward more inclusive, just community, the nuances with which they approach the biblical material and even the social world can be quite different.

8. For further discussion, see Allen, "Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters."

Rather than enforce a party line with respect to matters of exegesis, theology, and ethical vision, the individual writers bring their own voices to clear expression. The editors' hope is that each week the preacher can have a significant conversation with a writer who is an other and that the preacher's social vision will be broadened and deepened by such exposure.

Diversity also characterizes the process by which this book came into being. The editorial team itself is diverse, as it includes an African American man in the AME Zion Church, a woman of European origin from the Church of the Brethren, a historic peace church, and a man of European origin from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). While the editors share many convictions, their vision has been impacted deeply by insights from preachers and scholars from many other churches, movements, communities, and cultures. Dawn took the lead in editing Year A, Ron for Year B, and Dale for Year C. While the editors regarded one of their core tasks as helping the individual writers bring out their own voices forcefully, each has inevitably edited in light of her or his theological and ethical commitments.

Ultimately the goal of *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* is not simply to give preachers resources for talking about social issues, but to empower congregations to develop a theological life perspective that issues in practices of justice and to participate with God in working toward a time when all created entities—every human being and every animal and plant and element of nature—can live together as a community of love through mutual support with abundance for all.

# First Sunday of Advent

*Leonora Tubbs Tisdale*

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

The texts for this first Sunday in Advent are at times hopeful, at times prayerful, and at times foreboding. Yet they all seem to center around justice and the righteousness and holiness of God that will soon be made manifest in our midst, and how we as believers might thereby live more faithfully.

The Jeremiah lection starts the day on a hopeful note. Although people living in exile may believe God has forsaken and abandoned them, such is not the case. God promises that a "branch" will spring up from the seemingly dead stump of the Davidic line, a ruler who will govern the nations with justice and righteousness. Those living under oppression and subjugation can have hope that their situation will not last forever, but that God will redeem and save them.

Psalm 25 places us in the prayerful position of people who have known God's salvation, and who now trust in God so that God might show us how to live with justice and righteousness. How might our lives more ethically reflect God's own?

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul also sounds a prayerful note. Here he asks God to cultivate this beloved church in "holiness" to become all God intends it to be.

And finally, lest we think we have all the time in the world to get our lives in shape before that second coming of Christ with the saints, the Gospel lesson from Luke reminds us in foreboding apocalyptic language that we do not. Therefore, we had best busy ourselves with things that matter, such as caring for God's created order.

## Jeremiah 33:14–16

The portion of the book of Jeremiah in which this lection appears is called the Book of Consolation. After twenty-five initial chapters in which Jeremiah pronounces oracles of judgment upon God's people, and five chapters in which the prophet recounts incidents from his own life, the tone in chapters 30–33 shifts to one of comfort and consolation. The historical context has changed, with the people of Judah now in exile in Babylon. So, in a heartening tone reminiscent of those words from Handel's *Messiah* that we so often hear sung during the Advent season—"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" (Isa. 40:1 KJV)—Jeremiah brings his own brand of comfort and hope to those who long for an end to their reproof, separation from their homeland, and subjugation to a foreign enemy.

Earlier in this same chapter, Jeremiah proclaims that Judah's time of exile is coming to an end, and that God envisions a new future of hope, promise, and restoration. "I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth" (vv. 7–9a).

In today's lection, Jeremiah envisions the promise of God as a "shoot" or a "righteous branch" that will "spring up" from the seemingly dead stump in the line of Davidic rulers. Though the people of Israel and Judah may feel that the landscape of their nation is as desolate and devoid of life as Mount St. Helens was after a volcanic eruption covered its hillsides with molten lava and ash, the prophet proclaims that all is not as it seems. Even now God is at work, bringing life out of what the world considers to be dead. For a ruler will come forth from the stump of Jesse's tree—a ruler who will "execute justice [*mishpat*] and righteousness [*tsedeqah*] in the land" (v. 15). The time of oppression, persecution, and separation for God's people will come to an end, and God will establish a new day of restoration, healing, and safety.

Advent is a time for acknowledging the exilic conditions of life for those persons in our world who live in situations of injustice, who experience unrighteous hands of power over them. Whether we are talking about victims of war, domestic violence, or human trafficking, whether we are envisioning people who feel the heel of the economic oppressor on their backs or those who bear the weight of political oppression on their heads, Advent is a time for proclaiming the promises of God. The tree stump that looks to be dead and incapable of any new growth will, under the miraculous workings of God, send forth a new shoot—a tiny baby—who will continue the Davidic line.

Under his rule there will be no more oppression or subjugation, for God will inaugurate a new day and a new reign in which the peoples of the earth will live in freedom and safety and peace.

## Psalm 25:1–10

Psalm 25 is fitting to begin a new liturgical year because it places us (with the psalmist) in the position of offering ourselves anew to God for God's guidance, deliverance, and instruction. "O my God, in you I trust" (v. 2). "Make me to know your ways" (v. 4a). "Lead me in your truth, and teach me" (v. 5a).

The psalm is structured as an acrostic poem in which each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The result is a sense of wholeness or completeness as the psalmist reminds us both of the goodness of God and of God's forgiveness and guidance for those who put their trust in God. The theological culmination for today's passage occurs in verse 10, where the psalmist proclaims: "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees."

Advent, like Lent, is a time of preparation for receiving Christ anew. This psalm reminds us that trust in God and ethical living are closely aligned. Because we trust in a God whose ways are "steadfast love" and "faithfulness," we also seek instruction and guidance from God for our right living. Our lives—both as individuals and as communities of faith—ought to reflect God's own steadfast and faithful love. Implied here is a fidelity in relationships that runs counter to much of our "instant gratification" or "I'm here for you as long as it's good for me" culture. Conversely, this passage calls to mind those people and groups who, in their own care for others—especially the sick, the hurting, and the marginalized—mirror the steadfast love of God and inspire us to be more steadfast as well.

## 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

That the apostle Paul loves the people of Thessalonica is readily apparent in our reading for this first Sunday of Advent. Paul not only loves them, but also he is concerned about them; so he has sent Timothy to check up on this young church on his behalf. Timothy's reports are good ones, and they fill Paul's heart with joy. The church is staying faithful to Christ; the people are standing firm in their faith. And so Paul spends the first three chapters of this letter (thought to be his earliest) expressing his love, gratitude, and concern for the Thessalonians. His joy in the Thessalonians culminates in the opening verse of our reading for today (v. 9): "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?"

But this church, like any church, is not a perfect one. Therefore this passage also forms a bridge between Paul's expressions of thanksgiving for this church and his ethical encouragement to them. The bridge begins when Paul acknowledges that he longs to see the Thessalonians "face to face" in order that he might "restore whatever is lacking in [their] faith" (v. 10). Then, rather than immediately launching into a litany of all the ways the Thessalonians are falling short of what God desires of them, Paul prays for them. He prays that God will help him find his way to see them (v. 11). He prays that their love for one another might abound, just as Paul's love for them abounds (v. 12). And he prays that God will "strengthen [their] hearts in holiness" so that they might "be blameless" before God at the coming of Jesus with all the saints (v. 13).

The first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday of a new church year, is an appropriate time for the church to look back over its past year, acknowledging both the ways in which it has done what is pleasing in the sight of God and the ways in which it has failed to do so. All of us—like the church in Thessalonica—are a mix of sinners and saints. We need those occasions in the life of faith where we take stock of where we have been and look to where and who we would like to be. For the church to do so corporately is to acknowledge those places where we have failed to promote God's justice and righteousness and peace in the world, as well as those places where we have reflected Christ's goodness in our common life together. What better way for a pastor or church leader to begin a new church year than with prayer that we might all grow in faith, abound in love, and be strengthened in holiness, so that when Christ comes again with all the saints, we might be found blameless before him?

## Luke 21:25–36

The Gospel text for this first Sunday of Advent shakes us up. It is not about joyous anticipation or eager expectation—the things we usually associate with this season. Rather it is about end times, horrific natural disasters, and cosmic upheaval. With the heavy gloom and doom of its apocalyptic language, it seems about as fitting for a church decorated with an Advent wreath as Picasso's *Guernica* (his troubling portrayal of war) would be. It is unsettling, gruesome, and frightening.

Even worse, the disturbance appears to be intended. This text is meant to shake us up. Indeed, it is particularly written for people like us who are going about our business as usual, acting as if no cosmic event is about to occur that will change the whole future of the created order. God is about to break into history. And because of that action, the whole created order will never be the same.

Yes, this text intends to shake us up because God's redemption is not—as we are often inclined to think—simply about us and our individual relationships with Jesus. Redemption affects the whole created order. The sun and moon and stars, the seas and their waves, the very powers of the heavens will stand up and take notice when the Son of Humanity comes in his glory. And if we know what's good for us, we will be standing and watching, too, so that we don't miss the cosmic re-creation God will bring to pass at the second coming of Christ.

Consequently, we are called to "be on guard," lest this day catches us "unexpectedly, like a trap" (vv. 34–35). What that fully means for us, I do not pretend to know. But I suspect that in part it means we commit ourselves, here and now, to caring for the whole created order. So, when Christ comes in glory, we will not be found to be "weighed down with . . . the worries of this life" but instead will be found caring for those things that are pleasing to the Savior of the cosmos.

# World AIDS Day (December 1)

*Chris Glaser*

Ecclesiastes 4:1–12
Psalm 131
Philippians 2:1–11
John 13:1–20

World Aids Day began in 1988 to heighten awareness of the ways the HIV/AIDS pandemic ravages the human family and to take steps to deal with this disease.[1] This day opens the door for the preacher to learn how many people are affected by this disease and to provide reliable information about it in order to reduce the mystery and fear that still surround it in some corners. The preacher can help the congregation claim what they can do to end HIV/AIDS and to ease the suffering of those directly afflicted by HIV/AIDS and their families and friends.

> I have always believed that the HIV/AIDS epidemic would end someday, but I never thought I would be around to witness it. Now I believe it's possible that I will live to see the end of AIDS. After all we have the tools to end the AIDS epidemic today. The question is, do we have the political and moral will to use those tools effectively and compassionately?
>
> *Phill Wilson*[2]

Dr. Cecile de Sweemer, a Belgian medical missionary in Africa, observed the many challenges in addressing AIDS on the continent while keynoting an AIDS consultation in Toronto sponsored by the World Council of Churches. There are so many concerns in Africa—poverty, hunger, other diseases—that

1. Visit http://www.worldaidsday.org for the theme of World AIDS Day for the current year.
2. Phill Wilson, "The Way Forward," in *Not in My Family: AIDS in the African American Community*, ed. Gil L. Robertson IV (Chicago: Agate Press, 2006), 71.

AIDS must take its place as one more vital issue to be addressed. AIDS has spread widely within developing nations, including those on the African continent.

She described an incident that suggests the church is sometimes part of the problem. During a health crisis, she needed to visit a tribe known to be fearful of outsiders and hostile to whites. She asked to be left in a clearing near the village, and she stood in its center until she heard singing. Noticing the women from the village peeping at her from the trees and shrubs on the edge of the clearing, she began swaying to their song's rhythm and clapping to its beat. Hesitantly the women came forward and, one by one, joined her in the dance as they continued to sing. A woman handed her baby to her to hold as she danced, a sign of building trust. Finally the eldest woman of the village danced with her until they collapsed into one another's arms. Now the doctor was able to begin her work, sharing the medical information and materials the women needed to avert and address the crisis.

This is a model for reaching the world about AIDS. We must learn how to build trust, the best ways to enter others' worlds, in order to communicate and be of assistance. The interesting postscript to the story is that, when the doctor returned to the missionary with whom she was staying and proudly told how she had opened a line of communication with the villagers, the man's visage grew dark and angry, until he finally complained, "We teach them *not* to dance!" Indeed, sticks were used on the posteriors of any women who swayed too much as they brought their offering up the aisle to this new god. This serves as a metaphor of the way Christian influence has prevented honest talk about sexuality in Africa as well as worldwide.

## Ecclesiastes 4:1–12

> Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. (vv. 1b–3)

Unless you have sat with someone who suffers chronic pain and discomfort, continual prejudice and discrimination, and terminal despair and hopelessness, these opening verses of chapter 4 of Ecclesiastes seem over the top. But they can become the reality for those who suffer the opportunistic infections related to AIDS, who endure those who blame the victim, and who witness the ignorance and avoidance of those who will not even raise funds in an AIDS walk, let alone bring meals or comfort them simply by sitting beside

them. Nowadays in the United States, at least, it is as if AIDS work has fallen out of fashion, bringing us back to the old days before it became the au courant cause. Perhaps it is "AIDS burnout," as some have asserted, which only underscores Ecclesiastes' repeated declaration that all is vanity, a chasing after wind and dissipating vapors. But when power is coupled to inaction, oppression is born—as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. maintained, those who are not part of the solution are part of the problem.

Yet "two are better than one, . . . for if they fall, one will lift up the other" (vv. 9–10), and "if two lie together, they keep warm" (v. 11), while "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (v. 12). Though Ecclesiastes asserts work and idleness alike are vanities (v. 4), solidarity means something, even to this cynic. And wisdom: "Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king. . . . One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom" (vv. 13–14). The United States and the nations of Africa and the rest of the world have had more than our share of foolish kings, some of whom ignored AIDS or proclaimed lies about AIDS. But one wise king did come out of prison in South Africa: Nelson Mandela, "born poor in the kingdom" of apartheid, who championed nondiscrimination in the country's constitution and had an enlightened AIDS policy.

## Psalm 131

We often neglect contemplation in our spiritual tradition, but saying this psalm over and over may provide a powerful meditation. *Theologia* once meant an active communing with God, but it has become a systematic way of distinguishing ourselves and our beliefs—a practice of division among ourselves rather than communion with God. We spend too much time discussing theological "issues," giving rise to *diabolos*, an adversarial spirit that gives the devil its name. I believe it is more vital to be a church of common prayer than one of common belief, as writer Barbara Brown Taylor has suggested.

Anyone who wants to know where the ecumenical and interfaith movements have gone only need look at the ways traditions and denominations have come together around AIDS. AIDS is a humbling experience, not just for individuals with the syndrome, but for all of us. "O LORD, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high" (v. 1a) may characterize us as we witness the agony of the AIDS crisis. Though there were those who contemplated its theological dimensions, mindful of the theodicy of Job, for instance, most of us cleaning up the vomit or the excrement or the sores of people with AIDS in distress did not occupy ourselves with things "too great and too marvelous" (v. 1b).

No, if we were blessed, we "calmed and quieted" our souls, and thought of being held fast by our mothers in all innocence as the chaos of AIDS

enwrapped the world—from the challenges of the disease itself to the obstacles posed by those who refuse to recognize the need those challenges pose. And, if we truly lived Teresa of Avila's prayer that God has no body but our own, no hands, no feet, no face but our own, we were God the Mother to those who suffered AIDS, holding the ones having the disease or the ones who loved them, as they died or as they cried. Or we were Francis, hugging the leper of our time and finding Christ himself.

## John 13:1–20

Washing one another's feet at Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat center near Philadelphia, a man and I bonded as friends and fellow ministers. I had never experienced such tenderness and humility and sensuality in a spiritual act. Decades later, I found a way to incorporate footwashing on occasion in retreats I led. A couple married thirty years told me it was the most intimate encounter of their life together. During another retreat, a pair of strangers became lovers as a result of the exercise. At a Christian men's retreat in which we reenacted a number of sacramental acts, the evaluations revealed that footwashing was the one participants found most meaningful.

But I cannot read this story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet without thinking of a man with AIDS who refused to remove his shoes and socks for a similar exercise during a retreat in Chicago. His feet were infected with an unsightly fungus. Years later I took a friend with AIDS to the doctor and saw such infected feet for myself. His feet hurt too much to drive, and when I saw them in the doctor's office I was horrified, wondering how he could possibly recover from the swelling, discoloration, and flaking skin. It was as close to leprosy as I could imagine. At the same time, his vulnerability endeared him to me.

This prompts me to see something different in this story. Not only was Jesus demonstrating the humility we as Christians should practice, but also the disciples' vulnerability as their removing of their sandals further endeared them to him. It was a practice in intimacy as much as in humility. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me," Jesus tells Simon Peter (v. 8). Unless Jesus is allowed to touch us where we are most vulnerable, we miss the intimacy Jesus offers.

A friend with HIV said that if he were to get sick, he would go away from his family and friends to die, not wanting to burden them. "You don't understand," I said, rather bluntly. "Allowing us to care for you would be a very great gift." Anyone who has cared for a sick child, an ailing parent, a beloved pet, a dear friend, or a dying partner knows this. While not wanting to romanticize the experience—for there are times you hate it and just want to get away—when true love is present, God is there in the giving and receiving of tender loving care. *Ubi caritas et amor*, *deus ibi est*.

## Philippians 2:1–11

In my view, these verses are a perfect benediction on "all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers."[3] Blending sound Christian theology, uplifting liturgy, and compassionate charity, these verses are truly an "encouragement in Christ," a "consolation from love," a "sharing in the Spirit," and the "compassion and sympathy" that would make the joy of any Christian teacher like Paul "complete" (vv. 1–2). Though written from prison, its boundless self-sacrificing theme comes from a poetic liturgical formula celebrating Christ Jesus' own kenotic—self-emptying—love, not regarding "equality with God as something to be exploited" (v. 6) but "taking the form of a slave" (v. 7), causing God to exalt him (vv. 9–11). It was this unifying (v. 2b) and unselfish (vv. 3–4) love practiced by early Christians that attracted new converts.

Christians and churches too often concerned with what's in it for them, from self-preservation to church growth, should listen to Paul's "encouragement in Christ" to lose their life to gain it: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (v. 4). Ministry in the AIDS crisis means responding to the immediate needs of the nearest neighbor, tending to the fallen traveler by the roadside, rather than passing by to accomplish some ritual obligation. It was our failure to practice such urgency as well as our religious fastidiousness, ignorance, and self-preoccupation that facilitated the AIDS pandemic worldwide. May God forgive us! And may God give us the grace to do everything in our power to obliterate this modern plague as well as to stand beside those who still suffer.

"On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort" the oppressed, Ecclesiastes 4:1 reminds us. The psalmist recommends a contemplative and humble quieting and calming of our souls, like a child in its mother's arms. In John, Jesus washes his disciples' feet, demonstrating both humility and intimacy. And Paul writes to the church at Philippi that they should follow Christ's lead and treat others as more important than themselves. In the AIDS crisis, the oppressed have been faulted, as we have so often blamed the victim. The church has been more concerned with theological divisions than the hospitality of resting in God, the gift of contemplative spirituality. Intimacy and humility are lacking. And we have thought our church institutions and ourselves more important than the world's needs. Let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard his association with God as something to be exploited, but as an opportunity to serve (vv. 5–6).

3. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 287.