

# PREACHING GOD'S TRANSFORMING JUSTICE

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A Lectionary Commentary, Year A

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# Preface

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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. The editors and contributors are responsible for 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

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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.<sup>1</sup> *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.<sup>2</sup> 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: 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 *Strength to Love*.

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 the 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.<sup>3</sup> (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.<sup>4</sup> 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	Gender orientation	Police brutality
Absent fathers	LGBTQA	Pollution
Addictions	Geneva Convention	Pornography
Affirmative action	Genocide	Postcolonialism
Aging	Gentrification	Poverty
Animal rights	Glass ceiling	Prisons
Anti-Semitism	Greed	Public schools/private schools
Arms sales	Gun control	Racism
Church and nation	Health care	Repression
Civil religion	Homelessness	Reproductive rights
Classism	Housing	Sexism
Colonialism	Human rights	Socialism
Consumerism	Hunger	Stranger
Death penalty	Idols (contemporary)	Systemic perspectives
Disability perspectives	Immigration	Terrorism
Diversity	Islam and Christianity	Torture
Domestic violence	Islamophobia	Transnational corporations
Drugs	Judaism and Christianity	Tribalism
Ecological issues	Language (inclusive, repressive)	Unemployment
Economic exploitation	Margins of society	Uninsured people
Education	Militarism	U.S. having no single racial/ethnic major- ity by 2040
Empire	Multiculturalism	Violence
Energy	Nationalism	White privilege
Eurocentrism	Native American rights	Xenophobia
Exclusivism	Neocolonialism	
Flight to the suburbs	Peace movements	
Foster care	Pluralism	
Gambling		

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.<sup>5</sup>

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*.<sup>6</sup>

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

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.<sup>7</sup> 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 aspersions 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, ketuvim*), and adds the categories of Gospels and Letters.<sup>8</sup> 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.

# Martin Luther King Jr. Day (January 15)

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*Dale P. Andrews*

AMOS 5:18–24  
PSALM 33:16–22  
GALATIANS 3:23–29  
LUKE 6:27–36

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Racism is the one of the most pernicious and permeating realities of life in North America. If left unchecked, racism will destroy both people of color and people of European origin. The gospel insists that the church be anti-racist and pro-reconciling. The birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) offers to preachers the opportunity not only to honor the life of this prophetic leader, not only to name the abiding oppression of marginalized racial/ethnic communities and the duplicitous dominating effects on European communities, but also to help congregations recognize practical ways that the community can join the struggle for justice.

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The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. . . . But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, . . . it will rekindle the imagination of [humankind] and fire the souls of [all] imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace.

*Martin Luther King Jr.*<sup>1</sup>

What can possibly unlock the “shackles” that bind us to the “deadening status quo” of which King spoke? For that matter, what is the status quo itself? Is it our racial climate, our trumping trust in military might, or the exclusivity of our faiths? It would be too narrow to choose among the possibilities. King’s

1. Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963, 1981), 64.



appeal in the quote for this day hinges on the divine love that drives divine care and divine justice. The Scripture texts for today redefine our distortions of divine wrath, our vainglorious fear of God and one another, the rules of human engagement with enemies, and our twisted disciplines of justice. Our call, our strength, and our transformation are only in God's unrelenting love!

### **Amos 5:18–24**

This passage was one of King's go-to scriptural references during the civil rights campaigns. King would herald verse 24, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," in sermons and public addresses alike.

The prophet King stood among an expansive community of prophets: Amos, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, yes, . . . but also Ella Baker, Diane Nash, and Fannie Lou Hamer. King stood with prophets who would lift the Word of God in hymns of praise and proclamation; "we shall overcome, we shall overcome." King stood with moral and spiritual courage, calling us to be "maladjusted" in joining with him to lift the Word of God to the people of God and to a nation: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."<sup>2</sup>

It is hard sometimes to see hope and divine promise while standing in the shoes of prophets. The promise fades from our vision when we face dismissal or charges from insatiable anger, never mind physical threat or harm. The prophetic call feels like dispensing judgment without recourse. Mainstream America repeatedly wondered with resentment just how much reform would be enough for King and Black America! We must also wonder how to sustain a prophetic call or a prophetic community. Does the justice of Amos have a thriving, unending source? Does the righteousness of Amos bellow from life to give life? Do waterfalls run full of life? Do streams sweep us into life?

No, the prophet seems to speak only from impending doom! Amos does not receive a fanfare of life to speak in the name of God. No illusions in grand forums of national acclaim at the foot of the capital's memorials! No world peace prize to herald a ministry of justice, righteousness, and the love of God! Expulsion and exile are his threats. Even our nation could not bear to see a prophet called to speak from the frustrated wrath of God's love to give life, a frustrated wrath of God's love to sustain life, a frustrated wrath of love to live within God's covenant, to love the gift of life in the other. The nation would choose to see only doom! The nation would hear only gloom!

2. Martin Luther King Jr., "The American Dream," speech given February 5, 1964, at Drew University, Madison, NJ; available at [http://depts.drew.edu/lib/archives/online\\_exhibits/King/speech/TheAmericanDream.pdf](http://depts.drew.edu/lib/archives/online_exhibits/King/speech/TheAmericanDream.pdf) (accessed February 25, 2012).

Has our nation moved into the “promised land”? Does the promised land belong to the nation? We give God our honor and praise for our blessed inheritance. We commonly hear sermons proclaiming a covenant of divine favor and divine sanction upon blessings, upon the promise. We own prosperity; it is our divine election. We have because we are God’s favored. Even within our gates we determine the faithful and favored by the haves and the hoarding. And when we have, we praise God from our hoarding. We preach, urging others to give so that God can further bless us. We preach that if we give, we cause God to unleash untold blessings for our faithfulness, because God is eager to bless our storehouses. It becomes a divine transfer of funds.

Will we preachers be able to take on the mantle of this passage? Like King in his age, how will we address a complacent society impressed with its own image? How do we open the gates to the storehouse? Frankly, the wrath of God’s love demands justice for the other, righteousness demands care for the other, to seek their thriving, to seek out the other in the wilderness, to seek out the other in desert wandering from years of neglect, to seek out the other wandering from generations of withholding, to seek out the other wandering out from the desert.

Preachers take note of what King derived from this passage. The wrath of God is divine love driving justice and righteousness. The wrath of God’s love rages against the gates of self-contentment. The wrath of God’s love thrusts forth against the idolatry of craven self-images. The prophet Amos announces the wrath of God’s love that will not abate.

The wrath of God’s love is the paradox of this text. Injustice causes God’s wrath. Our tolerance of others’ suffering incites God’s disgust. We pray for God’s blessing and vindication, and yet we do not face or perhaps even perceive that God may look upon our spirituality with the wrath of God’s love; God may look upon our righteousness and the worship we offer from claims of divine favor or election with the wrath of God’s love.

Like prophets of any age, preachers will likely struggle with this text over how to find a word of hope. Where is the joy of salvation? The joy is in God’s unrelenting love; the wrath of God’s love is empowered by love that is never “done,” never satiated or satisfied. The joy of the wrath of God’s love is that justice ferrets out injustice. The joy of the wrath of God’s love is that the righteousness of God’s care stored up is a pressure cooker heaving and bursting. Divine wrath becomes judgment to be feared when we become content with our own image, when worship expresses only the desire to store more of God’s blessings. We come under God’s judgment when we seek and ordain our fortune more in privilege than mission, when we attempt to funnel God’s grace into privilege before responsibility! We struggle to understand

that God's wrath does not destroy relationship; in fact, divine wrath grieves how we have forsaken relationship!

The joy of the wrath of God is that God will not rest. The joy of the wrath of God's love is that God will not withdraw, nor relinquish justice. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

### **Psalm 33:16–22**

“The war horse is a vain hope” (v. 17). We place so much hope in the vindication of military might, and yet this psalm warns that the use of physical force simply cannot save us. In verses 10–12, the psalmist cautions us that God frustrates the plans of a people seeking their own sovereignty. A nation is secure only in God. God observes all of humanity and our vain efforts to rule outside of God's vision. That vision is not merely a physical sight, but it is theological also. What does God see in our making war? Does God perceive our claims of self-protection as we offer them? Does God focus on our claims of rooting out the evil other, as we have named them?

“The war horse is a vain hope for victory.” Preachers might find it difficult to preach on war from such a hymn of praise as this. The temptation, of course, is to reassert claims of divine election as the hand of God working out righteousness in the world. Yet the claim of human faithfulness in divinely sanctioned war is not the message of this psalm. Our hope survives only because of God's steadfast love (v. 18). Perhaps the most difficult point to grasp from this psalm is the call to fear God as it is juxtaposed with God's steadfast love. Strangely, we fear losing power enough to make war and do not fear God enough to find another way! The psalm asks us to trust in God to be our help (vv. 20–21). Instead, we tend to trust executing might and calling it righteousness. As King's vision of God's steadfast love grew from the nonviolence of civil disobedience against injustice to a national campaign against war, he encountered great resistance. In all debates of just and unjust war, we must acknowledge that all war is humanity's failure and endemic sin. King's nonviolence was not a distorted passivity or disassociating pacifism. It was—is—trust in God's steadfast love to deliver us from ourselves.

### **Luke 6:27–36**

Preachers will experience plenty of toil when constructing sermons on the principles of love. The fulcrum of this passage is the “golden” standard, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (v. 31). This sermon is located on the plain, as opposed to its counterpart, in Matthew 5–7, on a mount. The implications of its location are profound. In Luke's account, Jesus seeks

access and presence and is able to move from the mount of calling his twelve disciples to being directly present in people's lives. Verses 27 and 35 bracket the passage with the frank admonition to "love your enemies." To love one's enemies is not a sentimental vocation. We typically employ careful rules of engagement with enemies that we construct on rather sound ethics of protection. We extend ourselves with meted generosity measured on scales of mutual benefit. This passage, however, upends our understanding of mutual benefit. Jesus reverses the rules of engagement and measures of mutuality. The initial verses (vv. 27–30) redress how we engage those whom we avoid or seek to conquer—those who already hate us, abuse us, or deplete us. The later verses (vv. 32–34) address the distortions of our own favor toward those whom we find more appealing—those who love us and treat us well already. Jesus redefines the life of faithful love in God's reign—generosity, kindness, and mercy to the ungrateful and even the wicked (vv. 35–36).

King wrestled continuously with the ethics of this love on both social and personal scales of mutuality and protection. How does one balance respect and love for self with love for the other? King struggled with the painful spiritual crises of love, engagement with enemies, and self-protection.<sup>3</sup> The temptations to meet spiritual violence with spiritual violence are no less real than the encounter with physical violence; in fact the two temptations are seldom absent from one another. Would King raise the ethic of protection as a metaethic or way of life? This is the challenge Jesus raises in this sermon. Preachers will need to struggle with the metaethics of love in the rules of engagement with enemies and the perceived absence of mutual benefit.

### Galatians 3:23–29

If we are tempted by the Gospel reading to catalog the reversals that a metaethic of love might delineate as the way of life, then this Galatians passage should flag the hazards or limitations of a "lawful" approach to love. Verse 24 depicts inherited law as our disciplinarian. As such, the law instructs us in the means and manner of a disciplined faith. The law is clearly a gift to humanity to decipher faithfulness in concrete terms of life. The law reflects on our worship lives, interpersonal relationships, and society. If worship is an expression of faithful love to God, and human relations express the love we seek from one another, then social justice becomes the navigation of God's love as divine gift to society. We often preach that God is just. However, we all had better pray that God is truly more than just.

3. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1998, 2001), 63–82.

Galatians teaches us that God desires to be more than our disciplinarian. Justice is God's gift to society as God's love is a gift to humanity. According to Paul, the law serves to protect us from ourselves before God and with one another (vv. 23–25). Paul is not arguing that the law is unneeded. Instead, we now understand it within the eschatological reign that the love of God in Christ assembles (vv. 26–29). This faith that Paul defines transforms how we live with one another, even how we regard one another. Relationships of domination and servitude are overturned; chasms of alienation are bridged.

Toward the latter years of King's ministry, he increasingly perceived that faith in Christ required deconstructing domination and constructing bridges as the very means of protecting us from ourselves. In his *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* King argued that it was a matter of faith that all of the world's faiths need to come together, as do the races, to commune in the "world house" of God, or else we shall destroy our household and human family.<sup>4</sup>

4. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, 1986), 177–202.

# Ash Wednesday

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*Peter J. Paris*

ISAIAH 58:1–12

PSALM 51:1–17

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B–6:10

MATTHEW 6:1–6, 16–21

The season of Lent is an appropriate time for Christians to follow Jesus' practice when he spent forty days in the wilderness preparing himself spiritually for the mission he was being called to undertake. In doing so it is altogether fitting to attend to the following Scriptures: the prophet Isaiah's admonitions (Isa. 58:1–12) about the importance of true worship expressing itself in acts of justice, mercy, and helpfulness toward those in need; the psalmist's prayer (Ps. 51: 1–17) of repentance and a plea for a new spirit and a new heart; Paul's teaching (2 Cor. 5:20b–6:10) to keep our eyes on the mission of being reconciled to God and wholly dedicated to the mission God has called us to undertake; and Jesus' warnings (Matt. 6:1–6, 16–21) about the dangers implicit in giving wide publicity to our spiritual disciplines.

## **Isaiah 58:1–12**

In this text Second Isaiah focuses attention on the nation's call for the Lord's help in the midst of its suffering. The prophet summons the nation to proclaim publicly its unjust practices while seeking the Lord's protection. The prophet further reminds the people how they have served their own interest by fasting while they were oppressing their workers. Thus they are admonished that their worship can only be acceptable to the Lord if they take action "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free" (v. 6). Then and only then will they be able to experience the fruits of the new creation and be well protected by the glory of the Lord.

Reading this text in a predominantly African American congregation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's massive destruction of the Ninth Ward in New

Orleans, listeners will be prompted to raise the question of God's justice. Had not the poor Black population of that city suffered enough for many generations? Why could God not have protected them from this undeserved catastrophe?

Such questions conceal the real cause of the disaster, which was the deliberate neglect of the city's poorest citizens by the governing forces who could have treated them more fairly. Most importantly, those governing forces were not confined to the city alone, but they also functioned in the state as well as the federal government. None of those governing systems dispensed justice to the Black citizens in the Ninth Ward. Consequently, other parts of the city fared better during the crisis because they were not as vulnerable as the predominantly Black population in the Ninth Ward. Thus, the entire governing system was guilty of the sin of deliberate neglect, which, in turn, rendered all their emergency endeavors little more than self-serving platitudes. Time and again, the Scriptures teach us that doing God's work is measured by the fairness with which we treat the least of God's people.

### **Psalm 51:1–17**

This text represents one of the great Penitential Psalms in the Jewish and Christian traditions. From the days of antiquity up to the present time, this psalm has been associated with David's confession of his adultery with Bathsheba, which he came to see as a sin against God and not merely taking advantage of another man's wife, which in itself is reprehensible. In his plea for mercy, however, he manifested a humble spirit and a profound trust in God's steadfast love. Fully aware of God's justifiable judgment, he humbly sought divine forgiveness. Clearly, this prayer demonstrates the link between God's justice and God's mercy. Connecting these two ethical principles is significantly better than a mere emphasis on obedience to the letter of the law alone. David's repentance for breaking the law and God's forgiveness of him combine in anchoring the hope for a new beginning in which David promises to be a faithful witness to God's act of deliverance. David's forgiveness and his new relationship with God provide the groundwork for others in future generations who would link the faith and worship of Judaism with that of Christ's followers.

This text is often read in the midst of approaching danger, such as times when the certainty of death is near at hand. It applies to any occasion when people of faith are vividly aware of their dependency on God as their creator, sustainer, and savior. Such awareness of God also prompts one to remember one's own sin against God and, hence, one's unworthiness of divine deliverance. At all such times, however, the plea for mercy comes quickly to our lips and is never far away. Individually and collectively, those who are most

vulnerable in society are likely to call on God's help more frequently because of their needs, uncertainties, dependencies, and wrongdoings. Accordingly, for many weeks following the 9/11 horror, numerous informal shrines kept emerging in locations throughout New York City, symbolizing human awareness of our need for and dependency on God as the ultimate source of security, since our human means of securing ourselves can be destroyed in a flash. One such shrine was at the fire station on Thirty-second Street, commemorating the hundreds of firefighters who lost their lives as they attempted to rescue people who were trapped in the twin towers.

### **2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10**

Paul wrote this second letter to the church he had founded at Corinth because he had heard about conflicts and rivalries in the congregation, some of which pertained to accusations made about him and his apostolic authority. Clearly, Paul had learned that the congregation was disturbed that he chose not to visit them a second time. Paul defends that decision in the early part of the letter (2:1–2). In this section of the text he reminds the church that he and they are ambassadors of Christ. Thus, God is making an appeal through them, which means that they must be reconciled to God. By such reconciliation they will take on the righteousness of God.

Churches frequently have conflicts with their pastors. In this letter, we see that Paul shares in these experiences. In his absence, much conflict has arisen. Paul's method of self-defense is to focus attention on his commitment to the mission of proclaiming Christ. Accordingly, he reminds the church that he and they are ambassadors of Christ and that God is working through them. Thus he admonishes them to become reconciled to God so that they might manifest the righteousness of God. Though we today might see Paul as pleading his own innocence in this congregational dispute, he is justified nonetheless in focusing attention on their common mission rather than the dispute itself. In doing so, he is quick to remind them that despite the many obstacles and sufferings he had experienced in his ministry, the grace of God enabled him to remain faithful.

It is important to note that there may be times when the wrongdoing of pastors results in the loss of their moral authority in the congregations they serve. The impact of that loss may signal the end of their effectiveness in those contexts. Though such pastors should repent of their wrongdoing and seek the forgiveness of those whom they have hurt, it may take a very long while for trust to be fully restored.

In the wider political realm, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa made a valiant attempt to restore justice by inviting public



confessions by the officials responsible for implementing the apartheid government's policies of racial oppression. Though the commission's work was a helpful and necessary part of that nation's healing process, the breadth and depth of the racial wounds will require careful attention for many generations to come. In short, our actions have enduring consequences that require repentance and forgiveness as the first steps toward reconciliation, restorative justice, and trust.

### **Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21**

More than any other Gospel, Mathew presents Jesus as a master Jewish teacher. It begins with an account of Jesus' genealogy that traces it back to Abraham, the ancestral father of the Jewish people. This narrative speaks about Jesus being born to a family held in low social esteem, unlike most leaders. Yet his future greatness is foreseen as the story depicts the visit of wise men from the east coming to see the birth of this long-expected king. Throughout this Gospel, Mathew seeks to show the connections between Jesus and the covenants that God made with Abraham and Moses.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus focuses his attention on three important religious practices of the Jewish people: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. Clearly, each is a publicly visible act. Jesus warns the people, however, that they need to be careful in the public expression of their piety. If such acts are to be authentic, they must be done properly. Otherwise, they could have a contrary effect. For example, he tells them that their giving of alms should not be accompanied by fanfare but, rather, done in secret. They should expect their reward to come from God and not from the wider public. If their act of almsgiving is undertaken in the spirit of humility, God will see it and reward them accordingly. True worship seeks God's blessing rather than the praise of others. This message needs to be heard by those who are prone to making a public display of their piety rather than give a secret offering that comes from the inner depths of their hearts.

Time and again, we have witnessed political figures and televangelists boldly proclaiming their personal piety and family devotion and later being disgraced by the disclosure of their own moral hypocrisy. All too often, their personal and family virtues have been displayed publicly as they exercise moral superiority over such vulnerable peoples as undocumented immigrants, nonheterosexuals, and adult victims of rape and sexual harassment. Such acts of hypocrisy may be among the most heinous sins because of their total lack of spiritual or moral integrity.

Many people think of Lent as a time for reflecting on their own private relationship with God through the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation,

fasting, benevolent offerings, and charity. The danger implicit in such an understanding is that these actions may be carried out without giving any attention whatsoever to the needy and the people unjustly treated in our midst: the homeless, the hungry, the unemployed, the sick, the lonely, the imprisoned, neglected children, strangers, and many others. The season of Lent should inspire us to allow the circumstances of our world to evoke from us the desire to bring wholeness to a broken world, just as Jesus did during his forty days of fasting in the wilderness, when he chose to consider others even as he was tempted to think only of himself and his own glory in isolation from the needs of the world. Jesus chose not to yield to the temptations of self-absorption and prepared himself for ministries of love, justice, and mercy in the world at large. May we do likewise.