

Feasting on the Word

Preaching the
Revised Common Lectionary

Year A, Volume 1

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General Editors

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Publisher's Note

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary is an ambitious project that is offered to the Christian church as a resource for preaching and teaching.

The uniqueness of this approach in providing four perspectives on each preaching occasion from the Revised Common Lectionary sets this work apart from other lectionary materials. The theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical dimensions of each biblical passage are explored with the hope that preachers will find much to inform and stimulate their preparations for preaching from this rich “feast” of materials.

This work could not have been undertaken without the deep commitments of those who have devoted countless hours to working on these tasks. Westminster John Knox Press would like to acknowledge the magnificent work of our general editors, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. They are both gifted preachers with passionate concerns for the quality of preaching. They are also wonderful colleagues who embraced this huge task with vigor, excellence, and unfailing good humor. Our debt of gratitude to Barbara and David is great.

The fine support staff, project manager Joan Murchison and compiler Mary Lynn Darden, enabled all the thousands of “pieces” of the project to come together and form this impressive series. Without their strong competence and abiding persistence, these volumes could not have emerged.

The volume editors for this series are to be thanked as well. They used their superb skills as

pastors and professors and ministers to work with writers and help craft their valuable insights into the highly useful entries that comprise this work.

The hundreds of writers who shared their expertise and insights to make this series possible are ones who deserve deep thanks indeed. They come from wide varieties of ministries. They have given their labors to provide a gift to benefit the whole church and to enrich preaching in our time.

Westminster John Knox would also like to express our appreciation to Columbia Theological Seminary for strong cooperation in enabling this work to begin and proceed. Dean of Faculty and Executive Vice President D. Cameron Murchison welcomed the project from the start and drew together everything we needed. His continuing efforts have been very valuable. Former President Laura S. Mendenhall provided splendid help as well. She made seminary resources and personnel available and encouraged us in this partnership with enthusiasm and all good grace. We thank her, and look forward to working with Columbia's new president, Stephen Hayner.

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

Westminster John Knox Press

Series Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We have been honored to work with a multitude of gifted thinkers, writers, and editors. We present these essays as their offering—and ours—to the blessed ministry of preaching.

David L. Bartlett
Barbara Brown Taylor

A Note about the Lectionary

Feasting on the Word follows the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) as 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. In addition, it provides for a uniform set of readings to be used across denominations or other church bodies.

The RCL provides a reading from the Old Testament, 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 is the year of Matthew, Year B is the year of Mark, and Year C is the year of Luke. John is read each year, especially during Advent, Lent, and Easter.

The RCL offers two tracks of Old Testament texts for the Season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time: a semicontinuous track, which moves through stories

and characters in the Old Testament, and a complementary track, which ties the Old Testament texts to the theme of the Gospel texts for that day. Some denominational traditions favor one over the other. For instance, Presbyterians and Methodists generally follow the semicontinuous track, while Lutherans and Episcopalians generally follow the complementary track.

The print volumes of *Feasting on the Word* follow the complementary track for Year A, are split between the complementary and semicontinuous tracks for Year B, and cover the semicontinuous stream for Year C. Essays for Pentecost and the Season after Pentecost that are not covered in the print volumes are available on the *Feasting on the Word* Web site, www.feastingontheword.net.

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).

Feasting on the Word

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1-5

¹The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come

the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

Theological Perspective

We are accustomed to hearing words, and often we call on others to listen with us; but in dramatic fashion the prophet Isaiah speaks of "seeing the word." Seeing the word, a new idea for many of us, points to a new level of discernment. There is "a seeing beyond seeing," learning to see reality at its depth, as we learn that "there is often more there than meets the eye." In a profound sense the emphasis is not on human imagination or gifts of intellect, but on anticipation that the word concerning Judah and Jerusalem will be revealed by God. God's servants are expected to wait for God to reveal the word concerning their situation of faith. God shares the word with God's people, and they not only listen to the word, but also "behold the word."

Quite often in the Old Testament we are told that God's word is enacted. God's word does not return empty but accomplishes its intent. God's word happens as the word becomes deed. The word, as promise, is always looking toward fulfillment. "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). Isaiah enables his community to see that the rich have been exploiting the poor and worshipers have been preoccupied with the scrupulosity of sacrifice and obedience; but he goes beyond that.

The genius of Isaiah is that he also paints a vivid picture of God's corrective message to the people and the new reality it will create. Along with his

Pastoral Perspective

By the time Advent comes around, we have already been primed by our culture for a Big Event. Catalogs arrive, showing us pictures of happy families in matching pajamas enjoying a quiet moment together. Commercials splash across the television screen, promising love and contentment in the form of new gadgets. Store displays evoke nostalgia for childhood wonder. We are invited to lean together toward the coming Big Event, when fantasies will be fulfilled, and dreams may yet come true.

In the face of such messages, we preachers have the task of articulating a message that is both faithful to our Scriptures and responsive to the deep, true needs of people who are longing for something Big. We fail when we take the easy road of simple assault against the cultural and commercial messages. Yes, our culture is celebrating a giddy overhyped pseudo-Christmas while we are attempting the more serious task of observing a holy Advent, but the reason the cultural messages are so powerful is that our human yearning is so real, and so profound.

Isaiah holds up a vision of the true. He takes us to a mountain and shows us what our hearts are actually tuned for. First, he shows that God's presence, by God's own initiative, will become more evident and compelling: the Lord's house will be established as the highest of the mountains, and the nations shall stream

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
⁴He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Exegetical Perspective

This oracle is often called the “floating oracle of peace” because it also appears in Micah 4:1–3. It is apparently part of a general prophetic tradition that was available to both of these prophets as a promise of the eschatological fulfillment of God’s kingdom. Presumably this is especially important in times of difficulty when present circumstances seem unpromising; confidence that the future belongs to God gives hope in the present. In Advent we anticipate the birth of Jesus into a world in need of light (v. 5). Every generation needs assurance that the powers of the world—whether the Romans of Jesus’ time or the principalities and powers of our present age—do not determine the future.

In Isaiah’s time the difficult present circumstances were probably associated with the Syro-Ephraimitic war, when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus tried to force Judah into an unwise alliance in opposition to the Assyrian Empire. When these foes finally laid siege to Jerusalem, King Ahaz turned to the prophet Isaiah for advice and assurance.

In response, Isaiah offered a vision of promise that has a number of elements. The first is that regardless of where power seems to lie in the present, the day is coming when God’s reign will be established for all humankind to see. God’s dwelling on

Homiletical Perspective

As the Old Testament reading for the First Sunday of Advent, these lines from Isaiah are Scripture’s first words to the church in Advent. They are, therefore, the very first words to be heard by the church as its new year begins. The curtain rises. A prophet walks onto the darkened stage in a circle of light. He begins to sing—of a mountain, and of nations streaming to it willing to hear holy instruction and be judged by it, willing also to make peace with each other. As the song is ending, another sound rises, the ringing sound of hammers striking metal. It fills the room. That sound is the first in the church’s new year.

So vivid and appealing is the image of swords and spears beaten into plowshares and pruning hooks that we may be inclined to camp the whole sermon there. As usual, the preaching will likely be truer and richer if the larger sweep of the text is taken into account. So frame by frame, how does the vision proceed?

It begins by declaring that in God’s future, the holiest ground becomes highest ground—above all other elevations will be the place of awe. From this place the Presence will call to the nations, who will flock to it. A new community is being gathered to the Holy, a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual convergence. Coming nearer, they urge each other on and call out to each other the longing that draws

Isaiah 2:1-5

Theological Perspective

contemporary Micah, he enjoins Judah that God requires justice, mercy, and even more, to walk with God. It is in this context that he articulates a theology of “the last days.” The word of God provides the basis of a new future in which the temple of God becomes the focal point of the world. There is a break, a discontinuity, with the way things were. The good news is that tomorrow will be different from yesterday, because the future is based on the promises of God, which are always new.

There is no basis in the contextual situation of Judah for expecting or planning a new future. Without God’s promise as basis and ground of hope, the future is bound to be a repetition of the past. With that promise, there is a new point of departure, because the future is based on the faithfulness of God. The new future that Isaiah offers as promise is that the temple of God will be lifted high above all the mountains and all people, including the Gentiles, will stream toward it. The promise comes in the midst of the waywardness and idolatry of the people. The promise is not consonant with the practice and the conduct of the people, but the prophet, who is able to “see beyond seeing” and somehow able to see God’s hope for the people, articulates a message that transcends the reality on the ground.

Jews and Gentiles alike stream toward God’s holy mountain. Why? What compels them? One insight that emerges here is that, at our core, human beings need instruction from YHWH. “Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’” (v. 3). The people are in need of instruction and direction at crucial junctures of life, but they are tired of false instruction and faulty directions from their culture’s gods. So they set their gaze on the temple of YHWH atop the highest mountain, and together they become the pilgrim people of God.

There in the mountain of God they will encounter and meet God, who speaks not only in words but in acts. They will hear not only with their ears but with their hearts—and this God, whose actions they see and whose will they hear in their hearts, will be an all-welcoming God. The prophet offers a clue that the instruction of God revealed and hidden in the Torah is not only for Israel, but for all the nations. God’s word, indeed God’s law, is not the exclusive right of any particular people, but is “spoken” for all who stream toward the mountain of God.

God’s word always comes as law and gospel. The law here comes not in an exhortation but in a

Pastoral Perspective

to it. People everywhere will be drawn to God, from all nations, all cultures, all races. They will converge out of a shared desire for divine instruction. Here is a revolutionary contrast to current complacency and cynicism. The preacher might find real fire for preaching if he or she simply contemplates how radical a promise this is—that we will all seek God together, and God will be present. Here Isaiah is declaring that one day we can quit trying to get by on scraps and remembrances of spiritual experiences. God’s presence will be made manifest. God’s house will be established, and we shall stream to it. We will press toward it together to be taught and to be changed.

Then the word of the Lord will go forth, and from that word will come justice; God will judge between the nations and settle disputes. The word of the Lord will make an actual difference in the way the world works: inequities will be balanced, shackles will be loosed, wrongs will be set right. Out of this justice will come transformation—weapons of violence will be turned into instruments for nourishment. The nations will put their swords down, and will not train for war anymore.

Consumerist visions of the good life may seem to prevail in our culture at this time of year, but Isaiah’s prophecy will stand up to any of them. This picture of unity, of justice, of shared openness to the divine way, and of peace speaks to some of our deepest hopes. The preacher would do well to find ways to build bridges between the listeners’ culturally driven anticipation and the deeper yearnings that lie beneath. How might the many pictures of happy families and yuletide gatherings actually speak to something real, like the desire for harmony across many divisions? How might the nostalgia for Christmas past, and the idolization of childhood wonder represent our desire to believe again in things that seem impossible to us as adults—like peace on earth and goodwill for all?

Once tapped, these yearnings may reveal something raw and disillusioned. As much as we may long for a day when weapons are laid down, hearts are transformed, and peoples are drawn together, we find it hard to believe that such a day will actually come. Even to speak of the end of time, or of a time beyond time, when God will set everything right, is a stretch for many of us. Isaiah’s vision may be even more preposterous than that. He announces that this remarkable transformation will take place “in days to come.” “In days to come” may not be specific, but it does imply that such transformation will come within history.

Exegetical Perspective

Mount Zion will be central and elevated over all other claims to prominence or power (v. 2).

The temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was far more than a matter of local geography. It was the locus of God's presence in the midst of God's people. To envision Zion as elevated above all other mountains and the focus of pilgrimage by all peoples (vv. 2b–3a) is not so much a political claim by Jerusalem as a spiritual claim of God's presence as the true center to which all nations will eventually flow. Nations will always be in conflict unless God's reign is recognized beyond that of kings and God sits on Mount Zion enthroned above the ark of the covenant, reigning over all other claims to power. Already the prophet Isaiah understands God's ultimate purpose to bring salvation to all the nations and not simply to Israel. This universal quality is appropriate to Advent, where Christians celebrate the birth of the child proclaimed with the words "Peace on earth; goodwill to all people."

A part of that hoped-for future day is that all humanity will also recognize the need for God's direction in their lives. Verse 3 actually contains four synonyms that stress the ways in which the direction that comes from God will finally prevail: "he [will] teach us his ways," "we [will] walk in his paths," "out of Zion shall go forth the law;" "the word of the Lord [will come] from Jerusalem." Ways, paths, law, word—all express the direction that comes from God and counters the alternatives that tempt our allegiance in the world. The ways of this world are self-centered and idolatrous. This verse reorients the faithful to the alternative world created by covenant partnership with God. God is the true source of guidance in human life and community. In Advent, God's word incarnate is about to become flesh in our midst, countering the wisdom of this world. The Gospel of John expresses this hope in its profound claim that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (1:14).

This new focus brings two results. The first is judgment. Nations and peoples are judged and rebuked (v. 4a). Those in the world who claim authority apart from God's reign are exposed and judged. The world is not the source of true authority, and it is not the source of hope for the future. The world is the source of conflict, the sword, the spear, the making of war.

In God's reign these implements of conflict will be transformed into tools of community (v. 4b). Swords will become plowshares and spears become pruning hooks. Nations will trade in their swords and war will not be the focus of nations. This

Homiletical Perspective

them toward a common center: to hear the instruction of God.

This instruction, it turns out, includes arbitration. The Holy One "shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples." God, in other words, will not only speak, but will listen to the grievances, disputes, and concerns of the nations, and will adjudicate. These two words—"judge" and "arbitrate"—are the only active verbs assigned by the text to God. The nations and peoples are about to make peace, but the gift given by God is justice. The ending of inequity is ground for the ending of violence. The old assertion is true: there is no lasting peace without justice.

The nations accept God's judgments. One result, the only one named, is disarmament, inevitably leading to new capacities for tending the land and feeding the people. Since the reasons for envy, greed, resentment, retribution, and fear have been abolished, weapons are irrelevant. Since aggressions have been rendered absurd, resources once diverted for battle are available now for the provision of health, life, and communal growth. The text imagines *conversion* in its literal, material sense. Instruments of taking life are converted to implements for sustaining life. The economy is converted. The world's curriculum is converted from learning war to learning the ways of God.

Lest we get too dreamy about an idyllic future, the text hands us a present-tense invitation. Having pointed to a day when "the peoples" will say to each other, "Come, let us go to the mountain," the text now urges *us*: "Come, let us walk in the light." Whatever peaceable future there is to be, those who hear the promise are enjoined to go walking toward it "in the light of God."

Preachers face an odd challenge when a text points to the future of God. We are preaching a dream. In what way is the dream true, and in what realm? Isaiah is apparently proclaiming future wonders within human history. Real nations will bend their weapons toward the cultivation of the actual earth. On this First Sunday of Advent, preachers are not likely to declare that this vision will be historically and universally so.

Then what will we say? Strategically, it might be wise to say how absurd it all sounds. During the reading of the text, did no one in the room laugh out loud at the naiveté of it? Did no one smirk? Texts such as these cannot be preached effectively or truthfully without acknowledgment of the unbudging, bleak realities they claim will disappear. Sorrow and

Isaiah 2:1-5

Theological Perspective

proclamation: the people will make peace, as swords become plowshares and spears become pruning hooks. Once again the promise of peacemaking does not match the reality on the ground. The enemy is preparing for war, but the word goes forth that God's will is peace, and the people are called to join God in God's work of peacemaking. Because the prophet has his eyes on God and not merely on the situation—because he is focused on God's instruction and direction—he can actually see the word of God, the *promissio dei* in action. The word of encouragement for those who seek instruction at the house of God is not to focus on the present existential situation in such a way that they lose sight of the God who speaks and acts.

We are promised by God that as God's gift of peace becomes real among us, Jews and Gentiles alike will stream to the mountain of God to be instructed and directed by God. The people who are taught by God will seek peace and practice violence no more. Weapons of violence will be destroyed. To receive divine instruction is to share in a vision of a coming realm of peace in which God will judge among the nations, and nations will not learn war anymore. The way forward is to walk in the light of the Lord.

NOEL LEO ERSKINE

Pastoral Perspective

Herein lies another important pastoral insight. It is so much easier to pin our hopes on Christmas gifts and holiday feasts than it is to open ourselves to the possibility of believing in the seemingly impossible. We have been disappointed so many times by failed peace treaties abroad, and by divisions within our own culture, and by fractured relationships within our own lives. We know firsthand the destruction that conflict inflicts, even if we have never lifted an actual sword. It is important for the preacher to acknowledge the reality of disillusionment and disappointment, understanding that these apply not only to the lofty ideas of world peace, but also to some of the most intimate relationships in congregants' lives. As Christmas approaches, some in our churches will be feeling these losses acutely; it is important for the preacher to be honest about realities and attentive to the fact that happy visions of hope can make old wounds throb.

In the end, what Isaiah offers is not only a vision of global transformation, but an invitation to live toward that day. "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!" However hard it may be to believe that a new and longed-for reality will take hold some day, there is power in walking in God's light now, one step at a time. Congregants may feel cynical or hopeless about the prospects of Isaiah's vision, but in his invitation lies enormous and practical power. The future belongs to God, but the first step toward that future belongs to those who have glimpsed God's light and are willing to trust that enough light lies ahead.

STACEY SIMPSON DUKE

Exegetical Perspective

transformational image has fueled the imagination of many generations. It is the inspiration for a large sculpture that stands outside the General Assembly tower at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The hope is that through the cooperation of nations, the tools of community can replace the weapons of war.

The occurrence of this same striking image in Micah 4:3 suggests that this was a common expression of hope within the wider prophetic movement during Isaiah's time. It moves beyond the particularities of immediate conflicts between peoples and nations to find unity in a common hope for the alternative world of God's reign. In Advent we lift our sight beyond the challenges and crises of our own time to participate with the generations since Isaiah in the hope for a world transformed by the final goal of peace and harmony toward which God is moving us.

In the end, the establishment of God's reign is a matter of walking "in the light of the LORD" (v. 5). Light is a strong image in the prophecies of Isaiah, in 9:2, where God's light gives the people hope, and in 42:6, where God's people are called to be a light to the nations. Light is also, of course, one of the primary symbols of Advent. This First Sunday finds the Advent community brimming with confidence. The light of the world is coming in Jesus Christ, and the world will be transformed. We light the candles of Advent as a foretaste of the light that is to come in the Christ child. The darkness of the world will not prevail. Conflict is replaced by community, and those who would oppose the advent of God's reign will be judged and overcome. God's light will not be denied. The reign of God will come.

BRUCE C. BIRCH

Homiletical Perspective

doubt need a voice in the room, or the promise is flippant. Advent proposes impossibilities. The fitting first response is bafflement. The season keeps giving us cause to blurt out the question of Mary: "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34).

We are in the presence of a mystery. God's own justice and peace will occur among the nations "in days to come." What days? How? Perhaps all we can say is that the vision describes what God is, in fact, at work in the world to do. It is what Jesus apparently meant by "the reign of God," which is already present and at work among us, though not yet in fullness. We saw it in Jesus, who converted fear to love, lunacy to sanity, enemies to friends. He died surrounded by swords; a spear stabbed him; nails tore him. They entered infinite love, which "melted them into light."¹

Isaiah's vision should not be preached in the imperative. The text does not scold or admonish; it lifts a gleaming promise of what God will do in days to come. If the sermon blasts the nations or lectures congregants about being peacemakers, it violates the text's intention. True to the season, the sermon will express the deeps of human longing, and point to the dreams and promises of God for the world. In the end, the sermon will also be, as hope always is, invitational. "Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD." God's future casts its gleam into the present. We move toward God's future by making our choices—personal, relational, political, communal—in its light.

At St. Louis University is a small Jesuit chapel that is creatively lit. The light fixtures are made of twentieth-century cannon shells, converted. Emptied of their lethal contents, they now hold light for people to pray by. In such light we pray and live. And having laid our own weapons down, we bear witness to the promise of greater transformations in days to come.

PAUL SIMPSON DUKE

1. This image was used by George Arthur Buttrick in an unpublished sermon.

Psalm 122

¹I was glad when they said to me,
 "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

²Our feet are standing
 within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³Jerusalem—built as a city
 that is bound firmly together.

⁴To it the tribes go up,
 the tribes of the LORD,
 as was decreed for Israel,
 to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

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Beginning to read Psalm 122 leads to singing. The question is: "What song do you sing?" On the one hand, people might be drawn to the classical setting for organ and choir written by Sir Hubert Parry in 1902 for the coronation of King Edward VII of England. With ease that ought to worry us as much as it delights us, this music bespeaks the power of empires and their political, military, and religious elites all singing of the strong walls that enfold their peaceful and prosperous city. The divide is obvious, implicit throughout and made clear toward the end: prosperity to Jerusalem-lovers, but the hostile better keep their distance! This song is a song by and for the powerful.

What if those who are powerless sing the psalm? Can we hear it quite differently, less a theology of glory and more a theology of the cross? The song might begin with vibrant handclapping, Hammond organ, and drums, pulsing forth in a strong gospel style, such as the version by Joe Pace and the Colorado Mass Choir. The African American context insists that despite oppression, we have a mighty advocate fighting on our side, and in that one's house we have safety and protection. Rather than the power of empire and its elites, here we might find a safe house where we can exhale and gain strength for the struggles of life.

Pastoral Perspective

By the time Advent rolls around, most of North America is already thinking of Christmas. Carols are playing in the shopping malls, Christmas decorations are up, and the retail bonanza that drives our economy is well under way. The church comes late to the Christmas season. We are culturally out of step, emphasizing different themes, having different priorities. Psalm 122, a song of ascents or pilgrimage psalm, draws some attention to the different path we as Christians take toward Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ.

Verse 1 might be an interesting place to begin this discussion. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" I almost detect some ambivalence, here; the image is of people encouraging each other to go to worship, and the psalmist proclaims gladness at this—as opposed to some other prevalent emotions, perhaps? In my own context, people who proclaim an affinity for the church and for Christianity stay away from worship in droves. In the minds of some, it appears that "going to church" is indeed something that has been "decreed" (v. 4), an obligation that has been laid on us. We go to church not because we want to, but because we think we should. In the minds of many, also, are the images of a judgmental God and a judgmental church. Church can be the place where

⁵For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

⁶Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.

⁷Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”

⁸For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”

⁹For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

Exegetical Perspective

The Psalter reading for this First Sunday of Advent is identified in its superscript (not included here) as “A Song of Ascents” (Heb. *shir hama’alot*)—one of fifteen psalms (Pss. 120–134) so identified. The Hebrew word *ma’aleh* usually appears as a geographical term describing rising terrain (Num. 34:4; Josh. 10:10; 1 Sam. 9:11) or as an architectural term meaning “step” (cf. Exod. 20:26; 1 Kgs. 10:19–20). While neither of these meanings is impossible in this context, the content of the psalms in this collection suggests another translation. All of these poems deal, in one way or another, with coming into or longing for God’s presence in the temple. Since, in Hebrew idiom, going to the Jerusalem shrine always meant going *up*, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was an ascent. Perhaps, then, we should read these psalms as the songs of those who ascend—as pilgrim songs.

The bulk of today’s psalm deals with the city of Jerusalem. The poet rejoices to be at last within the city gates (v. 2). Jerusalem is praised for its stability (“built as a city that is bound firmly together;” v. 3), its political significance as a center for all the tribes (v. 4), and the justice enforced within it (v. 5). All of this is ensured by the king, descended from David, appointed by God (v. 5; see also 2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89:19–37). Because of these blessings brought by the city (as well as for the sake of family and friends

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Advent, the beginning of the church year, is a time to begin our journey of faith afresh. Today’s psalm captures in miniature the movement in the life of faith, that all of life should be one continual act of praise for God and service of neighbor. The psalmist creates a roadmap for peace that begins and ends in God (vv. 1, 9). This divine cartography propels the pilgrim’s journey in acts of praise and prayer and purpose. When we journey to the heart of God, we become God’s peace in the world.

Pilgrimage. The psalm invites the preacher to explore an itinerary for our Godward journey. We meet the psalmist, who is carried along by throngs of fellow pilgrims filled with joy about the impending journey. The psalmist exclaims, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to house of the LORD!’” (v. 1). Might we also detect a hint of hesitation and uncertainty? After all, one may be glad out of a sense of excitement, but one may also be glad out of a sense of relief.

That uncertainty seems true to the spirit of Advent, which, though filled with anticipation, is not devoid of dread. It causes us to question where we fear God’s judgment, and where we need God’s peace. We yearn for a world ordered according to God’s purposes, but that is not the world we see. The

Psalm 122

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The psalm itself has a theological argument about its meaning. Read through Joe Pace—that is, through the viewpoint of those on the underside of life—it subverts all we know about the violence that upholds empire and instead dreams of a city redeemed. What might such a reading of Psalm 122 imply? At least four things: a space for refuge-offering, a time for praise-making, a place for justice-doing, and a way for peace-living. Let me take each in turn.

Seen from the underside, the bold claim of space for *refuge-offering* is a theological claim, a declaration about the God whose house this is. The first and last verses of the psalm speak of the house of God, the one who made us, who brought us out of Egypt, and who desires for us good and not evil. We are, then, rejoicing as one rejoices in being where true joy lives. This is not simply happiness, the satisfaction that comes with a good meal or a lovely concert. The character of the moment is not subjective and emotional but, rather, objective and holistic. It is as if we could return to the womb, to our human place of origin. Here, people rejoice to come into the place where God dwells, the very house where God resides, from which all good things come to be. This house is a womb of the world, and our deep joy comes from being offered that deep and healing refuge.

In response to an overwhelming gift of healing refuge, the psalmist naturally turns to *praise-making*. The rejoicing at the psalm's beginning quickly moves through the doors and into the city, into the temple, where all go up to worship and give thanks to God. The centrality of praise to Israel's identity is directly related to their becoming a people in the first place. They are the people who were brought out of slavery. They are the people whose cry brings God's action through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The claim that giving thanks is what it means to be Israel, however, has to be held in tension with the story of how Jacob received the name "Israel." After wrestling through the night with the angel, asking for a blessing, Jacob received the blessing and a new name: Israel, one who has struggled with God (Gen. 32). The praise is ever entwined with the struggle.

Therefore, the time of praise-making finds its partner in a place for *justice-doing*. The God of Israel has always been both cosmos-creator God and committed-savior God, both transcendent and immanent in particular ways for us. Here the house of the Lord is described as having thrones, not for lording it over others, not for oppression and abuse, but for righteous judgment. This is the hope of the people, the long-ago promise that makes them glad:

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"thrones for judgment [are] set up" (v. 5)—where we expect to be judged and made to feel guilty.

Why would anyone be *glad* to worship? In what way could those "thrones for judgment" be positive and life-giving for us? While the Christian path through Advent is different from the consumer one, and therefore challenging, it is also one that many people in our culture crave. While part of us delights in the materialism of the season, part of us yearns for something deeper. Who first invited you to church, and to faith? Are you glad they did? In what way has God's judgment (or, shall we say, God's fresh perspective on life, a new glimpse of the truth) transformed you, and brought you to new life? What truth, what depth, what gladness can we offer those who attend worship this Advent?

This psalm is also a prayer for Jerusalem, for its people and its allies. It is a prayer for peace, prosperity, and security—all fairly standard prayers, in almost every time and place. These prayers have particular force and poignancy in times of war, political turbulence, and/or economic difficulty. This, too, can be an entry point to consider the different paths taken by our culture and by the church of Jesus Christ.

It is worth noting that this psalm brings together worship, religion, and politics in a way that may be quite challenging to those of us who are reluctant to bring political issues explicitly into our worship and preaching. This will become even more clearly an issue in the psalms for the next two weeks. The thrones for judgment in Jerusalem are identified as the thrones of the house of David (v. 5). Images of divine and human kingship seem to shade into one another in a way that is probably quite scary for many of us (was it scary for the psalmist as well?). This presentation seems to raise the question: what is our relationship as church to the governance structures of our society? What is our relationship with our own "thrones for judgment," and with those who are judged?

A prayer for peace, security, and prosperity also raises the question of definitions. In what does peace consist? For whom are we praying? When the psalmist prays for Jerusalem, there is perhaps a tribal assumption in the background, in which the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem is lifted up as more important than the peace and prosperity of other competing nations and cities. Do we do this in our prayers? Are we praying for our own church or nation's peace and well-being over against that of others? Such a prayer does not seem consistent with

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living within its walls, v. 8), the psalm instructs to all who read it:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”
(Ps. 122:6–7)

The high view of Jerusalem expressed in this psalm was widely held in ancient Israel. The Old Testament lesson for today, Isaiah 2:1–5, expresses a longing for the day when Jerusalem will at last be revealed in its true glory and be recognized by the nations as the center of the world: “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:3). Psalm 46:5 declares of Jerusalem, “God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved.” In Psalm 48:12–14, the poet declares:

Walk about Zion, go all around it,
count its towers,
consider well its ramparts;
go through its citadels,
that you may tell the next generation
that this is God,
our God forever and ever.
He will be our guide forever.

For this ancient psalmist, a pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a journey into the very presence of the Divine. In other words, if you have seen Jerusalem, you have seen God.

The emphasis upon the peace and security of Jerusalem in today’s pilgrim psalm is difficult, for, of course, Jerusalem would remain neither peaceful nor secure! The Babylonians destroyed the city in 587 BCE, bringing down its walls and bringing an end to David’s line: no king in David’s line would ever again sit on a throne in Jerusalem. In light of this disaster, the old “songs of Zion” became a mockery (for example, see Pss. 89:38–51; 137:1–4). Further, the prophets said that Jerusalem’s destruction had come about because it was *not* a place of justice, that in fact it had become a city of violence, oppression, and idolatry (for example, see Jer. 7; Ezek. 8).

Eventually, the exile ended and the city was rebuilt, but then Jerusalem was destroyed again, by the Romans in 70 CE (see the text leading up to today’s Gospel, esp. Matt. 24:1–2). Both destructions are commemorated by a fast in the Jewish year, on *Tish’ah Be’Ab* (that is, the Ninth of Av, which falls late in July or early in August). Through the long years of the Diaspora, prayer for the peace of

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eschatological tension is inescapable, and it takes courage to have faith in the promises of God’s peace and prosperity in a violent and broken world. It takes determination to begin afresh.

Whether a child heads off to kindergarten for the first time or an adult enters recovery from an addiction, change brings not only hope but also fear, and it requires courage to take that first step.

Praise. Even if there had been hesitation in the psalmist’s intent to set out on pilgrimage, upon arrival the joy is unmistakable. The joyful homecoming to the Lord’s house awakens gratitude (vv. 1, 4). Praise, honor, and thanksgiving are offered to God as the psalmist acknowledges God’s sovereignty (v. 4).

So why is the psalmist moved to praise? It seems more reasonable that the psalmist might lament in the face of dire conditions and stark realities, since Jerusalem has been a place of strife and turmoil. Perhaps praise chases out the powers and principalities that threaten to take God’s rightful place in our lives.

Praise may also come from the fact that despite difficulties in Jerusalem, the city was and is symbolic of a place that unites God’s family. To come into Jerusalem’s center is to spend time in the heart of God, who guides the pilgrim’s journey. To come into God’s presence reminds us of divine care for all creation, and so we offer praise.

Prayer. Though entering Jerusalem inspires praise, it also reminds us of the dual character of Advent—of the reality of violence and destruction as well as the hope for a world in which God’s will is fulfilled. Nowhere was and is that tension more palpable than in Jerusalem, which is not only a center of God’s presence but also a center of political and social instability. Although the psalmist extols the virtues of the city’s political leadership, the historical record is less positive. So the psalmist is moved to pray for Jerusalem and for the consummation of God’s reign of justice and peace.

We, then, are enjoined to reach beyond our singularity and into concern for others, for the cities and people where fulfillment is needed. In so doing, we escape our self-centeredness to experience our interconnectedness with one another, as well as our vulnerability.

Peace. Whenever we travel, the place we have been leaves a reminder, and we are transformed by its memory. In God’s house, the residue is peace. The psalmist is inspired to take that peace to humanity

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that when they arrive in the house of the Lord they find a place for justice-doing.

Doing justice, in the biblical world, helps define a way of *peace-living* called shalom. Here prosperity is far from contemporary culture's consumer-driven definition. Living in peace includes duties and privileges, requires both well-doing and doing well. The psalm, as a whole, could be heard both as a declaration of what is and an invocation of what should be. At the end of the psalm, its character as invocation grows: the insistence that we should pray for Jerusalem's peace, that its peoples should live in peace, that the writer pledges to do the very best for "our God."

In fact, if one reads this psalm assuming the perspective of the oppressed, of those who struggle and depend on God's mercy and justice, the psalm seems to end as the flip side of a lament, one crying out against what is broken and the other crying out for what was and will be again when things are set right.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem comes to mind as one way to come to this psalm. In Luke 19, Jesus enters the city to great crowds and enthusiastic praise. At Jerusalem's gate, Jesus weeps over the city before declaring that everything degraded and unjust will be broken down before a new and just city can arise. He himself begins the symbolic work in the temple, tossing over the tables of those making excessive profit on the backs of pious pilgrims.

In our cities and temples, where does this psalm leave us? Perhaps as we look at the sorrow of our world, its economic turmoil and ceaseless wars, we too join in Jesus' tears and moral outrage. Perhaps we too cry out for the promised house of God where we find refuge and an image of a new shalom that draws us into a life of well-doing as we seek to do well.

CHRISTIAN SCHAREN

Pastoral Perspective

Jesus' teaching to love and pray for our enemies (Matt. 5:43–48). In what does peace consist, in this world that has become in so many ways a global village?

Similarly, what is prosperity (v. 6)? Are we content to measure our prosperity in simply material terms, using our salaries or "net worth" as a guide? Are we content to measure the prosperity of our nation with a tool such as gross domestic product, which simply measures the amount of money spent in a given year? In that respect, the more we spend in a given Christmas season, the better the year—whether that spending is for gifts, feasting, alarm systems, or litigation for drunk driving. Is that how we see things? Or does prosperity have more to do with the *quality* of our life together?

The word "security" also brings with it a host of assumptions. Security typically brings to mind border guards and alarm systems (often euphemistically called "security systems"), airport checkpoints and military strength. Do these things make us secure, or are they testimony to our lack of security, to the divisions and injustices of our world? What would security for *all people* look like?

Finally, it seems important to pay attention to the form of our prayers, in light of this psalm. What are the assumptions behind our prayers? Do we pray as the privileged, for others who are disadvantaged? Do our prayers somehow imply a division between "us" and "them," somehow raising us and our interests to a place of greater importance?

Church and society approach Christmas ostensibly seeking the same things: celebration, peace, prosperity. Under the surface, though, there are profound differences. Society tends to focus on our own families and communities, and tends toward materialism (though longing for something deeper). The church is called to worship, to a wider community, and to a deeper and more widely shared prosperity. This purposeful hope is good news to a congregation of worshipers who are eager to say, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'"

DAVID HOLMES

Exegetical Perspective

Jerusalem became in Judaism an expression of longing for deliverance from oppression, and of hope for unity and restoration.

In our own day, the land of Jerusalem is once more a battleground, as innocent victims on all sides of the conflict fall to Palestinian suicide bombers and Israeli tanks. Once more, Jerusalem has become for many a symbol, not of justice and peace, but of injustice and violence. This psalm read at this time of year requires us to ask, how should Christians respond? How shall we join our prayers with those of the ancients?

A vital feature of today's psalm saves it from being a jingoistic embrace of Jerusalem as a political power. The psalm begins and ends, not with the palace of David, but with the house of the Lord. The poem opens, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" (v. 1). The poet has come to Jerusalem in order to worship at the temple. Further, the last verse qualifies the prayer for Jerusalem's safety: "For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good" (v. 9). Jerusalem is prized, and its security is sought, not for the city's own sake, but because God's temple is there. Indeed, the tribes flow into Jerusalem "as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD" (v. 4). It is as the site of true worship that Jerusalem is praised in this psalm.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus urges his hearers to be ready at any time for the inbreaking of God's kingdom. In Matthew, these words are followed by four parables that clarify what readiness means. The fourth, climactic parable in this series makes clear the standard of judgment in the world to come: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). So too, Jerusalem in our psalm stands for right worship and right living, for justice and mercy. Praying for the peace of Jerusalem, then, means praying for, and working for, the day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa. 2:4).

STEVEN S. TUELL

Homiletical Perspective

(v. 9). As Easter people living in an Advent world, that too is our charge: to pray and work for God's peace and wellness for all nations.

Just as God is not bound by space to the temple, God's peace will be so expansive that it cannot be bound by the walls of any city. In the new Jerusalem, we see a radically new blueprint for the city, its proportions so expansive that even if fortifications can contain it, they will not be necessary, as God's glory will be its protection (Zech. 2:4, 5; Rev. 21:23). As the architect of creation seeks to bend our hostilities into peace, we are reminded of the many walls that have created forced separation of God's family for reasons of race, land, and political ideologies. Whether in Soweto, Gaza, or Berlin, in the Messiah we are promised that, even now, the dividing walls of hostility have been broken down by Christ, who is our peace (Eph. 2:14).

Purpose. Our purpose, then, is to become the peace with which we have been gifted and to return it to the world. When the psalmist writes that the people said, "Let us go to the house of the LORD," it reminds us that the first act of the psalm is an act of worship—an act of going to the temple to encounter the Lord, pray, and give praise. We can see then how, when one praises God, one begins to care about others, pray for them, and work on their behalf. That work becomes the work of peace, work that will shape the world into the hope God has for it.

Each time we approach our Advent pilgrimage anew, we are different. The end of one journey positions us to begin the next. Our yearly pilgrimage gives us once again an opportunity to reconsider the way we are living our lives. Through pilgrimage, praise, prayer, and purpose, the psalmist reminds us that we are always waiting in hope, always called to be light in the world and to work on behalf of God's reign of justice and peace. We are forever engaged in an act of new creation.

CAROL L. WADE

Romans 13:11-14

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Theological Perspective

Paul's Letter to the Romans draws on a twofold image of people awakening from sleep and then putting on their clothes for the day.

It is time to get up. It is time to slough off the old life. It is time to wake up and live into the reality of the new age about to dawn. It is a wakeup call for Advent. For Paul, of course, this "time," this propiti-ous moment, is the eschatological time, the time when the fullness of God's kingdom will be realized. The end times are ever nearer, so do not delay, do not procrastinate. Tomorrow is too late.

We are to awake from the darkness of sin and licentiousness into the new dawn brought about by Christ's life, death, and resurrection. We are to peel off the night clothes of selfishness and ignorance and to put on the new clothes of Christ, that is, "the armor of Christ."

These familiar Pauline metaphors are not external to who we are. They are the fabric of our transformation into Christ. The first metaphor evokes Ephesians 5:14: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead," and the second echoes Galatians, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (2:20). Pauline theology rests upon the reality that a new world is being born. The new man, the new woman, belongs radically to this new world, rather than to the old.

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You *know* what time it is! Indeed we all do! Most of us who live in North America live under the tyranny of time. We consume it just as we do other products, and however much we "have" (as though one could ever really possess time), we never seem to have "enough." The lives of most American families are completely overwhelmed by the demands on their time: households must accommodate multiple work schedules, with school and extracurricular activities too numerous to count. The school calendar on the refrigerator can no longer manage the schedule a busy family keeps. Even finding time to coordinate multiple calendars can be a challenge! As the First Sunday of Advent brings the "holiday season" into full gear, time becomes a scarce commodity indeed.

The speed of communication in our world has only enhanced time's tyranny. Because we *can* communicate with anyone, anywhere, anytime, we increasingly feel that we *ought* to be connected 24-7 and that all of our electronic systems should be up and running at all times to make this possible. The world of instant communication has made us more accustomed to perceiving time in digital form—displayed as hour and minute (and sometimes seconds) that advance literally from moment to moment. In this format, we tend to see time as a series of discrete, disconnected units. What exists is the minute

Exegetical Perspective

The first verse of the stated lection, verse 11, is so clearly tied to what precedes it that we will need to consider larger boundaries of the passage, namely, verses 8–14 rather than simply verses 11–14. In its turn, verse 8 turns from a discussion of responsibility to the state (13:1–7) to a discussion of responsibility to the neighbor (13:8–14), providing further indication that verses 8–14 need to be considered as a unit.

The opening words of verse 8 have the form of an absolute imperative. It is a responsibility no Christian can avoid; one is to leave no legitimate obligation to another unfulfilled. The strong negative also indicates that this obligation is owed to all people, not just to fellow Christians. This obligation involves loving the neighbor, which in turn represents the fulfillment of God's law. Paul demonstrates this point in verse 9 with his citation of some of the commands from the "second tablet" of the Hebrew law, concluding that these and all other commands are fulfilled by loving one's neighbor. This surely reflects Jesus' words about the law in Matthew 22:34–40, although Paul gives no indication that he means his readers to know he is citing this particular saying. Verse 10 defines what loving one's neighbor means, namely, doing no wrong to a fellow human being.

The fact that verse 10 echoes verse 8 in its affirmation that love of neighbor is the fulfillment of the

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During the Advent season, the church prepares for the coming of Christ. Even as we make ready for the baby to be born in Bethlehem, the lectionary this First Sunday of Advent takes us beyond the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to a new moment of expectancy as the Day of Christ approaches and the reign of God is made fully manifest. The Romans text suggests several different approaches for preaching.

What Time Is It? Paul reminds his readers that they already know what time it is; but do they really? Paul himself thought that he knew the correct time, but clearly he did not. His writings indicate that he believed Christ would return to earth during the lifetime of those to whom he wrote. That certainly did not happen; yet, theologically, Paul was not in error. He was right to believe that every moment in time is rich with divine possibility. He was right to urge his readers "to wake up from sleep"—to pay attention and be alert to the imminent inbreaking of eternity "within the flux of time," as Karl Barth put it.

How many people today "sleep" through their lives, utterly unaware that they are living on the frontier between the old order of things and the new order, where Jesus reigns and all that is wrong has been set right? Barth calls the age in which we live,

Romans 13:11-14

Theological Perspective

Within the context of the whole Epistle to the Romans, we of course hear Paul refining his earlier polemic against reliance on works of the law. As became clear in chapter 12, there is, after all, something to do. Shed your old clothes of darkness and ignorance and be clothed with the armor of Christ. In this new time, the Christian is swept up within a “solidarity in grace,” dramatically more powerful than the solidarity in sin inherited from Adam. The gift of righteousness now pervades the heart and soul of the believer. It has also spread throughout the whole world.¹

A Theology of Desire. So what is it that we are waking up to? For Paul, it was to the eschatological reality that Christ was coming. We might sense that it is our whole person, our deepest desires, the core of who we are that is waking up. Our deepest desires thus become a doorway to this spiritual reality of Christ’s coming more fully into our lives. Catherine of Sienna, the great medieval Dominican mystic and spiritual theologian, said that it is only through our desires that we touch God, because God is infinite and it is only our desires that are infinite.²

One of a pastor’s greatest challenges is to elicit from parishioners what it is that they really want. Asked, “What do you want to do?” often enough they respond, “Well, what do you think I should do?” If you can help them clear away the psychic debris, get them to claim what they want, tap into their passion, then they are already taking the first steps toward mental and spiritual health.

One of the leading causes of deadened desires is our determination to avoid pain at all costs. Several years ago the painkiller Mediprin ran a clever ad on TV. A guy with a hand-held pile driver rattled away on the streets of New York while chaos, stress, a noisy racket filled the air. The guy had a splitting headache. Then a sharp businesswoman rushed from meeting to meeting, conference call to conference call, not a second to spare. She too had a stunning headache. Then came a soothing voiceover:

“Mediprin—when you don’t have time for the pain.”

If you “don’t have time for the pain,” you do not have time for desire either. You are deadening your body’s normal responses. An awareness of suffering as a normal dimension of being born into flesh frees us up for a full human life. By dealing with suffering

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(or second) displayed before you, and this moment will disappear from your eyes.

Something different happens when time is displayed on a clock face. As the hands move around, you not only see the moment as it passes. You can also visualize both future and past. It is two o’clock . . . three more hours until quitting time; two hours since you had lunch; thirty minutes until the big meeting; six hours since you kissed your partner good-bye this morning. This way of “counting” time is somewhat more like the experience of marking time by the movement of sun from dawn to dusk. We know (more or less) where we stand between the beginning and the end of day.

Paul is thinking about time more in this second way, in the sense of moving from past to future—but then he adds another dimension. When Paul calls his audience to remember “what time it is,” he is not thinking about the daily or even yearly round of events and activities. Paul has a completely different horizon in mind. He believes that, just as time had a beginning at creation, so also time will have an end. Just as God brought all things into being, so also there will be a time when God will bring the history of this world to an end and usher in the promised new creation.

This “new creation” is compared to a new day. So Paul tells us what time it is: it is time to awake from sleep. It is time to get up out of bed and get ready dressed for the day. As Paul paints the picture, it is still dark outside when this theological alarm clock goes off; the day is “near” but not quite here. Perhaps it is that mysterious moment when the darkness of night begins to give way to shadows, and there is just enough light to know that morning is around the corner. This is a time of anticipation, and Paul urges his audience to action. It is time to get up and get dressed!

The clothing Paul wants us to put on is Jesus Christ: his life, his way of being are the garments that we are to put on as we get ready to meet the future. What concerns Paul here is that we adopt a new and more honorable way of life. Put aside partying and drunkenness—things that dull the senses or draw one’s attention away from what is really going on. Put aside quarreling and jealousy—things that destroy community and injure relationships with others (v. 13). The new day that God is bringing is a time when God and humanity will be reconciled; when peace, justice, and integrity will be the hallmarks of human society. What Paul wants is for Christians to start living *now* as though this new day has already begun.

1. See Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina Series, ed. Daniel Harrington, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996): 397–403.

2. See Patrick J. Howell, “Desiring: An Avenue to Mystery,” in *A Spiritguide through Times of Darkness* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 35–50.

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law forms an *inclusio*, an ancient rhetorical device that was used to indicate the boundaries of a thought unit, and to emphasize its major point. In defining the law in that way, Paul makes use here of an understanding of the law found throughout the New Testament, namely, that the ritual and dietary aspects of the Hebrew law were no longer valid. The ritual laws, designed to expiate sin through sacrifices, were eliminated by Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (e.g., Heb. 10:1–18). The dietary laws were rendered invalid by Christ's own reinterpretation of the true intent of the law with respect to what renders a person impure (e.g., Mark 7:14–19).

This means that to understand love as the basic requirement for the Christian who lives under the grace of Christ is to understand such Christian life as the fulfillment of the law God gave to Israel. As Christ is the one in whom the law found its culmination and hence its end (Rom. 10:4), so in the love that same Christ commanded (e.g., Mark 12:28–31), one is also to find the culmination and hence the end of the law.

The key here is a proper understanding of the word “love” as it is used in these verses. Our modern culture has so perverted the meaning of this word that it has come to mean at best a sheer sentimentality, at worst the kind of erotic feeling aroused when an attractive member of the opposite sex comes into view. Love as the New Testament uses it is not to be defined as an emotional state, as though when God loves us, he gets all warm and squishy inside. Rather, God loves us by doing something for our benefit, namely sending His Son to remove our sins. We know God loves us, therefore, not because of how he feels about us, but because of what he has done for us in Christ.

Love in the New Testament is thus based not on emotion, but on action. To love someone is actively to pursue that person's good, however we may feel about him or her emotionally. That also points to how we are to love our neighbor “as our self.” The point is we are to do as little harm to our neighbor as we do to ourselves; emotional states are not involved here. Verse 9 makes clear that love means to cease actions that harm the neighbor. Verses 11–14 then are further examples of such love in action, given the current transition from the old age to the new age.

Verse 11 needs some sort of augmentation to convey the force of the opening two words, something like “And now do this, since you know the time . . .” Paul typically uses such language as waking

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the time of “great positive possibility.” Because divine love has already conquered, there is “this Moment—the *Now*—when past and future stand still. The former ceases its going, and the latter its coming.”¹

Christ was himself the turning point in time. The past might not be completely finished and gone, but the new has truly come. From this time forth, we are invited to dream along with God of a new heaven, a new earth, a new way of being human, reshaped into God's image as we were supposed to be from the beginning.

Eschatology and Ethics. Because “the night is far gone, the day is near” (v. 12a), we may now live and act toward one another in an ongoing state of love, even as God has loved us. Why would anyone want to cling to the old ways, now that a new day has come, now that we know how the story ends? We are able to move to higher ethical ground. To use Paul's imagery, we can “lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light” (v. 12b). An honorable life comes as a consequence of knowing what time it is. Some might think that knowing of God's ultimate victory over sin and evil gives us license to do what we please in the here and now. The opposite is true. Because the Day of Christ lies ahead, more is expected of us.

I cannot imagine any worse news than to be told that it does not matter what I do, what choices I make, how I treat other people. One of the most troubling characteristics of our culture today is that few people act as if character matters. People justify to themselves the most outrageous behavior and callous disregard for the well-being of others (see Paul's list of what we might call “vices of darkness”). Why? Because they do not believe any longer that anything is expected of them.

A few years ago, a member of my congregation wrote a meditation for the annual Advent devotional booklet:

When I was an elementary school principal, I often walked the halls and visited the classrooms. . . . One day, outside one of the first grade rooms sat a troubled little boy. He had clearly been sent to the hallway by an irate teacher. As the child saw me approaching, it was obvious he was really working hard at figuring out what to say.

Before I could speak, he stood up and hugged me around the waist and said, “Mr. Jones, I love you.” I was disarmed but recovered sufficiently to

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 493 and 497.

Romans 13:11-14

Theological Perspective

we can start dealing with desire. A Mediprin society does not want to deal with those desires; it is too much to deal with all that passion. It could burst the straitjacket of a world driven by production.

Relationships. Subtly, all the appeals of these verses happen in the plural. Paul assumes community. Throughout the Epistle to the Romans he describes a healthy relationship to God, to the earth, to ourselves, and to others. In our contemporary language, we would call these sets of relationships our spirituality or even our spiritual ecology.

Scripture says *God is love*. We might say *God is relationship*. If God is relationship, then spirituality is about the caring for and building of genuine, true relationships. Spirituality and religion are two sides of the same coin. Without a personal spirituality, religion becomes formalistic and bound up in rules. It is driven by law. Without religion, that is, without relationship to a faith community, spirituality may become self-centered, even messianic—presuming to have all the answers.

If we recognize Mystery in our lives, if we live out of the Mystery of love, if we experience the transformation that comes through genuine relationships, then our own love flows spontaneously outward and reaches others. Once again we live out a “solidarity of grace.”

Present and Future. Dag Hammarskjöld, the secretary general of the United Nations who died tragically in 1961 in a plane crash, wrote in his journal, “For all that has been—Thanks! To all that will be—Yes.”³ This terse synopsis is tremendous affirmation of both past and future. “Thanks” dissipates regrets and “Yes” dissipates fears. Hammarskjöld was a modern-day mystic because he had the capacity to see God in everyday life and could say “Yes” to the total reality of his life.

In today’s epistle, Paul invites us in turn—in this urgent eschatological time when Christ is coming—to say “Yes” to all that will be.

PATRICK J. HOWELL

Pastoral Perspective

In the early years of the Christian movement, believers lived with a sense of real anticipation. The promises they read in the Hebrew Scriptures seemed tangible; the reign of God and all that it meant for cosmic “regime change” seemed close at hand. When they prayed (daily), “Thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven,” they were looking forward to that happening within their own lifetimes.

Two thousand years later, the sense of anticipation has diminished. From time to time, communities of Christians have developed a sense of urgency about the “end times”; some have even predicted precise dates for Christ’s return, the beginning of “the end.” For some branches of Christianity, the belief that God will bring a new day of justice and reconciliation figures prominently in preaching and church life. For many other Christians, however, the sense of anticipation that drives Paul’s writing has diminished. To the extent that this is so, we may be the poorer for having lost this vision, because for Paul, this anticipation is not so much about circling a date on the calendar as it is about *hope*.

Paul really believes that the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus is God’s sign that all of those promises about life and wholeness prevailing over brokenness and death are true, and that God can be trusted to do what God has promised. Paul *knows* what time it is: it is time to wake up and look forward to what God will do in the future and what God is beginning to do now in your life and mine.

CYNTHIA M. CAMPBELL

3. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 89.

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from sleep (v. 11) and the contrast between night and day, darkness and light (vv. 12–13a), to contrast the old and new aeons, thus giving a distinct eschatological flavor to the passage. There is also a sense of urgency: the night is about to end, the day is at hand, our (eschatological) salvation has drawn nearer than when we first accepted the Christian faith. As a result, we are to equip ourselves appropriately for the time: put off the actions that characterized our former life, and put on divine armor for the impending final battle between good and evil, a battle we already participate in with our loving deed to others. “Armor of light” (v. 12) is defined in verse 14, where the same verb (“put on”) is used with the action of becoming Christlike.

The repeated use of words like “cast off” and “put on” reflects baptismal terminology when one casts off one’s old garments/life and puts on the new garment/life of the newly baptized. One is to put one’s baptism into practice now by abandoning one’s old way of life, a way described here in verse 13b with three sets of two nouns. The first two pairs are plural, perhaps suggesting repetition, the third singular, perhaps describing them as results of the activities described in the first two pairs. The first pair points to excesses of drink (the first of those terms is derived from a word that originally identified a festival in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine); the second pair points to promiscuous sexual activity.

Verse 14 sums up the entire passage, contrasting Jesus Christ with “flesh,” where flesh characterizes life apart from Christ, as demonstrated in verse 13b. The Greek of verse 14 is a bit convoluted; perhaps the best translation would be “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and don’t be preoccupied with plans for gratifying the desires of the old aeon (=flesh).”

One last note: in verse 11b, Paul said salvation was nearer than when his readers first believed. Apparently he thought the Parousia (i.e., Christ’s appearing) was imminent; but that means Paul’s timetable was in error. Does that make what he says about the Parousia invalid? Yet Paul speaks of God’s future—a future that already shines its light back into the present, showing us how to live in its light rather than in the darkness of the current age. The Christian thus lives in anticipation of God’s fulfillment of his redemptive plan for all creation. It is the anticipation of that future the church celebrates in the Advent season.

PAUL J. ACHEMEIER

Homiletical Perspective

tell the boy that good behavior was expected, and I asked him to return to the classroom and apologize to the teacher. My expression of love was to guide him into accepting responsibility.

The child settled down and had a good year. Each time he saw me in the cafeteria or on my rounds, he would smile and wave, and say, “Thank you, Mr. Jones.”²

New Age Religion. Very few members of our congregations spend their time looking to the horizon for Christ to come again in glory. Too many centuries have passed, too many false messiahs have appeared, too much eschatological hope has evaporated into the atmosphere of our postmodern age. I remember a remark made several years ago by major-league baseball player Dan Quisenberry when his team was in a slump: “The future,” he said, “is much like the present, only longer.”

We who have been baptized into the promises of God ought to have a different outlook. We are already citizens of the new age. We have glimpsed in Christ the glorious future God has for the world when “the great positive possibility” has finally carried the day. We make the moral decision to live in hope, rather than despair. We stay awake because we know salvation could bathe our hurting world with healing grace any day now.

One winter morning, I was driving to work. The day was gray and dreary, as were my spirits as I negotiated my way through Atlanta’s infamous traffic. All of a sudden, I felt a sudden warmth on my left hand as it gripped the steering wheel. I looked down and saw a thin shaft of light warming the back of my hand. “Impossible,” I thought. “This is too drizzly and dark a day for the sun to shine!” Nevertheless, as I glanced over my left shoulder toward the eastern horizon, there it was—the sun, buttery, orange, gold, as big as the world.

Let us pray for the dawning of the Day of Christ; and until it comes, let us dress ourselves in his light every morning.

JOANNA M. ADAMS

2. Robert S. Jones, from an Advent booklet produced by Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, in the 1990s.

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Theological Perspective

In contrast to some Eastern religions that view time as an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, Christianity with its Judaic roots is a deeply historical religion. This history begins with God’s creation of the world and ends with God’s judgment and re-creation of it. Christians look backward, remembering God’s mighty acts of salvation over the generations, and forward, anticipating the vindication of God’s ways in a new heaven and a new earth. They live, as Karl Barth said, “between the times.”

The season of Advent invites us to consider again the character of Christian existence “between the times.” On the one hand, Advent reminds us of God’s promises to Israel of Immanuel. God comes in human flesh to deliver God’s people from sin and evil. On the other hand, Advent calls us to anticipate the day on which this Immanuel will return as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will put all that resists him, even death itself, under his feet. Living between the times, we give thanks to God for the Christ child, even as we plead with God to realize, once and for all, the kingdom that Jesus declared to be at hand.

Matthew 24:36–44 stands in a series of sayings and parables about a day of judgment that will inaugurate this kingdom to come. Jesus warns that this day will take the world by surprise. As in Noah’s time, people will be going about their everyday

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The advent of Advent with its emphasis on the coming of the Son of Man produces two quite different reactions among congregants.

Some Christians think that the whole emphasis on Christ’s Parousia (i.e., appearing) is much ado about nothing, or at least much ado about nothing believable. If they are faithful churchgoers, they endure the annual Advent apocalyptic texts and look forward to next week, when John the Baptist, that tangible historical figure, helps us look forward to Jesus.

Some Christians think that Christ’s second coming is the heart of the gospel. As Karl Barth is supposed to have enjoined, they start the day with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, but their hermeneutical strategy is often quite different from Barth’s. They search the Bible for signs of the end times, and they search the newspaper to see if those signs are yet in view.

Those Christians who are agnostic about last things are tempted to fall into a state of perpetual apathy. Those Christians who are focused on last things are tempted to fall into a state of perpetual anxiety. Our passage encourages faith rather than apathy and hope rather than anxiety.

The Advent Community of Faith. The passage from Matthew calls us away from historical apathy. I once

Exegetical Perspective

The season of Advent usually begins with an eschatological text, as a way of framing Advent as the end of an old order and the birth of a new era. Matthew's eschatological text can be outlined as follows:

- 24:36 theme: watchfulness amid uncertainty
- 24:37–39 illustration of theme (days of Noah)
- 24:40–41 two further illustrations of the theme (men and women)
- 24:42 repetition of theme frames parable (application 1)
- 24:43 parable as illustration of theme
- 24:44 repetition of theme frames parable (application 2)

The passage we are studying comes from Matthew's fifth discourse, which deals with eschatological matters and judgment (Matt. 24:1–25:46).

The theme of this section of Matthew's discourse is the necessity for watchfulness in light of the uncertainty surrounding the coming (Parousia) of Jesus. Verse 36 makes a startling claim: "neither the angels of heaven nor the Son" know when "that day" will occur. It is remarkable how many interpreters seem to believe that they can accomplish what the Son confesses he cannot do. This view of the limit of the Son's knowledge is entirely compatible with passages like the *kenōsis* hymn in Philippians 2:5–11, so the statement should not surprise us so much as it

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Upon noticing the Gospel reading assigned for the First Sunday of Advent, more than one preacher may wince, if not grimace with pain. That facial expression is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual struggle between going where a text wants to go and staying where the people think they want to be.

Typically, the Advent I congregation already has Christmas on its mind and is tilting toward December 25. Hanging the greens, decking the halls, and already caroling Christmas seem high on the list of congregational expectations.

The Advent I Gospel reading is at odds with this congregational expectation because it tilts toward a different day altogether. Matthew and the Jesus he presents seem not at all interested in Christmas, but are focused instead on an apocalyptic day in the unknown future, when the Son of Man will suddenly return and lives will be suddenly and surprisingly changed. This "shall come again" language of Scripture and the Apostles' Creed are enough to give more than a few of our people the creeps, and many would prefer that it be "left behind." One need not lean very far to the theological left to be prone to dismiss this line of thinking as somewhere way out there to the right.

When, then, the preacher sits down in the study with the Gospel lection for the First Sunday of

Matthew 24:36-44

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business—eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage—with no awareness of God’s impending judgment. They will be like a householder who fails to anticipate the hour at which the thief will break in. Not even the angels or the Son know the day or hour. The point is that we must be ready for the Lord at any time. When he finally appears, those who are ready will be saved, and those who are not ready will perish.

Jesus reiterates these themes in three parables in the following chapter (Matt. 25). The first tells of ten bridesmaids who wait for a bridegroom. When he finally arrives in the middle of the night, he receives the five who wisely kept oil in their lamps but shuts the door to the five who foolishly let theirs run out. The second tells of a master who, leaving on a long journey, entrusts his servants with his money. When he returns, he commends two servants who made wise investments, but condemns the one who only buried his portion in the ground. The third parable, like the first two, warns of a day of judgment that will divide humanity into two groups. Those (“the sheep”) who fed and clothed “the least of these” also fed and clothed the Lord, though they knew it not; those (“the goats”) who failed to feed and clothe them failed to feed and clothe the Lord, though they too knew it not. All three parables explicate the point in Matthew 24:44: “Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Christians have long debated when and how this day of judgment will take place. One line of thinking has combined Matthew 24:36–44 with other apocalyptic passages in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to work out a timeline of events that are already underway or soon to transpire. Representative of this position is Hal Lindsey’s *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (a bestseller in the 1970s) or more recently Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins’s *Left Behind* novels. Like other American fundamentalists, these authors anticipate a day on which God’s elect will be raptured—that is, lifted up in their physical bodies to the Lord—while the reprobate are “left behind” to incur God’s wrath. We must get ready, because these things may take place yet in our lifetime.

A second line of thinking has seen the day of judgment not at the end of human history but at the time of each individual’s death. Each of us will stand before God’s judgment seat as soon as we have taken our last breath. We will have to give an accounting of our life and be weighed in the Lord’s balance. Again, the lesson is clear: we dare not put off doing what

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heard the distinguished New Testament scholar and bishop Krister Stendahl say that we misread our congregations if we think they are most often puzzling about the eternal life of each individual. On the contrary, said Stendahl, contemporary Christians are most often puzzling about whether history has any significance.

The passage from Matthew reminds us of the profound biblical faith that God is sovereign over all of human history. However metaphorically, however mythologically, Jesus tells us in this discourse that the God who created history at the beginning is not only history’s goad but history’s goal.

Pastoral attention to the themes of Advent requires a major counterproposal to Macbeth’s cynical apathy: “Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”¹ For the Bible and for the church, life is a tale told by a strong and sovereign God, enacted according to God’s pleasure. It is full of both judgment and grace, and it moves toward the time when God will make all things new.

For Advent especially we attend to liturgy, music, pastoral care, and Christian education that help assure God’s people that we *are* God’s people, and that the history in which we live is God’s story, moving from God to God.

The Advent Community of Hope. Today’s passage calls us away from historical anxiety. Of course it is full of signs of the end, but the initial warning steers us away from the temptation to keep apocalyptic calendars on the kitchen wall: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v. 36). The serenity prayer, usually attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, asks us to accept the things that we cannot change. Sometimes it is even harder to acknowledge the facts that we cannot know; yet with that acceptance can come a kind of eschatologically sensitive serenity. If Jesus is hopeful as he waits for a consummation he himself does not fully understand, surely we can learn our hope from him.

In pastoral care and in religious formation, one of the gifts we most desire is for people to be able to trust in the future without controlling or even knowing the details of what is yet to come. All our hope is founded in God.

The Advent Community of Memory. Today’s passage helps us look forward without apathy or anxiety

1. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, act 5, scene 5.

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may induce a certain humility into our efforts to discern God's will.

Three examples follow in verses 37–39, 40–41. The first (vv. 37–39) draws on the days of Noah. The figure of Noah has been variously interpreted in biblical traditions. In Hebrews 11:7, Noah heeds God's warning of impending catastrophic judgment and so builds an ark that saves his family, but his faith condemns the world. In 1 Peter 3:20, Noah's rescuing his family from the flood serves as a metaphor for baptism that saves us through water. In 2 Peter 2:5, the writer notes that God did not spare the world from judgment but saved Noah, "a herald of righteousness." The prophet Ezekiel groups Noah together with Daniel and Job to indicate that God's judgment is so great that even their presence would save themselves but no one else (14:14, 20). Finally, Isaiah speaks of "the days of Noah" (54:9) to reaffirm the covenant with Jerusalem.

The saying about the days of Noah in our Advent passage belongs to Q (Luke 17:26–36 // Matt. 24:36–44). What makes this saying so unusual is that it focuses on those who failed to prepare themselves, not on the righteousness of Noah. The "herald of righteousness" fades into the background, and the heedless and thoughtless step onto center stage. The point of the sayings is to emphasize that people were just doing business as usual while the specter of judgment hung over their heads unnoticed. "Eating and drinking" do not refer to drunkenness and gluttony, just everyday meals, and "marrying and giving in marriage" indicate that people presumed that there would be a future, assuming there was time for another generation to be born. Then all this came crashing down upon them, and they were swept away.

The next two illustrations make a similar point but indicate the two-sided nature of judgment, namely, that some are saved and others are not. The universality of judgment is indicated by the fact that the first two are men, and the second pair are women. In each case, they are involved in gender-specific behavior in Jesus' culture. The men are in a field, and the women are in the courtyard shared by several houses using a common grinding wheel. Both are well-chosen illustrations to indicate the extent of judgment and its invasion of domestic space and fields alike. In both instances, the figures are engaged in their normal, everyday activities.

This reading raises an interesting and sometimes overlooked question. Is the one taken being saved or being snatched up for judgment? What is the fate of the one left behind? Based on the use of the two

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Advent, there is both the powerful push toward Christmas and the equally powerful pull away from apocalyptic eschatology. Still, in spite of this push and pull, there is the press of the text, just as powerful and commanding.

If the preacher lets the text win in this push, pull, and press, the initial wince can open into the soft smile of a growing insight. The insight comes when one is suddenly taken by the idea that there is no reason why the first part of this text should not be taken literally. While the text may tilt toward a mysterious future day, it actually remains firmly put in an ordinary present day. This present day is characterized by uncertainty, by a perplexity that extends all the way to the angels and even to the Son. Since we know we are confused much of the time, there is ample reason and evidence to take this part of the text literally. If we begin here, our people might stop pushing toward Christmas and pulling away from apocalypticism, and start listening to a sermon about today.

Most people know they are perplexed. They also know they want to be persons of faith. Along with all the problems associated with their perplexity is the problem posed by the spoken or unspoken assumption that persons with real faith are not perplexed but clear. Instead, the faith of our listeners does not bring everything into focus. What God would have them do in regard to their daily decisions—much less their daunting difficulties—is far from certain. They have neither chapter nor verse nor the foggiest notion how to figure these deep matters through.

Since many of them, like many of us, are good at guilt, they assume they are baffled because they are at fault, because their faith is flawed and weak. Our text presents a splendid opportunity to show them that uncertainty is a condition of even the best biblical faith. This does not solve any of the unanswered questions, of course, but it may begin to bring our people a kind of rapture of relief because it takes the pressure off. It is a relief to know Christ does not expect us to know everything.

We are not expected to know everything, but we are expected to do something. The Jesus of the verses before us calls persons to a life of work in a spirit of wakefulness. Work in this sense means activity here and now. Biblical faith as Jesus envisions it is not so concerned with otherworldly matters that it neglects this world's affairs. Matthew's Jesus has an eye on what is to come and believes something decisive is going to happen in the future, but he keeps attention focused on the present day and the needs of the hour. We find this in the manner in which he directs people

Matthew 24:36-44

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Jesus has commanded. None of us can know when death will overtake us, and then it will be too late.

A third understanding of this passage emphasizes the symbolic character of Jesus' language. The point is not to speculate about a day of judgment sometime in the future, whether at the end of all humanity or at the death of each individual, but rather to confront us with God's radical claims on us here and now. Each day is a day of judgment, so I should always be asking myself, Am I living in the way of Christ? Am I trusting in him alone? Have I allowed myself to be distracted by selfish cares?

Other Christians have combined aspects of these positions, or have developed variations on them. None of these interpretations will be true to the gospel, however, unless they keep the day of judgment firmly in relationship to the new day that has already dawned in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We live between the times! A theology of the coming kingdom is most faithful to the biblical witness when it reminds us that the Christ who judges us is also the Christ who endured judgment for our sake; that God's judgment never contradicts or overrides God's grace; and that the readiness to which Jesus calls us is shaped not by fear of the future, but rather by gratitude for life in the kingdom that Christ already offers us.

To live between the times is, above all, to trust and hope that God has begun, and will continue, to transform us more and more into the stature of Christ, in whom all of God's mercy and loving-kindness becomes manifest. Advent calls us into a continuing history of relationship with the Christ who meets us whichever way we turn, whether toward the past, the present, or the future.

JOHN P. BURGESS

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because it is not afraid to look back. What this particular passage looks back on is the time of Noah. The tale is a cautionary reminder that we ignore the judgment and power of God at great cost. The tale is also a helpful reminder that sometimes by looking back at what God has done we can have confidence in what God will do, in God's own time.

Part of the power of Scripture is that it provides the stories that are foreshadowings (not blueprints) for what God is doing in our own time and will do. Part of the power of community is that we can look back together at the moments in our past where God was present to chasten and to bless, and find there hope and admonition for the future.

Liturgy is the great remembering. Surrounding the sermon are the hymns and prayers and readings that recall what God has done for God's people and for God's world. It is bad faith to come to Advent services as if we had no idea that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. We wait in hope because we wait in memory.

While pastoral care is by no means confined to pastoral psychology, we have learned over these past decades that looking back can be essential to moving ahead. Think about Noah, we say to the parishioner. Think about the stories in your own life that showed forth the judgment and the promises of God. Move forward in that light.

The Advent Community of Alertness. One major function of our apocalyptic text is to remind us to keep awake. Faith, hope, and memory all help draw us toward Christian responsibility. We respond to the God who acted in Jesus Christ, who acts now, and who will act in the consummation of history.

As the next chapter of Matthew's Gospel will make abundantly clear, we also keep awake to the needs of others (see Matt. 25:31-46). One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that—as Matthew reminds us—Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbor ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned.

“Therefore [we] also must be ready” (v. 44).

DAVID L. BARTLETT

Exegetical Perspective

verbs (taken=*paralambanō* and left=*aphiēmi*) in Matthew, it would appear that the one taken is the fortunate and watchful disciple who remains undistracted by the signs of the times enumerated in Matthew 24:3–28. In the birth narrative, the verb “taken” is used four times (2:13, 14, 20, 21) to indicate taking the child to safety. In 20:17 and 26:37, Jesus “takes” the disciples aside. In the “days of Noah” saying, those who are taken in the ark are saved while those who are left perish. So, in Matthew’s vocabulary, “taken” (*paralambanō*) seems to refer to being redeemed from danger, while being left behind (*aphiēmi*) carries the sense of being forsaken or abandoned.

The “days of Noah” illustration and the paired scenes of judgment share a common theme. Because the day of the “Son of Man” will come unexpectedly and cannot be anticipated, one must develop the art of watchful living. Daily work in the field and in the courtyard is necessary to maintain life, but one must always peer through the ordinary days to discern the coming of that extraordinary day. However, one is not to waste time on wild speculations over the claims of false messiahs (24:3–14). The coming judgment will separate the redeemed from the lost.

The parable of the Thief in the Night (v. 43) is surrounded by two applications (vv. 42, 44), both of which make the same point. However, the surprising depiction of the coming of the Son of Man as a thief raises a question. To whom might the reign of heaven and the coming Son of Man be seen as a threat? Whose hegemony would be undermined? Which “strong man’s house” would be “plunder[ed of] his property” (12:28–29)?

Amos could say to an Israel eagerly anticipating the coming day of the Lord, “Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light!” (Amos 5:18–20). Jesus’ comments here may indicate that he shares a view of the Day of the Lord much like Amos’s. The master of the house is simply the negative counterpart of the watchful disciple. For what is the disciple being watchful?

A new advent!

WILLIAM R. HERZOG II

Homiletical Perspective

to the field, the mill, the daily grind, the ordinary places of human endeavor where life is lived. This region of the mundane is where faithfulness happens, and it is not to be neglected. Biblical faith knows it does not know everything, but it does know it is called to do something here and now. Whatever else Christians may be, they are a work force in the world.

The work the Christian does is to be accomplished in a spirit of wakefulness or watchfulness. The key element for Jesus is not the work, important as it is. The indispensable part of faithful work is the awareness or sensitivity Jesus names as watchfulness or wakefulness. He does not define this awareness with clarity, spelling out its details—more uncertainty!—but indications are it at least means that work is not all there is. Work will not do everything and cannot do everything. Hope will come—the deepest, best, and highest shall come—not from our work but from somewhere outside and beyond it.

So the sermon has brought another moment of rapture, has it not? If the first rapture of relief came when the people were taken up by the idea that they need not know everything, the second comes when they are taken up by the idea that they need not do everything—to work their or anyone else’s salvation. The voice of Jesus has assured them: if they do what they can in a spirit of hope and trust, they will do enough.

MARK E. YURS

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1-10

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Theological Perspective

One of the essential differences between the Old Testament prophets and the writers of the New Testament has to do with their views concerning the realm of God. The OT is generally couched in the future tense. “The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him” (v. 2) or “The wolf shall live with the lamb” (v. 6). In the NT the tense changes: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4:18); “the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). While this contrast can be exaggerated (see, e.g., Mark 14:25 and Luke 22:30, where God’s kingdom is a future reality), this lection appears during Advent for a reason: the earliest Christians heard echoes of this prophecy in the life of Jesus.

With a future tense organizing his thought, Isaiah in this chapter highlights themes of hope and a coming prince of peace. Taking his cue from the concrete and current situation, he indicates that Assyria will fall like a tree that will never sprout again. The scene changes when he turns to the house of David. Although David’s house is falling, also like a tree, from its roots a branch will sprout. All is not lost for the people of Judah, because from the Davidic line will emerge a king of peace whose reign will be one of peace and righteousness. A second David will emerge from the line of his ancestors to usher in a time of peace.

Pastoral Perspective

With the exception of the white dove, it would be difficult to come up with a more iconic image of future peace than that of a lion lying down with a lamb. Though Isaiah never actually portrays this pairing, it has been depicted so often as to be emblazoned on our collective conscious. The idea of predator lying down with prey has the power to thrill us, to move and delight us. We send each other videos of a rat who rides on the back of a cat who rides on the back of a dog, or pictures of a tiger nursing piglets, or articles about a lioness adopting antelope calves.

Our fascination with such oddities surely has to do with more than our love of the cute and fascination with the bizarre. We recognize something profound in these reports. They signify hope. If even animals can override bloody instinct, how might we humans do the same?

These pictures strike us because they are so rare. If every lion took care of baby antelopes, it would not be news. Likewise, the parade of animal friends Isaiah shows us is remarkable because of its absurdity: wolf with lamb, leopard with kid, calf and lion, cow and bear, and little children playing without fear. Even snakes do not bite. Is this a prophecy or a fairy tale?

Isaiah’s declaration stands in direct contrast to the terror and brutality that pervade our world and

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Exegetical Perspective

This passage falls into two distinct parts, both dealing with Israel's future hope for the coming of God's kingdom. The first part reflects the hope for a righteous ruler in the line of David (vv. 1–5); the second expresses the hope for an age of harmony and peace (vv. 6–9). The first of these hopes makes the second possible.

The context for this oracle is the difficult period of tensions around the Syro-Ephraimitic war in 733, when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaeans of Damascus tried to force Judah and King Ahaz to join their rebellion against Assyria. On Isaiah's advice, Ahaz refused; but then, instead of joining the rebel alliance, he called Assyria to intervene. This they did with devastating impact, eventually leading to the destruction of Samaria and the end of the northern kingdom in 721. Isaiah objected to this dangerous move by Ahaz, but he was hopeful that the young Hezekiah who would follow Ahaz might be the righteous Davidic ruler long hoped for. This hopeful passage may reflect that rising hope in Hezekiah as God's righteous king (vv. 1–5, 10) ushering in the peaceable kingdom (vv. 6–9).

This passage is one of three texts in the book of Isaiah thought of as messianic oracles. Messiah, a title that means "anointed one," was used of Israel's Davidic kings. The prophet Isaiah has several

Homiletical Perspective

The text is a hinged pair of paintings. The panel on our left shows a young king. He exudes vitality and strength, severity and a brilliance of joy; deep wisdom is in his eyes. On a distant hill behind him, cruel-faced monarchs lie dead. Nearer to him is a gathering of the poor, whose faces are lifted and radiant. The panel on the right is a fantastic bestiary. There are sleek, beautiful carnivores—leopard, wolf, lion, bear; and there are domestic animals—calf, lamb, ox, goat. The predators and their edible counterparts are lounging together. A child sings to them while toddlers play by the nests of quite peaceable rattlesnakes. Beneath each panel of the diptych is an inscription: the first reads *Justice*, the second says *Peace*.

Each scene may be taken as freestanding and more than rich enough to be preached on its own. The two are purposefully set side by side, however, and letting them inform each other may yield a more interesting and insightful sermon. No transformation of nature can be envisioned apart from a new righteousness in human affairs, and the gift of a real Messiah will extend beyond redemption for humans to the emerging of a new creation. The intention of God moves, as Julian of Norwich understood, from "all shall be well" to "all manner of things shall be well."

Isaiah 11:1-10

Theological Perspective

The renewal of the Davidic reign is not merely a human possibility but a divine gift, because this will be effected by the spirit of YHWH. As great as David was, the hope that God will renew Judah is not limited to the Davidic line but is rooted in the new life that the spirit of YHWH makes possible. A king will emerge from Bethlehem who will lead his people with “wisdom and understanding,” “counsel and might,” “knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (v. 2). The clue here is to be found in these gifts that are endowed by YHWH. The coming one, the promised prince of peace, will be the bearer of the spirit of YHWH.

In the coming one resides the salvation toward which the children of Israel look. The hope of the people is expressed in Psalm 72:1-2: “Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.” Like Solomon the new leader will be skilled in knowledge and the gift of discernment (1 Kgs. 3:9). Knowledge must be coupled with the fear of God. Knowledge must never be for its own sake; it must always point to the acknowledgment of YHWH and the superiority of the ways of YHWH. The promise that the king of peace will embody and make possible is one in which the whole creation will participate. The sign and signal of the new day will be the appearance of this new king who will restore the Davidic line, ushering in the eschatological realm in which God’s knowledge will cover the earth “as the waters cover the sea” (v. 9).

Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, illustrates for us the force of the messianic promise and how this shaped Jewish expectation. After a day with Jesus, he returns home and says to his elder brother Peter, “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). John’s Gospel does not let us in on what Jesus said or did to warrant this identification, but in the Messiah resides hope of salvation and the prospect for the dawning of a new day, when “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6). This hope looks larger and more obviously divine than a monarchy in Judah. The promised salvation will not come through human intervention but through divine action, in which the rights of the poor and the frail members of society will be respected.

In this wonderful vision of peace inaugurated by the Messiah, the entire creation participates. The place of peace will be the holy mountain of God, and the land will be filled with the knowledge of God.

Pastoral Perspective

inform our decisions, both personal and corporate. Our congregants, whatever their circumstance, are acquainted with fear and violence. News of terrorism, war, economic collapse, and climate catastrophe can instill a deep sense of anxiety even among the very young. Some in our congregations may be acquainted by experience with violence we can scarcely imagine. It is important for the pastor to speak honestly and with sensitivity about the power of violence to wreck lives. We might search for ways to name the more insidious forms of abuse and destruction in our lives. What lions have ravaged those in the congregation? What snakes coil hidden in their lives, threatening to strike?

Our fear for children’s safety and future is especially acute. Some in our congregations may have had the tragic experience of a child’s death; they may be particularly fragile when it comes to Isaiah’s images of vulnerable children living and playing in safety. That grief may not be confined to those who have suffered the loss of near ones. We are intimately acquainted with suffering children through heart-breaking images broadcast via the electronic media. This produces its own brand of grief. Isaiah’s word is for all, but the pastor must be sensitive to the grief in the room. Isaiah promises future security; how might this be a word of hope for those from whom security has already been stolen? Answers are not easy, but the pastor who wants to care for congregants in grief will want to wrestle with the question.

How is Isaiah’s word also a word of security for *now*, for people living in unstable and frightening times, and not just a word about a secure future? According to Isaiah, the transformation from a culture of fear to a world at peace begins with a stump. Out of something that appears finished, lifeless, left behind, comes the sign of new life—a green sprig.

This is how hope gets its start—it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place. Listeners might be asked to examine where the stumps are in their own lives; where do they feel cut off? Can they imagine or believe that even now God might be nurturing the growth of something new and good from their old, dead dreams? They might consider what areas of their lives most need the promise of new life, and how they might become open to such newness. Isaiah’s promise is not just a future one; even now there are tiny signs of hope and life in places that look dead and discarded.

Of course Isaiah’s promise is not meant as a merely personal one. He proclaims the coming reign of God, which we read through our Christian lens as the

Exegetical Perspective

passages that seem to reflect the hope for a righteous king in the context of his own time. In the first two of these passages (7:14–16; 9:2–7), the prophet seems hopeful that such a righteous ruler might be near at hand in Israel's future. Some think that today's passage from chapter 11 reflects Isaiah's growing sense that such a righteous ruler might be in the future beyond his own lifetime. The peaceable kingdom (vv. 6–9) represents the final consummation of God's kingdom, not something Isaiah himself would expect to see.

The passage opens (vv. 1–5) with the metaphor of a tree base (not really a stump, since it is not cut off) from which branches grow. The trunk and roots of this tree are named Jesse, but our attention is directed to the stem or branch that represents new growth. Jesse, of course, is the name of David's father (1 Sam. 16:1), so we begin to see that this growing tree is the house of David. It is literally a family tree, and this passage is the source of the popular devotional and worship device of a Jesse Tree used during Advent in many churches as an Advent calendar. Our attention is being directed to a new branch, and subsequent verses go on to describe this hoped-for new stem from the house of Jesse/David.

The coming king will receive the spirit of the Lord. In 1 Samuel, both Saul and David are anointed by the prophet Samuel and immediately receive God's spirit (1 Sam. 10:10; 16:13). Being possessed of God's spirit is a mark of God's anointed one. Verse 2 goes on to expose to the reader various attributes of this empowerment by God's spirit. These include association with "wisdom and understanding," with "counsel and might," and with "knowledge and the fear of the LORD." These are attributes to be highly desired in a hoped-for ruler. The sense of reverence toward God is underlined by beginning verse 3 with a statement that the expected one delights "in the fear of the LORD."

Such an expected one will not rely solely on the immediate impression of his senses (v. 3, eyes and ears), but will rely on the qualities of covenant commitment, righteousness and equity (v. 4a). This theme of covenant qualities continues in verse 5 with the image that the anointed one will be clothed in righteousness and faithfulness. The beneficiaries of these covenant commitments will be the poor and the meek (v. 4a), and the wicked of the earth will be laid low by the mouth and lips of his judging word.

Verses 2–5 paint a powerful portrait of one to come in the line of David who is empowered by God's spirit, equipped with the qualities of covenant

Homiletical Perspective

What are we to make of this king? We notice that he is a surprise. The royal family tree is finished, yet from its stump he nonetheless appears—and is unlike all others. Our kings and executives are not possessed of these depths of reverence, wisdom, righteousness, and effectiveness in righting the world. Such a ruler does not evolve from among us. This is a new and miraculous sovereign presence, stepping forward from the mystery of God.

Is this a promise of the coming of Christ? For us it is. We cannot hear these lines without seeing Jesus among the poor and victimized, confronting procurators and priests, and in solitary places praying. Of course, he redefines our notion of king, just as Isaiah has already done. There is no throne for him, "no place to lay his head." What is more, he invites others to join him in this messianic spirit and work. The world still languishes for the embodied wisdom, discernment, compassion, and fidelity envisioned by Isaiah. The messianic enterprise foreseen by our text invites us to ask not only about Jesus, but about ourselves. The sermon, however briefly, could ask: can a shoot come out from the stump of the church?

With or without us, God will accomplish a new creation. Having raised up the righteous leader, the Creator will make a new paradise of the earth. Enter the animals. Imagine—baby goats are best friends with grizzlies; a lamb and a wolf enjoy conversing over a breakfast of clover. Imagining such unlikely friendships between ex-predators and prey invites a little fun, but we should guard against getting too cute. The text has its eye on the deadly aggressions and fears that sicken the world, the ending of which can be envisioned only in a far-future tense. A thoroughly healed creation is imagined, nothing less than Eden remade. We notice that there is not much of a human presence in it—only a few little children are there.

We would not be wrong to reflect here on the dreadful abundance of human predators in the world. Predator nations, individuals, institutions, and societies live by destroying the vulnerable. Do these predators need destroying, as the messiah kills the wicked (v. 4c) in the first vision? Are miraculous transformations possible, as with these lions and wolves? Or are both visions true? New creation will not likely occur without some further dying among us; painful endings precede the great breathing wonders of harmony.

Such visions are not easy to trust, and it would be best to say so. All around us, fangs are bared. Nations and factions are snapping and snarling. We are at each other's throats. Edward Hicks, a

Isaiah 11:1-10

Theological Perspective

The peace of God expected will include human beings, animals, and the land. The promise is reconciliation and restoration for all of God's creation. It is a beautiful vision that, in the day of salvation, the animals and the land will be included. Little children will be able to play with snakes.

What of the Christian church and its vision of the coming one and the coming realm? The church points to Luke 10:24, "For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." The kingdom is in our midst and belongs to all who are willing to see the word of God enacted. Eschatology has become history. The secret of the church and its mission are in relationship to the kingdom.

The church is not the kingdom of God, but its relationship to the kingdom signals its mission. The realm of God shines through the witness and mission of the church as the poor have good news preached to them and are judged with righteousness and equity. The Messiah awaits the church in a future of righteousness marked off by the gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of God, beckoning the church to a new future not of its own making but one made possible by YHWH. The challenge is not to be stuck in the traditions of the past but to be open to the new realm in which the proud will be punished, the humble will be exalted, and the practice of justice will be the order of a new day.

NOEL LEO ERSKINE

Pastoral Perspective

coming of Christ. The little shoot will rise to be a new kind of king, one who judges with righteousness and brings justice for the poor and the meek. He manifests a power unlike any other, and his power is for the weak. From this declaration proceeds the vivid vision of the peaceable kingdom, a compelling portrayal of both aggression and weakness overturned.

Most of us can relate to feelings of both weakness and aggression. Most of us have felt preyed upon at one time or another; most of us have sometimes been the predator as well. Though Isaiah speaks of a future time when predator and prey will feast and rest together, his vision can have transformative implications now, if we allow the possibility of conversion in our own lives. The pastor might invite listeners to give some thought to those areas in their lives where they feel weak, as well as those areas where they may be prone to aggression or even violence. Advent is a good time for reexamining our old assumptions and definitions, including how we think of and use power. In Christ, power has been reinterpreted. How might our own lives be reinterpreted in his light? How might our own lives be remade—so that the wolf and the lamb within us live together in a new kind of harmony? Our own lives can become peaceable kingdoms when subjected to the judgment and transformation of Christ.

Isaiah is clear that we are not the ones who usher in a new era; it is God who brings it forth. Some would therefore say that Isaiah's call is a call not to action but to hope; but hope, in the end, *is* action, with the power to overturn old assumptions and sad cynicism, to give us new eyes, and to heal our warring hearts.

STACEY SIMPSON DUKE

Exegetical Perspective

commitment, and directed to the welfare of the most defenseless and marginal. This is a model of hoped-for leadership in any generation; early Christians saw it completely fulfilled in Jesus by the testimony of New Testament Gospel narrative.

The vision of harmony in verses 6–10 is often referred to as the vision of “the peaceable kingdom.” Edward Hicks’s paintings of this scene, with William Penn’s treaty with Native tribes in the background, is the visual image that comes into mind for many. The image is of a return to Eden when God’s reign is finally consummated. When the anointed one described in earlier verses ushers it in, broken creation becomes the completely harmonious creation God intended.

Wolf, leopard, lion, and bear will live harmoniously with the domestic animals lamb, calf, kid, and cow (vv. 6–7). Lions will now eat straw like oxen, and a small child will play over the holes of poisonous snakes (v. 8). These seemingly natural adversaries will live in harmony with no thought of hurt or destruction. Indeed the earth will now be filled with the “knowledge of the LORD” (v. 9). This Hebrew term for knowledge is more than cognitive information; it is the full entering into and experiencing of what is known. So the earth will be infused with the reality of God, and it shall be as comprehensive as the waters of the sea (v. 9).

In verse 10 the passage returns to the hope for a descendant of David who will usher in the full reign of God’s kingdom. Further, this kingdom will encompass not simply the future of God’s people but the Gentiles of all nations as well. This is a very universal and comprehensive vision of hope for the future. We read this text in Advent as a new generation that lives between two times: we celebrate the coming of an anointed son of David in Jesus Christ, and we look forward to the promised final consummation of God’s peaceable kingdom yet to come.

BRUCE C. BIRCH

Homiletical Perspective

nineteenth-century Quaker artist and minister, painted Isaiah’s vision of “The Peaceable Kingdom” at least sixty-two times. All the animals are there, and a child among them, and in the background a delegation of Quakers in peaceful conversation with some Native Americans. Over time, the paintings changed. Hicks grew increasingly discouraged by the conflicts of his time, especially within his religious community, and began to make the predators in his paintings more terribly ferocious.¹ So we who preach this text should take care to make its claws and teeth sharp enough.

Are the predators the only ones to be transformed? Why not also their former victims? The predators have lost all interest in eating them, having crossed over to join them in a congenial vegetarianism; but does conversion apply only to the powerful? The first vision speaks more of gifts for the poor and meek than of consequences for the mighty. So why not imagine a purring lion beside a calf who has learned to roar, and a wolf wagging its tail in the company of a brave, lion-hearted lamb?

What of the “little child” who leads them? Shall Christians think of Jesus again? We should not make this move too quickly. Like the calf, lamb, kid, and ox, the child stands for the vulnerable, and is joined by others even younger and more vulnerable, happily playing in a safe world at last. Why is it the child who leads the whole bleating, mooing, yipping, snuffling, roaring, giggling company? The new creation wants a human presence—new, bright, undefended, and free—to love and care for it all.

This, of course, is the child we seek in Christ, in whom the lion of Judah and the lamb of God are one. In this Child we meet the divine vulnerability and the divine strength. In this Christ comes a halting of aggression and a banishing of fear—the justice of God, the peace of God, together.

PAUL SIMPSON DUKE

1. John Dillenberger, *The Visual Arts in America* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 130–32.

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

- ¹Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
²May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
³May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
⁴May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

Theological Perspective

Psalm 72 represents a longing in the midst of broken political realities.

“We want a king!” they had said, so we can be like other nations (1 Sam. 8). Did they really know what they were asking for, these elders of Israel, gathered about Samuel? Ever since the people of Israel escaped Egypt and were thereby made a people by YHWH, they had been struggling to learn and live a new form of life dependent upon the Lord alone. They had escaped the idolatry and oppression of archaic empire. When they asked for a king, Samuel knew they had sold out their own liberation and were rejecting God.

God told Samuel to describe clearly the realities people would face under kingly rule, and it is not a pretty sight. Kings needed armies, and conscription would surely take their sons away to war. Kings needed workers to support their lavish lifestyle, so people could expect a large group to be forced into labor for the king. On top of that labor, their production would be taxed to support the king's court nobles, the priests, and a large standing army. Before long, Samuel warned, the people would cry out against the oppression of their king.

Israel's trouble with kings emerged right away, beginning with Saul's paranoia and David's lust and murder. Solomon, David's son, made a good start by

Pastoral Perspective

On this Second Sunday of Advent the church is invited to consider the political ramifications of the coming of the Lord—both as the child Jesus and as the returning Lord. What implications does the coming of Christ have for the way we order our society?

The pastorally aware preacher will also move beyond ideas about justice and into the specific lived lives of the diverse collective she faces when she speaks. In that sanctuary each listener from every place on the social, economic, and political spectrum will be offered a next step forward toward the just participation this psalm describes.

Psalm 72 is simply a prayer for the king, concluding with a blessing to God. Most churches, as part of their Sunday liturgies, can safely and usefully pray for the political and governmental authorities. It seems a worthwhile thing to do, since governments are responsible for shaping and ordering our common life, our society. The government sets the goals toward which we strive, establishes the priorities of our culture, and guards the values and peace we hold dear . . . does it not? On the other hand, we are not powerless subjects of a remote monarchy. We live in democracies, which means we are a part of the political authority for which we pray. Interestingly, Psalm 72 is presented in the Bible (in the superscription, not printed above) as a psalm of Solomon—a prayer

⁵May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

⁶May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.

⁷In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

.....
¹⁸Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.

¹⁹Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth.
Amen and Amen.

Exegetical Perspective

Today's psalm is one of only two ascribed to Solomon; the other is Psalm 127. In each case, the reason for this traditional attribution by the scribes is easy to discern. Psalm 127 is a wisdom psalm (for Solomon's association with wisdom, see 1 Kgs. 3:1–15//2 Chr. 1:1–13; 1 Kgs. 3:16–28; 4:29–34; 1 Kgs. 10:1–13//2 Chr. 9:1–9; Prov. 1:1; 10:1; 25:1; and Eccl. 1:1) that begins with reference to building, calling to mind Solomon's role as temple builder (Ps 127:1; cf. 1 Kgs. 6:1–30; 7:15–51//2 Chr. 3:1–5:1). Psalm 72 deals with the rightful duties of the king, calling to mind Solomon's prayer for just such guidance ("Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people," 1 Kgs. 3:9//2 Chr. 1:10).

Likely too, the reference to the "king's son" in verse 1 reminded the scribes of Solomon, son of David. Psalm 72 is further distinguished by the role that it plays in the Psalter. The book of Psalms is divided into five parts, each concluding with a doxology (see Pss. 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; and 106:48; Book 5 apparently concludes with Psalms 146–150, a series of "hallelujah" psalms). Today's psalm comes at the end of Book 2. Psalm 72 ends with the only explicit editorial note in the Psalter, "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended" (v. 20). This note relates well both to the content of Books 1 and 2 (most of the psalms ascribed to David in the Hebrew

Homiletical Perspective

The psalm opens with a petition that God will give Jerusalem a king beyond all their imaginings, who will bring a reign of justice and prosperity for all. This all-encompassing plea asks for a ruler empowered by God who will serve the common good. In Advent, Christians are also waiting—waiting not only for personal rebirth but also for the consummation of our world in the coming of the Messiah's reign of peace and justice.

Power, peace, and justice are the abiding themes for the psalmist, who explores the definitions of dominion ranging from Israel's king to God's reign in the world. These ideals are predicated upon the notion of righteousness, or in Hebrew *tzedakah*, a complicated noun that might best be translated in this way: "What *tzedakah* signifies," writes Jonathan Sacks, "is what is often called 'social justice', meaning that no one should be without the basic requirements of existence."¹ So what kind of image does the psalmist ultimately offer of power, peace, justice, and righteousness?

Attributes of Kingship. The psalmist shows that the king is representative of God's glory and goodness.

¹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 114.

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asking God for wisdom to judge with justice, a request echoed in the first line of this psalm; but his syncretism and greed led to a life of pleasures lived on the backs of his subjects. His reign foreshadowed many more severe departures from God's ways with future kings in the years that followed.

The gift of wisdom to judge with justice seemed to do little good, given the sorry story of corrupt kings stretching down through Israel's history, through exile and return, culminating in a horrific yet symbolic way with Herod the Great. It was this latter king who, according to tradition, was willing to kill all the baby boys in his territory rather than abide the word of the magi that a new king had been born who would finally fulfill the old longing for a king like the Lord.

What is the character of such a king? One can hear in the imperative voice of the first verse the desperation of those struggling to survive, who know the injustice of social arrangements that benefit the few rich at the expense of the many poor. The verse has the tone of a strong pleading, of an intense cry that by its very guttural nature hopes to confect the reality for which it cries.

The initial cry gives way to a murmuring prayer of invocation rooted in a longing for hope and history to rhyme. The job description is uncompromising in its utopian aim. It has to be, since the model king is the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, the liberator of the oppressed, the one who bears the ragtag people as a mother bears her child when the child's exhaustion means not one step further.

This invocation, modeled after God's rule and reign, asks for justice and righteousness as the foundation. Upon that firm foundation a dual theme unfolds to guide the new king in defense of the poor against oppression and toward its opposite—a downpour of blessings upon the people so that their lives flourish and grow as a verdant garden. Here we see the dream that is later unfolded in Isaiah and Revelation, of a place with no tears or sorrows, a rule founded on shalom for all.

The worst moments in the long history of God's people across history come to pass when leaders throw their lot with the politically powerful. Solomon and Herod are obvious examples, but so are church leaders in Germany during National Socialism or in Chile during the reign of Augusto Pinochet. Year after year, people watch their rulers again succumb to corruption, greed, and power—some more, some less. Tension grows between the vision and reality. It is this gap, wearing on the

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by the king *for* the king—so he would be expected to become a part of the answer to his own prayer. Are we in a similar position? In what way can our practice further our prayer?

Psalm 72 does more than simply offer support and blessing to the existing authorities, however. The particulars of the prayer also hold the governing authorities to account; *what is prayed for the king* clearly indicates what the king's power is to be used *for*. Justice, righteousness, prosperity, and peace are to be the hallmarks of good government. This is hardly a list that would be disputed anywhere! However, there are two notions present in this psalm that seem particularly challenging to the way our own society is ordered.

The first is that the poor and needy are the key population to watch in assessing the king's justice and righteousness. Is this how we judge the political effectiveness of our own leaders—by how well they “defend the cause of the poor” and “give deliverance to the needy” (v. 4)? What would be different if the acid test for the world's economic policy was improvement in the lives of the poorest people of the earth? What would change if our “bottom line” was the quality of life for First Nations in North America? Here the pastorally aware preacher will know that “the poor” are not an abstract concept, but include real people who will be listening to the sermon that very day. What if those poorer people were seen to be the people who matter *most*—first in our congregations, then in our land?

Not long ago, Mohammad Yunus was given a Nobel Peace Prize for his work in microcredit, with the Grameen Bank. The Grameen Bank (as do several other microcredit organizations) turns conventional banking policy on its head by giving very small, unsecured loans to very poor people. These loans pay very little interest, but they do enable very poor people to improve their lives, build small businesses, and rise out of the depths of poverty. Microcredit may be one example of the kind of economic policy that results from paying attention to the lives of the poor.

The second challenging notion is found in verse 3: “May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, *in righteousness*” (emphasis added). In this verse, prosperity and righteousness are held together in a way that they do not seem to be in our own society. What does *righteousness* mean when applied to prosperity from the earth? Does it imply sustainability—that we are not plundering the earth, enjoying our prosperity at the expense of future

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text fall in these two books, suggesting a preliminary collection of “David” psalms) and to the content of Psalm 72, which deals with the dignity and responsibility of the Davidic king.

Many of us come, of course, from a culture *without* kings—indeed, a society formed in rebellion against monarchy! Even in ancient Israel, the confident hope that the king might “live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations” (v. 5; cf. Ps. 89:36–37) proved unrealistic. Davidic kingship ended when Jerusalem fell. Clearly, this meant that God’s everlasting covenant with David needed to be understood in new ways. In the Psalms, kingship increasingly comes to belong not to any human, but to God (see the “enthronement songs,” Pss. 24, 29, 47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99). James Luther Mays writes, “The psalms are the poetry of the reign of God. They are the praise and proclamation and prayer of those who believe that the confession ‘The LORD reigns’ states the basic truth about the world and life lived in it.”¹

In the prophets of the exile, the Davidic covenant was democratized, reinterpreted as being not between David and the Lord, but between the Lord and the entire people Israel (Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; and esp. 37:25–26). For example, in Isaiah 55:3–5, the only mention of David or David’s line in Second Isaiah, God swears an everlasting covenant with *Israel*: “I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.” Israel is to be to the nations what David had been to Israel; now the restored, reborn people become the leaders and commanders of all the nations of the earth, to bring them into the light of the Lord.

Of course, for Christian readers, the covenant with David and the image of kingship apply particularly to Jesus. As Mays writes, “Christians have always known that they can pray the psalm in its fullness only for the heir of David who was Jesus of Nazareth.”² Read in this way, the psalm’s focus on the poor and oppressed takes on even greater significance.

According to the universal witness of the Hebrew Bible (and in keeping with ancient Near Eastern ideals of kingship), the king was primarily responsible for rightly administering justice, particularly for those persons who had no one else to stand for them: the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (for the king as enforcing justice and righteousness, see, e.g., Ps. 99:4; Isa. 9:7; Jer. 22:15; 23:5; 33:15; Ezek.

1. James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 30–31.

2. *Ibid.*, 238.

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In many ways, the king is depicted as an agent of God’s righteousness. The hope is that the king sees the world as God sees it, defending the world’s most vulnerable and bringing deliverance to the needy (v. 4). This may include offering professions, providing shelter, and cultivating useful skills or meaningful work. This is the hope that Israel had for its kings—that the power of the Spirit would rest upon them (Isa. 11:2).

The psalmist envisions a king who will crush oppressors and dismantle the sinful structures that keep God’s people from flourishing. The ruler will maintain determination in enduring hardships and sacrifice to overcome evil with good. These things will be done for all times and all generations (v. 5). The fruit of the king’s labors will be days when righteousness flourishes and peace abounds (v. 7). All that the sovereign is and does shall be life giving to the people, a source of refreshment and renewal for the whole of creation. It is a herculean task, is it not?

Indeed it is. The writer of 1 and 2 Kings reminds us that it was only David, Solomon, Josiah, and Hezekiah who were deemed great rulers, and even they were less than perfect.

Contemporary Leaders. So what does this say about our mandate for living with power and authority today? We do continue to hold our current elected officials and other leaders to a higher standard. We hope that they will provide us with a rubric for ethical living. We also hope that the actions our leaders take will provide a habitat where justice, hope, adequate shelter, and a more environmentally friendly world prevail. We imbue these leaders with expectations as we place many of our hopes and dreams for our world on their promises to deliver.

It is important to remember not to place too much trust or authority in such figures, because they, like us, are only human. Rather, our need for an exemplar such as the one Psalm 72 imagines reinforces our need for a Messiah, for Jesus, who never fails or forsakes us. As Christians, we look to Jesus as our ultimate moral exemplar, not to our earthly leaders.

John the Baptist recognizes this division between earthly leaders and the Messiah, remarking that he is not worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals and that one more powerful than he is coming (Matt. 3:11). Nonetheless, John recognizes that we are not impotent; rather, we are called to “bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:8). So, following in John’s humility, we may not be worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals, but we

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

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faithful over time, that gave way to a hope for one who would come to fulfill this vision and rule as God in flesh, one with God's vocation. This hope is for a son of David unlike Solomon, who both asks for wisdom to rule with justice and does so truly, for the flourishing of all creation.

Carefully looking at the world as it is, while praying this psalm during the season of Advent, suggests a number of directions for Christians today. First, while acknowledging the psalm's vision of the kind of leadership that God desires for us and that we hope for ourselves, we can and ought to pray for rulers today: good, bad, and ugly. After all, if we take Jesus at his word in Matthew 5, God rains blessings on the nice and the nasty, and we are called to love and bless like God. How then can we pray only for those political leaders who hold the views and enact the policies with which we agree?

Second, it is finally one, and one alone, upon whom we can fully pray this prayer. He is the one hoped for in Isaiah's words about a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:1), the one whose life and death and resurrection have already begun a reign that embodies God's very life, transforming the life of the world. In him we finally find a "king" whose spirit is of the Lord, who will rule with justice and righteousness for all the earth.

CHRISTIAN SCHAREN

Pastoral Perspective

generations? Does it imply a lack of oppressive or exploitative business practices? Does it imply a fair or equitable distribution of the earth's bounty?

The way we envision and measure prosperity and progress sets the economic course for our society. In the Western world, we typically measure prosperity in economic terms, using gross domestic product (GDP) as our primary indicator. GDP is simply a measure of all the money spent in a given year. What an odd measure of economic success! Already in 1968, Robert Kennedy eloquently named the shortcomings of this method of accounting:

Too much and too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product . . .—if we should judge America by that—. . . counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. . . . Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures . . . everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.¹

What would it mean for us to seek prosperity *in righteousness*? What kind of prosperity *really matters*, in our eyes and in God's?

The incarnation is all about God becoming a part of earthly, human life. Therefore, this psalm challenges us to see that in political and economic terms—to give our prayer support to our leaders, to be sure, but also to hold our leaders (and our own political participation) to account. Pastorally aware preachers will also hope that justice starts in the room, with a renewed sense that everyone worshipping with them that morning matters.

DAVID HOLMES

1. Robert Kennedy, Remarks at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968, quoted in Mark Anielski, *The Economics of Happiness* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2007), 27.

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45:9). In today's Old Testament reading, this high view of the king is on prominent display:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.
(Isa. 11:3b–4)

However, it is the Lord, who “loves righteousness and justice” (Ps. 33:5; see also Isa. 5:16; 28:17; 33:5; Jer. 4:2; 9:24; Mic. 7:9; Pss. 36:6; 103:6; 106:3; Job 37:23), who is ultimately responsible for guaranteeing the rights of the powerless. Psalm 72 takes that idea a step further, referring to the needy as “your [that is, *God's*] poor” (v. 2). This radical concept is found elsewhere only in Psalm 74:19 (“do not forget the life of your poor forever”) and Isaiah 49:13, which calls upon heaven and earth to sing praises: “For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones [in Hebrew, the same term translated as “poor” in Ps. 72:2].” Far from being God-forsaken, the poor are here described as God's own possession. No wonder the psalmist says of the king,

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.
(v. 4)

In an address to representatives of some of America's largest United Methodist churches, Bishop Peter Storey of South Africa placed the church's mission to the poor on an unexpected level: “Those Methodist churches struggling in places of poverty and injustice are fortunate—they are already where Jesus is. Those who have become prosperous must find Him again.”³ We misunderstand ourselves, and our God, if we believe that we are *taking* Christ to the world's poor. Instead, now as when he walked the hills of Galilee, it is among the poor that we will find our Lord. Heeding John the Baptist's call to repent, may we resolve today to “Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt. 3:8).

STEVEN S. TUELL

Homiletical Perspective

are worthy to carry on the work of empowering those who are poor and needy.

Our Servant Leadership. Our leaders—both earthly and divine—provide models for us, but what we look for in others we might also need to find in ourselves. The psalmist inspires us to action: to give, judge, yield, defend, uphold, and know God. Just as the king in the Davidic monarchy strove to embody God's righteousness, so too do we attempt to take on that mantle of righteousness; we seek to be instilled with the power of God's Spirit.

Like the leaders about whom the psalmist writes, preachers are also held accountable to our communities. As servant leaders in an impoverished world, we strive to bring liberty to the oppressed and the captive. We must not only carry a message of liberation; we must also work to see that it is implemented in a way that empowers others. Education is a key component here—to be good citizens, we all need access to the knowledge and skills that will enable us to work for and with others.

As Jonathan Sacks writes, “The highest form of aid is one that enables the individual to dispense with aid. Humanitarian relief is essential in the short term, but in the long run, job creation and the promotion of employment are more important. . . . As an African proverb puts it: the hand that gives is always uppermost; the hand that receives is always lower.”²

Ultimately, the psalmist reminds us that it is “the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things” (v. 18). However, we are called to participate in that work as well. It is our vocation to work for a world ordered by God's good purposes, where justice, righteousness, and peace reign for all. That work may include serving on juries, speaking out against inequality, volunteering at soup kitchens, making charitable contributions, or tutoring in elementary schools. Whatever form ministry takes, it is our hope to be cloaked with God's righteousness to do God's will and to enable flourishing for all.

CAROL L. WADE

3. From Peter Storey, “Making a World of Difference,” an address at the Large Churches Initiative of the United Methodist Church in Orlando, FL, January 20, 2008.

2. *Ibid.*, 120.

Romans 15:4-13

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name”;

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The search for God begins with our acceptance of the human. Christians believe this, says the pastoral theologian John Heagle, “Because it is in the stable of humanity that God has come in search of us.”¹ In this season of anticipating the birth of Christ, a theology of incarnation enlivens, enables, and encourages us to live as Christ did. “Accept one another, therefore, as Christ has accepted you” (v. 7, my trans.).

The Jesuit theologian Peter van Breemen wonderfully develops this theme of acceptance, this theology of God’s radical love. One of the deepest needs of the human heart, he says, is to be accepted and valued. Every human being wants to be loved, but there is an even deeper love, a love of acceptance. Every human being craves to be accepted, accepted for who one is, not for what one has done or achieved or merited.

“A friend is someone who knows everything about you and still accepts you,” van Breemen says, quoting Augustine. “That is the dream we all share: that one day I may meet the person with whom I can really talk, who understands me and the words I say—who can listen and even hear what is left

1. See *Advent Sourcebook*, ed. Thomas O’Gorman (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 66.

Pastoral Perspective

Hope is the theme that forms an envelope around this concluding section of Paul’s long letter to the community of believers in Rome. In 4 he urges that they find in “the scriptures” (that is, the Hebrew Bible) the encouragement that will produce hope. Verse 13 is one of Paul’s “benedictions”: “May the God of *hope* fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in *hope* by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Hope may seem illusive in the modern world. “A thing with feathers that perches in the soul,” Emily Dickinson called it. For many of us, hope may be something of a court of last resort: it is what we do after all our planning and preparing is done; it is what we do if we cannot fix whatever the problem is. Such a perspective puts us at the center of the universe, of course, and God is what is there to take up the slack.

For others, hope is buying a lottery ticket or going to the casino. It is imagining that there is some force in the universe that will come to our rescue and give us what we think we want. We may call this “luck” or “fate” or “chance.” Whatever it is, it depends on the random event that falls our way and that just maybe will change our lives for the better.

Neither of these meanings fits with Paul’s intention in this passage. For Paul, “hope” is more like

¹⁰and again he says,
"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";
¹¹and again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";
¹²and again Isaiah says,
"The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope."

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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The general point of this passage, with its quotations from the OT, is that God's decision, enabled in Christ, to unite Jews and Gentiles into one people of God is not a recent divine decision, but was a part of God's plan for a chosen people from the beginning. To that end 15:1–3, which must be considered a part of this passage, summarizes Paul's discussion of the need for weak and strong to accept each other (Rom. 14), as Christ accepted all, not doing what he wanted but what God wanted: unify all people by bearing their sin (15:3). Through such a unity of weak and strong, the Christian community may face its future with hope.

This passage is divided into two units, verses 1–6 and 7–13. Each of these two parts quotes the OT, each points to the accomplishments of the historical Jesus, each contains paraenetic, didactic, and doxological elements, and each ends with a prayer wish.

In verse 4, it is not clear whether the "endurance" (NIV; NRSV "steadfastness") mentioned refers to our own endurance or that of Christ. It is probably the latter, with the point growing out of the reference to Christ not pleasing himself, but enduring the reproaches aimed at others. This scriptural citation from Psalm 69:9b then prompts Paul to say such Scripture was written for our instruction, so that through the steadfastness Christ exhibited, and the

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On the Second Sunday of Advent, the Epistle lesson reminds us of two of the most precious gifts we receive from God. In much of North America, culture's Christmas is all about what we buy and wrap and give to one another, but these gifts Paul knows can be neither bought with money nor made by human hands. Our human minds have a difficult time even imagining they exist; yet they are ours for the taking, priceless treasures from the realm of God's redeeming love. Our job as preachers is to make room in hearts of people, helping them to wait expectantly for gifts only God can give, two of the most valuable of which are *hope* and *harmony*.

Hope. Paul brackets this passage with a twofold reminder that hope is at the heart of the gospel of salvation. He begins by maintaining that everything "written in former days was written . . . [so that] we might have hope." He is referring, not to some generalized emotion that ignores reality and insists that everything will turn out fine, but to a core kind of trust that relies on the steadfastness of God and enables us to be steadfast, no matter how dire the situation.

Paul concludes the passage with a benediction that not only sums up what he has just been trying to say about why the Gentiles are now able to live in

Romans 15:4-13

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unsaid, and then really accepts me. God is the ultimate fulfillment of this dream.”²

Nothing is so crippling, van Breemen goes on, as the experience of not being fully accepted. When I am not accepted, a deep, unnamed emptiness pervades my being. A baby who is not welcomed is ruined at the roots. A young athlete who is not accepted by the coach performs poorly.

Acceptance means that my friends and family give me a feeling of self-esteem, a feeling of being worthwhile. They are happy that I am simply as I am. Acceptance means that I can grow at my own pace. I am encouraged and supported, but not forced.³

The craving for acceptance can absorb all our creative energies. It is comparable to the physical craving caused by rickets, a softening of the bones due to a deficiency of vitamin D. Children with rickets, over a century ago, would scratch the lime out from the walls to feed their bones. Likewise, people who are not accepted attempt to scratch out acceptance from others. They may develop rigidity because of their lack of security, or they may resort to boasting, a not-so-subtle way to provide themselves with the praise they so badly crave.

The twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich claims that *faith is the courage to accept acceptance*. I am accepted by God as I am, not as I should be. However, this requires an act of faith. It requires the courage to embrace Acceptance, that is, God’s very self. God absolutely, fully accepts me and intimately knows my name: “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (Isa. 49:16).

It is one thing to know I am accepted and quite another to embrace it. It takes a long time to believe that I am accepted by God as I am. The basic faith is that I know myself to be accepted by God. Self-acceptance can never be based on my own self, my own qualities, or my own herculean efforts. Such a foundation would collapse. Self-acceptance is an act of faith. When God loves me, I must accept myself as well. I cannot be more demanding than God, can I?

Our reading proclaims that *Christ accepted you for the glorification of God* (vv. 7, 9). The glorification of God will be possible only if the acceptance enacted by Christ flows through to mutual acceptance of one another, in particular those “weak in faith.” Whatever one has received from God is bound to spread to others.

2. Peter van Breemen, SJ, *As Bread That Is Broken* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1974), 15.

3. See Patrick Howell, “The Courage to Accept Love,” in *A Spiritguide through Times of Darkness* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996), 70–81.

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“trust.” The ground for hope is neither the last resort nor random chance. The ground is *God*: the God of “steadfastness and encouragement,” the “God of hope.” Because God is the guarantor of whatever is promised, the believer may live with complete confidence. What God has said, is what *will* be.

Paul’s exhortation to hope comes in a particular context that turns this from a well-meaning bromide into a critically important word for the church today. Paul is writing to a community of believers in Rome made up of both Jews and pagans or Gentiles. They are together because Paul and others have been preaching a gospel whose message is that the promises that God made long ago to God’s people Israel are now open to all because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The first eleven chapters of Romans are Paul’s explanation of how this works theologically. Then, in chapter 12, he spells out what the theological vision means for how this community is supposed to live, in particular, how they are to live with their very real differences and live into their new unity in Christ Jesus.

The summary of all he has said in chapters 12–14 comes in 15:7: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” In order to give glory and praise to God, Paul says, Christ extended his welcome to all—Jew and Gentile alike. In order to fulfill God’s promises, Christ embodied God’s intention to widen the circle of divine love. *Therefore* (Paul’s favorite word for making the transition from theology to ethics), if God has welcomed you—all of you—you are to be imitators of God. Life in Christian community is to be shaped by the practice of extending a welcome, of opening one’s home and life, of giving hospitality to the “other.” Each side is to welcome *the other*. There is no longer insider and outsider. Now all are hosts and all are guests, because all have been welcomed by the infinite expanse of divine love.

Living as we do in a world that draws boundaries all the time and in every possible way, it is impossible to preach this message too frequently. From the time we are old enough to be in school, we know all too well the patterns of forming “in-groups” and “outcasts.” There are people who are cool and those who are not; there are those who get power and influence because of good looks or athletic prowess; there are those who grab power by being bullies. We learn this as children, and we can see the effects of this behavior in almost every aspect of adult life—in business, education, politics, and even the church.

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encouragement (or comfort, or exhortation; the Gk. word *paraklēsīs* also has such meanings) Christians find in Hebrew Scriptures, they may have hope. Hope is mentioned twice in verse 13, showing its importance for this passage. Unless there is trust in God, there can be no hope; but unless God is faithful, there can be no trust. It is therefore the faithfulness of God, demonstrated in Christ, upon which our hope is based. Paul will return to this theme in verses 8–9a.

Verses 5–6, the prayer wish by which Paul closes this first section, take up the ideas of patience and exhortation/comfort once again, this time making clear their source is God himself. The language found here reminds one of Philippians 2:2–4 and represents the kind of vocabulary Paul uses when Christian unity is uppermost in his mind. Unity is of course, here as in Philippians 2, the purpose for which Christ became incarnate and died, namely, to break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile.

The “therefore” with which verse 7 begins in the Greek now introduces the concluding paragraph of this section of Romans. What has been said in 14:1–15:6 is summed up in the command: receive one another because Christ has received you, to the glory of God. There are two minor questions here. The first is whether the reading is Christ welcomed “us,” or welcomed “you.” While both readings have strong support in ancient manuscripts, “you” is probably the original, since unlike verse 1, where Paul is addressing the strong, among whom he includes himself, in verse 7 he is addressing the whole Christian community, weak and strong together. The “you” is the more inclusive and is thus the preferred reading.

The second question is the construal of the phrase “for the glory of God.” Its placement in the Greek sentence is such that it could refer either to the command that Christians welcome one another, or to the statement that Christ welcomed you. Given its position in the sentence, Paul may have wanted it to refer to both. Hence, both Christ’s mission and our response are done for the glory of God.

The “For” with which verse 8 begins connects it to verse 7 as a further development of verse 7, giving additional support to the command to welcome one another. The Greek structure of verses 8b–9 is not entirely clear. The parallelism of some grammatical constructions, and Paul’s tendency in the second part of such constructions to omit words repeated from the first part, could indicate that Paul meant the following: Christ became a servant for the circumcised (Jews) for the sake of God’s truth, to

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hope, but describes magnificently what the Letter to the Romans has to say and what life in Christ is all about: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope *by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (emphasis added). Clearly, hope is not a human accomplishment, but the gift of our gracious God.

The hope of which Paul writes is not a pie-in-the-sky kind of optimism. Neither is it a cheery denial of the painful realities of life and death, injustice and suffering. Paul has wagered his life on a hope that is grounded in the promises of God and looks forward to the reality to which the gospel of Jesus Christ bears witness. Hope is the undaunted force that comes from the Holy Spirit, getting into our human spirits and drawing us beyond the darkness of today and toward the light of the new tomorrow. Encouraged by the marvelous things God has already done, we abide in hope for what is not yet but will surely come to be.

Like the members of the Christian movement in ancient Rome, we who live in today’s troubled times have every reason not to hope. One thinks of the world Matthew Arnold pictures, which “Hath really neither joy nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; / And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night.”¹

Taking the long view, Paul knows that the church, if it is to have a future, must be hopeful and share hope abroad. Every Advent, we look again to Christ, not only for our own salvation, but for the redemption of the world. We renew our hope that God will come among us to heal and to save. We discover anew that “the hopes and fears of all the years” are met in a stable in Bethlehem, the place where God became flesh among us, and the whole world had new reason to hope.

I love these glad lines written by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: “My eyes already touch the sunny hill, / going far ahead of the road I have begun. / So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp; / it has its inner light, even from a distance— / and changes us, even if we do not reach it, / into something else, which, hardly sensing it, we already are.”²

Hope is the light that draws us onward toward the peace and harmony that only God can give.

1. “Dover Beach,” *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 703.

2. Rainer Maria Rilke, “A Walk,” quoted by Robert Bly, *Iron Man* (Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 2004), 49.

Romans 15:4-13

Theological Perspective

Israel understood its call this way: “The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you. . . . It was because the LORD loved you” (Deut. 7:6–8).

This deeper, divine acceptance leads to harmony in the community and to glorifying God “together” and “with one voice” (v. 6). Granting their differences, Paul prays that they may nonetheless have joy and peace with each other.

Our gospel speaks of a God who accepts us as we are. We are capable of accepting others because Christ has accepted us. Barriers are down. We belong.

We are all slow learners in the church. In the “school for sinners,” most of us are in the remedial class, but the first and absolute necessity is that we accept that we are accepted. To grow in that awareness is to grow into the potential of truly accepting others. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” says God (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31).

The great medieval monk Bernard of Clairvaux explained that there are four stages of growth in Christian maturity: (1) love of self for self’s sake; (2) love of God for self’s sake; (3) love of God for God’s sake; (4) love of self for God’s sake. God emptied himself so that he might become flesh like us (see Phil. 2:5–11).

Much of the self-help literature and world of advertising asserts, by way of contrast, that you must “love yourself,” that “you deserve to be pampered,” that the first love is “love of self.” This basic love is certainly critical, but it can also be quite self-deceiving and illusory.

The challenge of our reading today is that ultimately love reaches out to the other, expands the boundaries of self, even empties the self of all self-seeking, for the sake of Christ, because that is precisely what God has already done. Imagining such free giving of selves to one another, it is not surprising that the last word Paul speaks in this passage is one of hope.

PATRICK J. HOWELL

Pastoral Perspective

Paul calls Christians to another way of living, another way of relating: Welcome one another. It is a model of gracious reciprocity based on the most profound of theological insights: God has already welcomed *all*—and so there is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female (Gal. 3:28). We, of course, must translate: no longer rich or poor, black or white or Hispanic or Asian, no longer gay or straight, no longer evangelical or progressive, no longer free-market capitalist or socialist or libertarian. God has welcomed us all . . . just as we are . . . into God’s embrace.

Paul wants to make sure that his audience knows that he is not just making this up, that this is not the result of some wild-eyed idea he has come up with all by himself. No, God’s intention to make known this plan of wide embrace is already there in “whatever was written in former days” (v. 4). The clues to God’s intentions have been there all along, Paul says. It is now, in the light of Christ, that we can see the true meaning of these texts. So Paul brings out four citations of Hebrew Scripture that point to the inclusion of the Gentiles (the “other,” from the point of view of Paul and his community). “Rejoice, O Gentiles. . . . praise the Lord, all you Gentiles!” (vv. 10–11) He saves the best for last, a word that believers were coming to see as a foretelling of the birth of Jesus: “The root of Jesse shall come . . . in him the Gentiles shall hope” (v. 12). Something new has happened that has brought into the world God’s ancient promise: *all are welcome*—so welcome one another.

CYNTHIA M. CAMPBELL

Exegetical Perspective

confirm the promises made to the ancestors, and became a servant with respect to the Gentiles for the sake of God's mercy, so that they would glorify God. In its current form, without taking such parallelisms into account, perhaps the best translation would be: "Christ became a servant for the circumcised for the sake of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and with respect to the Gentiles on behalf of mercy to glorify God."

However one construes the structure, the point seems clear: Christ's coming shows God was truthful to the patriarchs when God promised that through them all humankind would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). Therefore Jews can trust God and in that trust welcome others. Christ's coming also shows God's mercy in that Gentiles—now also included in God's people—can praise God. On the basis of that mercy, Gentiles can also now welcome others because God in Christ has shown himself to be merciful.

The citations from Scripture in verses 9b–12, each of which includes the word "Gentile," are drawn from all three parts of the OT: Law (*torah*), Prophets (*nebiim*), and Writings (*ketubim*). Paul apparently intends to show that the whole of Hebrew Scriptures bears witness to God's original plan to include both Gentiles and Jews in one elect people.

Paul may have seen in the quotation in verse 9b a prediction of his mission to the Gentiles. Verses 10b–11 emphasize the inclusiveness of God's call—no one is to be excluded from the people of God who praise God. Verse 12 points to the fact that the unity of Jews and Gentiles is due to the Messiah who is a Jew, yet who represents the hope of the Gentiles.

The word "hope" then becomes the key concept in the prayer wish in verse 13 that concludes the entire passage. Only the power of God, working through the Holy Spirit, can grant both Jew and Gentile joy, peace, faith, and hope. "Hope" is the key word, a hope possible because God controls the future and has given a glimpse of that future by sending Christ. Advent is thus for Christians a time of expectation and joy, of waiting and fulfillment.

PAUL J. ACHTEMEIER

Homiletical Perspective

Harmony. Paul's next prayer is that God give the Romans "harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ" (v. 5). What is the point of such harmony? It is not peace for the sake of peace, but "so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 6). Our world has forgotten that we human creatures exist, not for the fulfillment of ourselves, but for the glory of God. The text goes on to encourage believers to "welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you" (v. 7). Whom did Christ not welcome? The children, the outcasts, the foreigners were all his people, the sheep of his pasture.

No one who has lived for a time in our fractured, fractious world or held membership in the often fractured, fractious church can deny that peace and unity are conditions to which we are not naturally inclined, at least not since the exit from Eden. Paul reminds us that regardless of our natural inclinations to look down upon "the other," God has a different idea in mind for the human race. At one time, the Gentiles were perceived to be outsiders, but now both Gentiles and Jews are included in the covenant God made with "the patriarchs" (v. 8). God expands the covenant. Unity comes, not because somebody had the big idea to be inclusive, but because that is the way God wants us to be, intended us to be in the first place.

"Peace on earth, good-will among those whom God favors": this is the message the angels will sing, come Christmas Eve. Until then, may the church be the demonstration project of the peaceable kingdom God intends.

In *Seasons of Celebration*, Thomas Merton wrote, "The Advent mystery is the beginning of the end of all in us that is not yet Christ."³ Until then, may harmony mark our holidays, and may the peace of Christ calm and correct our divided world.

JOANNA M. ADAMS

3. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Marie Press, 2009), 77.

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Theological Perspective

Advent has traditionally been a season of preparation. The church over the centuries has come to understand that Christians need to set aside regular times of the year to consider again the full significance of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The meaning and joy of Christmas will easily elude us unless we make a focused effort to dwell ahead of time on all the promises of God that have come to fulfillment in Jesus’ birth.

The church’s traditional Advent practice stands in tension with contemporary culture. The rhythms of a secular, consumer society have displaced the church year. In that society, preparations for Christmas have been reduced to hanging twinkling Christmas lights, listening to cheery holiday music, and gazing at an abundance of material goods for the buying, all of which we hope will evoke in us a sense of magical, childlike wonder and goodwill. Not the promises of God, but our own ideals and longings, have become the focus.

How different is the preparation to which John the Baptist calls the people of Israel! The promises of God that are coming to fulfillment in Christ should compel people to confess their sins. John asks us to examine ourselves, rather than bask in holiday wonder. We should bear good fruit, rather than worry about material things to get or give. John is almost a

Pastoral Perspective

Here is what we do not want in our church lives—especially at Advent.

We do not want judgment.
And we do not want nostalgia.

We Do Not Want Judgment at Advent. Every congregation I have served as pastor has been populated in large measure by Christians recovering from Christian judgment. Christian spouses who are divorced and have remarried are recovering from churches that provide unbending interpretations of Mark 10:11–12.

Gay and lesbian Christians are recovering from churches that provide implausible interpretations of 1 Corinthians 6:9, where Paul says that *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* will not inherit the kingdom, though no one knows for sure what these Greek words mean.

Inquiring Christians are recovering from churches that read 2 Timothy 3:16 (“All scripture is inspired by God”) as the place where Paul requires a literal interpretation of Scripture, though it may well be that Paul did not “literally” write this letter.

So Christians quite appropriately come to accept churches where they will feel at home.

Then here comes John the Baptist: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? . . . [Jesus’] winnowing fork is in his hand,

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Exegetical Perspective

Advent not only marks a new beginning, but it defines a time of transition, and this may be why John the Baptizer is the focus for the Second Sunday of Advent. John has one foot in the old age that is coming to a close and the other foot in the new age that is being born. No less than Samuel, John is a bridge between eras in Israel’s history. The sources for Matthew’s construction of this picture of John the Baptizer are at least Mark and Q (the sayings source composed of sayings found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark). A quick review of the sources of Matthew’s narrative will reveal his compositional control: Verses 1–2, 4–6, and 11 are drawn from Mark. Verses 3, 7–10, and 12 are drawn from Q.

The passage can be outlined as follows: (1) “John’s prophetic witness” and “life on the margins” (vv. 1–6); (2) the “same old, same old” and “the empire strikes back” (vv. 7–10); and (3) “hope springs eternal” (vv. 11–12). It may be helpful to examine each section more closely.

In verses 1–6, something unusual is happening. In the ancient world, power was concentrated in central cities, where the temples and imperial buildings witnessed to the power of the current regime. In the center were located the bureaucracies that collected tribute and other direct and indirect taxes. As a general rule, if people wanted to get something or get

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The person of John the Baptist attracts immediate attention as a tough-minded, straightforward, no-nonsense preacher. John may have been like Alexander Whyte (1836–1921), noted preacher at Free St. George’s Church in Edinburgh. It was said that Whyte could be so direct and penetrating that to hear him preach was to take your life in your hands.¹ Whether they knew it or not, those who went into the wilderness to hear John did the same thing. His example leads to one of the toughest questions that can be asked about our preaching: Is anything really at stake when people listen to us? Do persons have to take their lives in their hands when they come to hear us?

John’s wilderness preaching brings to mind a memorable line from Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. Without confessing which of the two thinks it, they write, “Indeed, one of us is tempted to think there is not much wrong with the church that could not be cured by God calling about a hundred really insensitive, uncaring, and offensive people into ministry.”² If they overstate the case, it is not by much. Since John here seems to qualify as one of the

1. John Kelman, “Whyte of St. George’s,” in *The Best of Alexander Whyte*, ed. Ralph G. Turnbull (1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 26.

2. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 167.

Matthew 3:1-12

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comical figure, dressed in camel's hair and eating locusts and wild honey, but his message is hard-hitting: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Repentance is a confusing concept to many Christians today. Does it mean feeling sorry for our mistakes? Is it a matter of trying to be a better person? Is repentance something that we even need to do, if our lives are now hidden with Christ, our Savior? For some Christians, language of repentance dredges up feelings of guilt and unworthiness, and may even evoke a deathly fear of a day of judgment, when God will separate the wheat from the chaff. For them, the question soon becomes, Can I ever be sure enough that I will experience God's mercy rather than God's wrath?

What John—and Advent—remind us is that repentance is not primarily about our standards of moral worthiness, but rather about God's desire to realign us to accord with Christ's life. Repentance is not so much about our guilt feelings as about God's power to transform us into Christ's image. For Matthew, John's strange clothes and harsh sayings are necessary aspects of communicating the full meaning of the gospel. While warm and fuzzy feelings at Christmastime are not all wrong, they fail to capture the full picture of what God has done for us in becoming human flesh.

Matthew uses several key images to enlarge our vision. One important image is the *wilderness*; John preaches in the wilderness and is a voice crying out in the wilderness. Wilderness evokes memories of the joyous yet troubled history of Israel. God led the people of Israel out of bondage into the wilderness, yet they feared that God had brought them there to die. They sinned and rebelled against God in the wilderness, yet also learned to trust and obey God there. The repentance that befits the church's observance of Advent will have similar dynamics. We will remember and affirm that Christ has brought each of us out of bondage and has fundamentally reoriented our life. Our own wanderings in the Christian life will not be without wilderness hesitancy and resistance, yet God promises to keep pointing the way ahead.

A second key image for Matthew is *baptism*. John baptizes people in the Jordan as they confess their sins. This baptism, says John, points forward to a more radical baptism in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. This new baptism will be much more than a symbol of our own efforts to live according to God's will, for it will represent God's act of fully claiming us for new life in Christ. Advent

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and he will clear his threshing floor and . . . the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

It is easy to hope that John had only scribes and Pharisees in mind when he pronounced such judgment, but the larger context of the chapter and the entire context of Matthew's Gospel make clear that we all need to be on our toes. Because John, and the Jesus he announces, arrive with the most astonishing combination of acceptance and admonition. We all discover this Advent, not only that we are cherished for who we are, but that we are responsible for what we do.

That can be good Advent news, because if God does not care about what I do, I will begin to suspect that God does not actually care about me. If God loves me enough to welcome me into Christ's family, then God loves me enough to expect something of me. (What God expects, it need hardly be said, is not necessarily what churches that specialize in judgment expect; see Matt. 7:1–2.)

William Muehl underlines this point in an appropriately Adventesque story:

One December afternoon . . . a group of parents stood in the lobby of a nursery school waiting to claim their children after the last pre-Christmas class session. As the youngsters ran from their lockers, each one carried in his hands the "surprise," the brightly wrapped package on which he had been working diligently for weeks. One small boy, trying to run, put on his coat, and wave to his parents, all at the same time, slipped and fell. The "surprise" flew from his grasp, landed on the floor and broke with an obvious ceramic crash.

The child . . . began to cry inconsolably. His father, trying to minimize the incident and comfort the boy, patted his head and murmured, "Now, that's all right son. It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter at all."

But the child's mother, somewhat wiser in such situations, swept the boy into her arms and said, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters a great deal." And she wept with her son.¹

It does matter. Our Advent worship, Advent hymns, Advent expectations, and Advent comforts require the reminder that John the Baptist makes so clear. It does matter. We do matter.

Perhaps the church can give up on judgment, but we cannot give up on responsibility.

We Do Not Want Nostalgia at Advent. Our people may want nostalgia, but we do not. They are ready to

1. William Muehl, *Why Preach? Why Listen?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 82.

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something done, they would travel to a center city. The margins came to the center, but not the reverse.

In this portrayal of an obscure wilderness prophet, a peripheral prophet, John remains on the margins, and the center comes to him. In this passage, people from Jerusalem (a central city), “all Judea,” and “all the region along the Jordan” (areas under the control of Jerusalem) came to John. Of course, the “all” is hyperbole, but its effect is to emphasize the extent of John’s surprising influence.

John “appears” on the margins, the “wilderness of Judea,” proclaiming the coming of an empire profoundly different from the Roman Empire and the client kingdom of Herod Antipas. The wilderness (*erēmia*) was in Israel’s history the place of renewal where the revelation of the Torah was given, and it was a place of judgment where a hardhearted generation perished for lack of faith. The echoes of Isaiah 40:3 (v. 3) indicate that Matthew may be invoking the theme of new creation and new exodus so deeply embedded in Second Isaiah. So also for Matthew, the wilderness will be a place of both judgment and redemption.

John is clearly described as a prophetic figure speaking with a prophetic voice and performing a prophetic symbolic action—baptism. He stands in the tradition of Second Isaiah, who announced the need for someone to show the people how to find a “way” in the “wilderness.” John’s words are as important as his symbolic action. Note that the description of John as Elijah (v. 4; see 2 Kgs. 1:8) follows directly the quote from Isaiah. John will not be a prophet with connections to the centers of power (as Isaiah had been) but will live on the periphery. His food will be the food of the poor (locusts with whatever honey he can find), and his clothing will be the clothing of the poor, the common camel’s hair smock of the bedouins.

This strongly ascetic prophet was admired and, as the Gospel traditions indicate, his baptism was considered to be from heaven (Matt. 21:23–27). Living on the margins did not render John marginalized; it provided him with a prophetic distance from the issues of his day. Perhaps it would be better to say that John created “liminality” through his proclaiming and baptizing. It is difficult for us to realize what a challenge his prophetic witness was to the authorities who came from the center, Jerusalem, and the temple in Judea. John was baptizing those who were confessing their sins, a redemptive activity usually reserved for the temple and the sacrificial system controlled by the high priests and the priestly caste.

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hundred, no sermon true to this text can avoid at least some edginess.

The image of the wilderness is as appealing as John himself, and there is value in thinking about the wilderness as the location of *our* preaching and not just John’s. How and to what extent do preaching and church life take place in a wilderness today? Every wise and sincere congregation works hard to be warm, friendly, inviting, and do all it can to make persons feel at home. Nevertheless, worship is always something of a wilderness where people think their lives through and wonder about all that is unknown and frightening and causes them to double- and triple-check their holds on what is reassuring. No matter how beautiful the sanctuary, the pew where people sit with their fears, worries, responsibilities, and all the rest is a kind of wilderness place where people confront the howling winds, thorny brambles, and lonely emptinesses of their lives. All this is the stuff of life, and the stuff of the preaching moment.

Verses 5 and 6 give us license to think the harshest wilderness is within the hearer. Matthew tells us people went out to John to confess their sins. Few topics are more “churchy” and religious than that; so, fearing the subject is trite, some pulpits may be led away from taking it up as a theme. Other pulpits may shy away from the subject of sin for fear of appearing prudish or moralistic. Matthew’s text may contain hyperbole, but these verses remind us that pews rush in where pulpits fear to tread. Persons in the pews before us may have no doctrine of sin but they have the experience of it and the desire to be rid of it. They at least know that they have themselves to contend with and that, in all their relationships and undertakings, they are their own worst enemies and do not seem to be able to get out of their own way. Whatever else they may be dealing with in their lives when they come to worship, they are dealing with this.

What kind of preaching is needed in the wilderness today? John’s methods supply ample materials for a lesson in wilderness homiletics. If we want to give him a theological label, we could call him a kind of liberal evangelical. He is somehow both at the same time. He challenges the conservatism of his day, which seeks entitlement in bloodlines and position; yet he does not use new ideas or theologies but ones from the very heart of tradition, such as sin, judgment, and repentance.

John’s wilderness sermon addresses the persons who are before him. When he sees particular people in the congregation (here the Pharisees and Sadducees) he does not trim his message to please them,

Matthew 3:1-12

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has similar meanings. We repent as we remember and affirm the new identity given us in baptism. We have been buried and raised with Christ, and have been adopted into the family of God.

Other key images evoke God's judgment and wrath. The ax is being laid to the root of the trees; every tree without good fruit will be thrown into the fire; Christ has a winnowing fork to thresh the grain; the chaff will be burned with an unquenchable fire. Matthew wants to make clear that the kingdom of God brings about a fundamental break with the past. The world no longer goes about its normal business. Human ideals and longings have been shaken to the core. At the same time, God's judgment is essentially related to God's promises: the old is passing away, in Christ the new has come. Similarly, in Advent the church practices repentance as it remembers and affirms that this world no longer has the last word, and that we live instead by hope in a new heaven and earth.

The preparation to which John calls Israel, like the preparation to which Advent calls the church, happens not primarily as self-purification but rather by way of a radical trust that Christ himself is working to purify us and the world around us to become a dwelling place fit for himself. Remembrance of God's promises nurtures this trust, and faithful service to the world affirms it. We need the space that Advent provides for remembering and affirming Christ's incarnation and all that it means for us.

The church's rediscovery of Advent will come in small steps, such as when we learn the difference between Advent hymns and Christmas carols, recover ancient practices of Advent fasting and waiting, or pray the daily lectionary of Advent with its themes of judgment and purification. These Advent disciplines prepare us for Christmas joy and feasting (including holiday lights, music, and presents!) when they finally arrive. But this Advent preparation also does something more. It rehearses us in the way of life that should flow out of Christmas, a life marked by a steady confidence that God's kingdom is indeed at hand.

JOHN P. BURGESS

Pastoral Perspective

pull out "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Silent Night" by the Second Sunday of Advent, but we have the good sense to know that there are still four stanzas of "O Come, O Come, Immanuel" to go before we light that final candle.

They want the Christmas pageant to be just the same as it was last year and the sixty-two years before that, preferably in the King James Version; and God forbid that we depart from the traditional poinsettias by introducing red chrysanthemums for this holy season. Because Advent is about looking back, they think. Feeling good about what used to be.

"Advent is about looking ahead," we pray and preach and teach, "waiting expectantly for what is to come."

Then here comes John the Baptist, dressed up in such a way as to remind us of old Elijah and speaking words taken directly from old Isaiah. "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Here comes John the Baptist to remind us that in the odd economy of God's grace—as we find it in Scripture—we look forward only by looking back. The Jesus we wait for in our future was already planned for in God's past.

Maybe our people are not as hopeless as we thought. Looking back on Advent past they find the courage to trust in Advent present and wait for Advent to come. Those ghosts who made Scrooge look back before he could look ahead had a point.

Nostalgia is memory filtered through disproportionate emotion. Faith is memory filtered through appropriate gratitude.

We sometimes use our liturgies and our prayers and our sermons and even our pastoral care to play make-believe with our people. "Move toward the future and make believe you have no past." "Wait for Jesus to come and pretend that you do not already know how the story turns out, so that when we sing 'Joy to the World' you can try to be not only grateful, but astonished."

It is an exercise in false piety to come to the manger without remembering the cross, and it is an exercise in false liturgical correctness to read Isaiah's "for unto us a child is born" while pretending that we do not know what George Frideric Handel and the church have made of that promise.

Perhaps for Advent we can give up on nostalgia, but we cannot give up on memory.

So, go ahead and sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" this week.

DAVID L. BARTLETT

Exegetical Perspective

In verses 7–10 we see that, if the peripheral prophet would not travel to the center, then the center would journey to the margins to assess the significance of the challenge and the danger it posed. A good deal hinges on the meaning of a preposition (*epi*), which can mean either “coming for (*epi*) baptism” or “coming against (*epi*) baptism.” The latter reading fits the context better than the first reading. The Pharisees were a political interest group with a holiness agenda for Israel, and they promoted their program by aligning themselves with factions in the powerful ruling class (both lay and priestly). Though they differed in many and significant ways, both Pharisees and Sadducees would perceive John as a threat to their interests, especially any attempt to reduce the sphere of influence of the temple through an appeal to John’s “baptism from heaven” (Matt. 21:25–26).

Their opposition also explains John’s immediate hostile reaction to their appearance. He knows that they oppose what he is doing, and, like any honorable man, he will attack his opponents rather than wait for their verbal assaults. The images are strong: vipers slithering ahead of a rapidly spreading fire. Snakes were, of course, unclean animals, so John is adding insult to injury. John then turns his attack to their inevitable appeal to special status through relationship with Abraham. The appeal is an attempt to define insiders (the elite of Abraham’s offspring and covenant community) and outsiders (John’s desert community) and, in this context, a reminder that they are the insiders.

John responds by mixing images of judgment (ax; cut down; thrown into the fire; winnowing fork; burn chaff; vv. 10, 12) and hope (one more powerful than I; baptize with fire and Holy Spirit; gather wheat into God’s granary; vv. 11–12). Note that fire relates to judgment and hope. The passage looks forward to the grand transition: the advent of a new age that can be reached only by finding a way through the wilderness and living through judgment into hope.

WILLIAM R. HERZOG II

Homiletical Perspective

but rather speaks in a way that reaches them. How many sermons delivered on any given Sunday miss the mark because they do not speak to the people present?

John Ames, the main character in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, tells of once scrapping an antiwar sermon that pleased him very much. He scrapped it because the only ones who would be present to hear it were a handful of old people who agreed with him already and who had no power. “Mirabelle Mercer,” he concluded, “was not Pontius Pilate, and she was not Woodrow Wilson, either.”³ Like John Ames, John the Baptist directs his words to persons who are present rather than far away.

John’s wilderness sermon is, for the most part, in the present tense. The matter seems to hinge almost entirely on what God is doing now, or is about to do. He reports on what he sees to be true now. We who preach may love history and the inner workings and plots of texts. The stories of old are, indeed, key to our theology and preaching; but those sermons that tell what God is doing today have the best chance to be interesting and make a difference. To see how this can happen, take an old sermon and change the tense of the verbs from the past to the present. See how much a simple change like this brings life, movement, and interest to what was otherwise true but flat.

John’s wilderness sermon points beyond himself to God. Whatever our message is going to be, it is not going to be found in ourselves. We are not the message. The church is not the gospel. The community of faith is not the savior. Preaching worthy of the name strives to point ever and always to Jesus. He should increase in every sermon, and the preacher, and even the church, should decrease.

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3. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 43.