

# *Feasting on the Word*

Preaching the  
Revised Common Lectionary

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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. But 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. President Laura S. Mendenhall has provided splendid help as well. She has made seminary resources and personnel available and encouraged us in this partnership with enthusiasm and all good grace. We thank her.

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 Jack Keller and Don McKim of Westminster John Knox Press, who conceived this project, and to David Dobson and Jon Berquist, who worked diligently to bring the project to completion. We thank President Laura Mendenhall and Dean Cameron Murchison of Columbia Theological Seminary, 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, John Schuler, and Dilu Nicholas have supported both her and us with their administrative skills.

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

David L. Bartlett  
Barbara Brown Taylor

*Feasting on the Word*

## FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

### *Isaiah 64:1-9*

<sup>1</sup>O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
<sup>2</sup>as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
<sup>3</sup>When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
<sup>4</sup>From ages past no one has heard,  
no ear has perceived,  
no eye has seen any God besides you,  
who works for those who wait for him.  
<sup>5</sup>You meet those who gladly do right,  
those who remember you in your ways.  
But you were angry, and we sinned;  
because you hid yourself we transgressed.

#### **Theological Perspective**

This passage from Isaiah raises substantial theological questions about the character of God and God's action in the world. These verses, part of a larger lament (63:7–64:12), introduce us to both a baffling God who hides from the people and a redeeming God who is their father and maker.

Following the traditional pattern of the lament, Isaiah begins in 63:7 by recounting “the gracious deeds of the LORD.” He recalls the paradigmatic event of divine deliverance—God's rescue of the Israelites from Egypt in the exodus. Yet, given God's visible and spectacular actions in that story, Isaiah finds it all the more troubling that God is not so visibly or powerfully present to postexilic Israel. As chapter 64 opens, Isaiah cries out to God, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”—do what you did in the past, bring fire and earthquake, make our enemies tremble! Three times he asks for God's “presence,” but God has hidden himself from the people (64:5,7).

The language of God's “hiding” in this passage (echoing 1:15 and 45:15) seems to serve two purposes. First, it disabuses Israel of any notion that God belongs to them or can be contained or controlled by them (they cannot “attempt to take hold of [God],” Isa. 64:7). They must become again “like those not called by your name” (Isa. 63:19), in

#### **Pastoral Perspective**

Advent begins with a prayer of the prophet Isaiah that is both a lament and a plea. The heavens will open and the God of Sinai will come down with righteous power to stun the enemies of Israel with his presence, bringing shock and awe to his adversaries. Even though the people of God have sinned and feel God has hidden God's face from them, they still trust God in their spiritual exile. In spite of all, they know that they are clay and the works of the hand of the Almighty Potter.

Although the details of Israel's situation differ from those of our nation, there is a deep similarity between our existential conditions. We know that our reliance upon our own massive, ruthless political power, rather than the pursuit of justice, has brought us into political disrepute among nations. Our national prayer is a kind of sacrilegious prayer of the prophets; we would depend upon military power alone to make the mountains quake and the nations tremble. Isaiah is not a proponent of a sentimental theology of easy grace. He shows us a God who is angry and silent, one who hides God's face from a people who reject God's righteous ways. For us, the path leading from repentance to redemption involves an appeal to a more universal God than was called upon by Israel. Our task and the healing of the nations depend upon our remembering that we are

<sup>6</sup>We have all become like one who is unclean,  
 and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.  
 We all fade like a leaf,  
 and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
<sup>7</sup>There is no one who calls on your name,  
 or attempts to take hold of you;  
 for you have hidden your face from us,  
 and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.  
<sup>8</sup>Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;  
 we are the clay, and you are our potter;  
 we are all the work of your hand.  
<sup>9</sup>Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,  
 and do not remember iniquity forever.  
 Now consider, we are all your people.

### Exegetical Perspective

The passage (63:19b–64:8 in Hebrew) marks the high point of an extended communal lament that begins in 63:7 and concludes at 64:12. The lectionary unfortunately drops 64:10–12. These final verses imbue the passage with a historical specificity, as well as bring it to an explosive climax.

The lection is a cry of “pain seeking understanding.” Composed sometime after the Babylonian conquest (586 BCE) but prior to the rebuilding of the temple (515 BCE), the lament reflects Israel’s disorientation in the wake of devastating exile. The sanctuary lies in ruins (63:19): “Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation” (64:10b). Although the crisis shook the religious foundation of the community to its core, Israel’s response was unabashedly theological: a lament to God punctuated by plaintive questions regarding “where” God is in the face of such calamity (63:11, 15) and “why” (63:17) and building up to direct appeal in chapter 64.

The lament proper begins in 63:7 with a resounding note of praise of God’s abundant “steadfast love” (Heb. *hesed*) demonstrated in history by God’s “gracious deeds” (63:7). God has chosen a people and in so doing has become their “savior” (63:8). The exodus and the wilderness trek, the events of liberation and guidance, are lifted up as the

### Homiletical Perspective

The season of Advent is a time when the church is reminded to wait and prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Advent is projected from our pulpits as a time of new hope and new birth, when the Christ child is born into our world and ultimately into our hearts. Words of assurance abound amid the promises that God will come again. Yet the voice of Isaiah tells us that God may have forgotten us altogether.

On this first Sunday of Advent, preachers may squirm at the idea of preaching from Isaiah who says, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all of our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth” (v. 6). But that is not all. Isaiah also says, “Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people” (v. 9). Isaiah’s words may seem too harsh for some preachers who want to focus on overcoming hopelessness by shining the spotlight on the manger. Yet the season of Advent has always held in tension the combination of God’s judgment and God’s promise.

Isaiah portrays a God in history who does awesome deeds that often surprise God’s people. Yet God’s people have forgotten to call upon God, who in return has hidden from the people. Isaiah portrays God as up there in some remote place while the people are down here sinning out of control.



## Isaiah 64:1-9

### Theological Perspective

order to be called anew. Second, it symbolizes a withdrawal of protection so that the Israelites will be awakened by the consequences of their sin. God “hides” in order to deconstruct a distorted set of beliefs and practices, thereby opening Israel to receive again (as gift and event) their calling to be God’s people. Hiding is a form of divine judgment that ultimately serves divine mercy, a “No” that clears the ground for a more profound “Yes.”

But this divine inaction is more than judgment. It tells us something about the way God has chosen to relate to the world. The hidden God of Isaiah 64 is the God who refuses to act powerfully and dramatically to rescue Israel from their distress. The frustration expressed in the opening verses of chapter 64 reflects Isaiah’s struggle to reconcile the ancient stories of God’s powerful presence with his present experience of God’s absence.

Who has not at one time or another wondered the same thing? If in biblical times God intervened in history with “awesome deeds” (64:3), why does God not do so today? Surely there are egregious wrongs that deserve to be righted. Why would God deliver Israel from Egypt but not deliver six million Jews from Hitler’s death camps? We read stories about God’s spectacular interventions, yet we look in vain for such visible signs of God’s involvement in the world today. We want the mountains to quake and the nations to tremble at God’s presence. Instead, the sufferings of our day are too often met with divine silence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a German concentration camp in 1944, dared to draw the logical conclusion, “God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”<sup>1</sup>

For Bonhoeffer this realization did not amount to a denial of faith but to a retrieval of faith in the God of the cross, whose power is suffering, whose omnipotence is vulnerability. What Bonhoeffer discovered was that the hiddenness of God is not a cloak of humility temporarily covering an awesome,

<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 360.

### Pastoral Perspective

all the people of this awesome God: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

It is a strange way to begin this time of Advent. Beginning Advent with weeping and a lament? That is unusual!

And powerful. This is where we need to begin. The coming of Advent jolts the church out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it’s time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness. Peace, the peace of shalom/salaam, is at the heart of the promise born at Advent, but it is difficult to arrive there safely and without becoming vulnerable along the way. It is difficult to set out on the journey without repentance and forgiveness. We can feel the tears glistening on our cheeks as we gaze upon Baghdad and Jerusalem, Darfur and Beirut, Tehran and Seoul. We are living in a time of brokenheartedness, a time when most Americans know that we must find ways to make peace in Iraq, but we feel helpless, hopeless, and just plain brokenhearted over the devastation in the Middle East.

I recall a comment that our country has changed over the past years from one that wanted to be good to one that wants to feel good. We see some of this desire every Christmas season as people run from store to store and shopping mall to shopping mall, searching for the things that will bring them and their families some sort of fulfillment and happiness. Peace, the kind of peace that the world is hungering for, will not come from trying to fill ourselves up with material things. We try to stem our hurt and pride by running away from pain and caring only about what is ours. We cannot create peace through selfishness, but by opening ourselves to hope. Hope is what is left when your worst fears have been realized and you are no longer optimistic about the future. Hope is what comes with a broken heart willing to be mended.

“No eye has seen any God besides you,” Isaiah pleads, “who works for those who wait” for the forces of hate and evil to be overthrown, the people to be restored, and the house of David to be revived. A righteous branch will emerge to execute justice, hope, and possibility for God’s people. Hold on to the promises of God, encourages the prophet, even though the circumstances are bleak and seem nearly impossible. We pray for the hope of Advent: that God will break into the ordinary, bringing the promise of peace, hope, and restored life.

At Advent, God’s people summon the courage and the spiritual strength to remember that the holy

## Exegetical Perspective

paradigmatic examples of God's "great favor" (63:11–14). Such events empowered a people and made for God "a glorious name" (v. 14b). But God's unmediated care was met by rebellion (63:10). God's turnaround is swift: God turns from "savior" to "enemy" vis-à-vis the people, and Israel feels abandoned. The preface to the lection in 63:7–19 acknowledges Israel's sin as sufficient warrant for God's absence, but at the same time refuses to excuse God from withholding compassion (63:15). The stage, then, is set for direct petition.

The lection follows a movement that progresses in fits and starts, specifically with two highly disjunctive sections ("but" in v. 5b and "yet" in v. 8a). It opens with direct appeal to God that recalls an earlier time of God's decisive action (64:1–3) and slides into a profession of faith, an assertion of God's incomparability and care (vv. 4–5a). But as in 63:10, the language abruptly turns toward confession of sin and acknowledgment of God's anger (64:5b–7). In verse 8, however, another faith assertion is made that highlights the relational intimacy between God and the people. The lection concludes as it began, namely, with urgent petition (v. 9).

Content-wise, the lection proceeds with a series of evocative images and bold assertions. Stronger than its parallel in 63:15, the opening verse in chapter 64 calls God to immediate and decisive action, expressed in poignant desperation ("O that . . ."). The petition is cast in the language of theophany, of God's earth-shattering, heaven-shredding presence (cf. Ps. 68:7–8; Hab. 3:3–15). Flaming brush and boiling water connote nature's travail before God's inbreaking presence (Isa. 64:2a). The quaking of the mountains has its parallel in the trembling of the nations (v. 2b). The community fondly recalls when God caused just that by committing actions without precedent ("unexpected") in behalf of a people in crisis (v. 3). God's mighty acts evince an incomparability that is no match theistically: no other god has ever been "seen" (v. 4a). All mighty acts are ascribed to the one God who "works" salvation for those who long ("wait") for God (v. 4b). A pervasive theme throughout Isaiah and the Psalms (e.g., Isa. 8:17; 30:18; 40:31; Ps. 37:7), "waiting for God" is no passive endeavor; it involves painful longing and bold allegiance, in short, a passionate patience. It is a tensive waiting charged with the pathos of lament and conjoined with the joy of remembrance and the anticipation of praise.

But an explosion erupts in the middle of verse 5. The message up to this point is one of mutual intimacy and care between God and Israel: God's

## Homiletical Perspective

However, Isaiah reminds God that the people are like clay that needs to be molded into the people God wants them to be. Isaiah calls upon God's long-term memory by reminding God that the people should be forgiven of their iniquities because they are all God's people.

The preacher needs to begin by connecting the longing of the people of Israel in Isaiah's time with the longing of the people in the pews today. The preacher will want to know under what conditions Isaiah makes his statements. Obviously, the people of Israel know a lot about waiting for God, but their confidence in God has all but disintegrated. The preacher will recognize that the situation of Israel is very similar to the people who sit in the pew waiting, wanting, and expecting to see the face of God.

A decision will need to be made about how to construct the sermon in the present-day situation without losing the historical biblical perspective. Are we active participants in Isaiah's message? Does the text need to be interpreted from God's perspective or Isaiah's perspective? Is the sermon to be told from an onlooker's perspective, with certain analogies to the birth of Jesus?

The fact is that we *are* onlookers and the Advent season opens us to the need for God to break into our lives. Advent affords us the opportunity to look at how God interacts with humankind from ages past to the present day. Unfortunately, many of us are onlookers from the perspective of the culture in which we live. Hence the sermon message must compete with the prominent and distracting cultural messages of Christmas. Opening the ears of those who cannot wait to shop for Christmas sales requires the preacher to stand alongside the message of Isaiah. Shaping the sermon as a shopper eavesdropping on a conversation Isaiah has with God may be one way to design the sermon.

Such a conversation is not without some assumptions about when and where Isaiah decides to share his concerns with God. The text very clearly illustrates Isaiah's concern for the people of Israel. The text also shares Isaiah's concerns for God and perhaps God's selective memory. Isaiah begins by reminding God of the history and the intimacy God had with the people. From time to time, God even surprised the people of Israel. Flipping through his notes, Isaiah recalls how the mountains used to quake at God's presence.

Isaiah probably takes God by surprise when he hints that it may be God's fault that the people have fallen deeper and deeper into sin and rebellion. His

## Isaiah 64:1-9

### Theological Perspective

powerful glory (a kind of Clark Kent/Superman act), but rather is a reflection of the divine character, a divine determination to relate to the world through the vulnerable path of noncoercive love and suffering service rather than through domination and force.

God's refusal to replicate a Red Sea-type deliverance does not mean that God has abandoned Israel (or the church). Our hope does not rely on God's acting today in the same ways God acted in the ancient stories, but it does rely on God's being the same God yesterday, today, and tomorrow—a God who hears our cries, a God who does not abandon us, a God who will finally redeem all that is lost in a new heaven and new earth (Isa. 65:17). The tradition of biblical lament does not invoke the past as nostalgia, nor does it dismiss the present in despair; rather, it draws on the collective memories of God's people as a source of hope for the future.

Here the images of God as father and potter are helpful. Isaiah refers to God as "father" twice (63:16) in the verses preceding this pericope and again in 64:8 as the lament shifts from confession to plea. In contrast to the hidden God, the image of God as father and potter suggests closeness and personal connection. Yet neither image suggests a God who "would tear open the heavens." Instead they evoke a God whose mode of action looks more like that of the artist or the parent than that of the superhero. God forms and shapes the people as a father over time shapes the character of his children, as a potter lovingly molds her clay. Isaiah calls on Israel to be malleable in the hands of God, and he reminds God to fulfill the task of forming Israel into a people of blessing.

In the season of Advent, Christians imaginatively enter a time of waiting for the Christ child, who comes as God hidden in human form, who comes not to inaugurate an apocalyptic cleansing but to reveal the power of the powerless in his self-giving on the cross. In so doing, he reveals the will of the Father who is eternally, patiently molding and shaping the clay of creation into the New Jerusalem.

SCOTT BADER-SAYE

### Pastoral Perspective

breaks into the daily. In tiny ways, we can open our broken hearts to the healing grace of God, who opens the way to peace. May that peace come upon us as a healing balm, as a mighty winter river, gushing and rushing through the valleys of our prideful fear and our own self-righteous indignation. As a friend has said, this is not a season for passive waiting and watching. It is a season of wailing and weeping, of opening up our lives and our souls with active anticipation and renewed hope. At the church I serve, we even fantasized about building a wailing wall close to the peace pole, a place where we can pray and weep for our broken world and then get up and continue the hope of God, made fresh and new again.

Last December, at the end of a beautiful Advent retreat, all who were there climbed up a hill to a small chapel at a place called Sky Farm. The chapel was dark and quiet and smelled of incense and old wood. We sang, "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." Each one of us was given a bright candle to carry in the darkened world, in order that we might burn brightly with the hope of the prophets and the courage of the gospel. The holy broke into the ordinary, flooding us with hope for peace and making our hearts strong again, so that we could move into the world with courage and compassion.

And so we do not lose heart; rather, we live with our hearts broken open so that compassion, caring, and God's reckless love can find a way into our hearts and the heart of the world. Make straight in our hearts a highway for the possibility of peace.

PATRICIA E. DE JONG

## Exegetical Perspective

grace has been met with Israel's trusting allegiance. But now the very integrity of that relationship is threatened by sin. Astonishingly, the lament claims that no one party is at fault. While fully acknowledging its sin and fragility (v. 6), the community charges that God too is implicated: "because you hid yourself we transgressed" (v. 5b; although this verse is reconstructed from textually corrupted Hebrew) and "for you have hidden your face" (v. 7b). Human sin is occasioned, indeed initiated, by divine absence! God cannot afford to wash God's hands of the "filth" that has beset the community. Such a claim, however, is meant not to excuse the community before God, but rather to motivate God to act in redemption. Indeed, punishment in this passage avoids making direct reference to God's punishing hand; rather, it is "the hand of our iniquity" that is fundamental. Punishment is spelled out as the *consequence* of iniquity. Iniquity carries its own power to dissemble and dissolve a community (vv. 6b, 7b). The translation of the Hebrew text of verse 7b is "and [you] have melted us into (or by) the hand of our iniquity." The community confesses a guilt so pervasive that even God is not immune, a guilt that has overtaken both Israel and its God.

But the clincher comes in the final section (vv. 8–9 [12]), which marks a return to the relationship of intimacy explicated in vv. 4–5, but now inscribed with images as poignant and evocative as those employed in the confession. These final verses establish the ties that bind God to God's people. God is "our Father," equated earlier with "our Redeemer from of old" (63:16). To claim God as paternal is to assert God's familial claim upon Israel and Israel's claim upon God, a kinship that necessitates continued recognition and care for Israel. Indeed, Israel was begotten by God in more ways than one. The community is also God's handiwork, pottery, no less, shaped by loving hands (cf. Jer. 18). God would not let a people slide into destruction any more than a father would sacrifice his son or a potter would destroy her prized bowl. The bottom line is that "we are all your people," whether God likes it or not, for the covenantal bond is indissoluble. God, thus, is bound to act.

WILLIAM P. BROWN

## Homiletical Perspective

statement appears to be the-chicken-or-the-egg question. Was it the people who caused God to get angry and hide from the people, or did the absence of God cause the people to do unrighteous things? Isaiah's final assertion is a metaphor that God is the potter and the people are the clay. Isaiah implores God to take responsibility for the clay and mold them into the people of God.

By telling the story, Isaiah seems to be reminding both God and the people of Israel about their history together. God is in charge of the world, and Isaiah does not want the people to forget about God's sovereignty. On the other hand, Isaiah does not want God to forget that the people of God need to be molded into whatever God wants them to be. Isaiah also recognizes that God can easily get angry at the people, but he pleads for God not to hold a grudge forever.

The season of Advent provides every preacher the same opportunity to be as forthright as Isaiah. The words of Isaiah remind us that God is and has been faithful. When the faith community recalls that God is present among them, then perhaps they will also see how God has molded them in the same way the potter molds the clay.

Yet recognizing God's presence may be a daily task, especially given the world in which we live. Like Isaiah, the preacher will need to remind the people when God has been visible in their midst. Waiting with hope that God will be visible once again is the call of Isaiah to God. Watching with eyes to see is the call of Isaiah to the people of faith. To hear the voice of Isaiah is to proclaim that Advent is more than a time to hear promises about God. Advent becomes a season of attentiveness to the presence of God already among us.

DONALD BOOZ

*Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19*

<sup>1</sup>Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
 you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
 You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
<sup>2</sup> before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
 Stir up your might,  
 and come to save us!

<sup>3</sup>Restore us, O God;  
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.

<sup>4</sup>O LORD God of hosts,  
 how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

<sup>5</sup>You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
 and given them tears to drink in full measure.

**Theological Perspective**

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps. 80:3). This is a psalm of deep yearning, and thus very appropriate for use in worship on the first Sunday of Advent. Much of the theological substance of this liturgical season is latent in this brief text, and can be brought to mind, pondered, and given voice through its use. As with so much of the Psalms, the language here resonates with relevant passages and themes throughout the Bible—in texts that were part of the psalmists’ own heritage and in texts that bear their influence. In this way, the “prayer book of the Bible,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalter, helps the Bible itself become the prayer book of the church. Two interrelated theological features may be of particular importance to our reading and interpretation of these verses now.

One of these features has to do with how the community of faith understands its most pressing need before God. A tension is evident in this psalm, as elsewhere in the Psalter, among various understandings of the source of our distress. Two options rise to prominence in this psalm. In one of these, the source of our troubles is “our enemies”: other people, who are out to get us. In our prayers, accordingly, we call on God to come and save us from them, or to make us victorious over them. God is invoked as our ally.

**Pastoral Perspective**

The people of Psalm 80 are in a world of hurt. They want God to know about it. “Give ear!” (v. 1). They hold God responsible for it. “You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves” (v. 6). Most of all, they want God to *do* something about it. “Stir up your might, and come to save us!” (v. 2).

This no-holds-barred psalm is an odd source for a pastoral word in Advent. It portrays God as unhearing, heartless, and downright hurtful. Unlike its counterpart in Psalm 23, this Shepherd of Israel did not walk with the people in the valley of the shadows or protect them with rod and staff. God did not prepare a table for them, but fed them with “the bread of tears.” In the presence of their enemies, they are the objects of ridicule. Their cup overflows with tears, not blessings.

What pastoral word, much less Advent hope, can be found in such a psalm? What is needed is a profound word, especially in this season. Psalm 80 gives voice to a people’s grief and anguish at God’s seeming absence. In so doing, it gives them power. As anyone who has experienced loss can affirm, grief both paralyzes and silences us. We feel “at a loss for words” or, in Paul’s description, left only with “sighs too deep for words.”

This psalm provides the words and, with them, a way out of the despair. Like other biblical laments, it

<sup>6</sup>You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.  
<sup>7</sup>Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved. . . .  
. . . . .  
<sup>17</sup>But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
<sup>18</sup>Then we will never turn back from you;  
give us life, and we will call on your name.  
<sup>19</sup>Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

**Exegetical Perspective**

Psalm 80 is a communal lament: a prayer for salvation in response to a catastrophe that has befallen the community. It is the sixth in a series of nine psalms of Asaph that open Book III (Pss. 73–89) of the Psalter. First Chronicles reports that Asaph was the chief among those Levites appointed by King David for “the singing of praises to the LORD” (16:7). The designation “of Asaph” thus indicates the tradition or style of psalm composition and performance begun by Asaph and continued by his descendants and students.

The mention of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and the half-tribes of Joseph and Benjamin suggests that the psalm refers to some catastrophe that befell the northern kingdom of Israel, perhaps even its utter destruction by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Refugees who survived the invasion by fleeing south into Judah might have composed it; the Jerusalem temple establishment would later have absorbed the psalm into its worship. Given the massiveness of the fall of the north in the history of God’s people, however, anyone who endured a similar catastrophe later could have recalled it as a way of giving voice to their own sorrow, so that a precise date or occasion for the psalm’s composition remains elusive.

The lectionary omits verses 8–16, an extended metaphor that succinctly retells the story of the

**Homiletical Perspective**

A fruitful area for the preacher to explore in this psalm is the tension between vv.1–2 and vv. 4–6. This tension is the gap between theology and experience. As the psalmist speaks for the people, he recognizes that what they believe and what is happening around them do not cohere.

The people believe at least two broad affirmations about God. God is strong and powerful, represented by God’s place “enthroned upon the cherubim.” This powerful God is not distant or uncaring, however. God is a Shepherd who takes special interest in and cares for the people. As with all good theology, this poem mixes its metaphors; God is ruler, shepherd, and vinedresser. All of these metaphors speak to God’s might and deep involvement with the people.

This belief and trust in God cannot—in the minds of the people and the psalmist who serves as their spokesperson—be reconciled with the crisis hanging over the community. The psalmist interprets the crisis not merely as the absence of God, but as God’s active punishment of the people. God is angry. God has fed them tears.

The implicit assumptions behind the psalm’s treatment of the divine/human relationship are refreshing and theologically helpful. In contrast to many other scriptural understandings of suffering, this psalm recognizes that suffering and trouble are a

# Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

## Theological Perspective

Contrasted with this is another understanding, in which the source of our troubles is—to put it briefly—God. What this means, and why this is the case, are other questions, and various other psalms explore various possibilities in this regard, but often—as in this instance—that question is left open. What is clear is that in this psalm the tension is decisively resolved in favor of this second understanding.

The tension between the two approaches is perhaps more evident in the complete psalm than in these selections, and may reflect something of the psalm's redaction history, but in any case there is no doubt as to its resolution. In this, our psalm displays a tendency characteristic of the biblical canon as a whole. Karl Barth put the point memorably in addressing a conference of preachers in 1922: "To suffer in the Bible means to suffer because of *God*; to sin, to sin against *God*; to doubt, to doubt of *God*; to perish, to perish at the hand of *God*."<sup>1</sup> This "monotheizing" dynamic in Scripture, as James Sanders has called it,<sup>2</sup> is evident in such lines as these: "You have fed [your people] with the bread of tears. . . . You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves" (Ps. 80:5–6). Whatever the more proximate facts of the situation may be, *God* is the ultimate problem with which (or with whom) we need to deal. The enemies (or neighbors; it is worth noting that the two words are in apposition in the parallel construction here) are, along with ourselves, to be seen in a more comprehensive context, and our prayers will take on a different character in consequence of this changed perspective.

The God-problem that becomes the main theme in this psalm might be more clearly identified as the lack of God, or the unavailability of God. But the self-examination or introspection that is a familiar element in many psalms makes no appearance in this one. There is no searching of the heart, no probing of reasons for God's anger or withdrawal or distance, no explicit acknowledgment of fault. There is simply sheer need for God: the pain of absence and the longing for God's presence.

The language in which this longing is expressed points to the second theological feature of particular interest in the season of Advent. It is a language of radiance. The initial "shine forth" (80:1) and the

<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 119.

<sup>2</sup>James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 56–60.

## Pastoral Perspective

breaks the silence and validates the reality of the people's suffering. With Job, it cries, "I will speak in the anguish of my spirit" (Job 7:11).

But in contrast to Job, the voice of Psalm 80 increases the power of its anguished words. First, its voice is *communal*. This is not one lone person lamenting his or her fate. It is a whole congregation of Jobs crying out. Its communal voice reminds speaker and listener alike they are not alone.

Second, it is a *bold* voice, not one of weak resignation. Other psalms (e.g., Pss. 5, 55, 84) ask God to "give ear to my sighs." But this "give ear" ends with an exclamation point! Moreover, the psalm contains no confession and hardly a note of repentance (v. 18's "then we will never turn back from" may allude to their having done so in the past). Instead the psalm lays the responsibility for the people's suffering solely at God's feet. "You have fed them with the bread of tears. . . . You make us the scorn of our neighbors" (vv. 5–6).

Its unrepentant tone could seem out of place at the start of Advent's penitential season. But Psalm 80 is an incredible confession, not of sin, but of faith. It confesses the people's trust in a God who is big enough to hear their hurt, strong enough to handle their anger and pain. It also identifies the congregation as a people who, even in their suffering, have the courage to call on the Lord God of hosts to help them.

Third, it is a *liturgical* voice. This bold psalm is to be used in worship. That liturgical context underscores the legitimacy of the lament. The people do not have to "clean up" their anguish or deny their disappointment in God, even in God's house. The psalm also demonstrates the pastoral power of corporate worship. *Together* the people proclaim what they have experienced, who they trust God to be, and the power of the covenant between God and them.

Fourth, it is a *prophetic* voice. This anguished voice from thousands of years ago can be heard in the voices of our time—the loved one with a diagnosis of MS, the worker whose job has been outsourced, the Katrina evacuee with no place to call home, the victim of senseless war in Iraq or senseless violence in our schools.

Finally, it is a *hopeful* voice. The psalm moves the community beyond disappointment with God to a call to God to act. "Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand"—be it the king or the whole people. That call to action is also expressed in the refrain of verses 3, 7, 19: "Restore us . . . let your face shine, that we may be saved." It reminds them of

## Exegetical Perspective

exodus from Egypt and the settlement into Canaan in terms of a vine that God transplanted. After the vine spread through the land, foreigners stole its fruit, boars ravaged it, and unnamed others cut it and burned it. Consistent with the rest of the lament, the psalmist asks why God has allowed this, calling upon God to look with compassion upon the vine and with wrath toward its destroyers.

If God is a vintner in verses 8–16, the rest of the psalm portrays God through the metaphor of the shepherd-king. The psalm begins by addressing God as the “Shepherd of Israel” who is “enthroned upon the cherubim,” a reference to the empty throne in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple. Verse 2 invokes the corresponding functions of king and shepherd: “Stir up your might, and come to save us!” The flock cries out to the shepherd for rescue. King David, the man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), was both a fearless warrior and a shepherd, and thus provides part of the earthly basis for the metaphor.

Verse 3 introduces a refrain that the psalm repeats in verses 7 and 19, but with each repetition adding a term to the divine name: verse 3 “God” (*’elohim*); verse 7 “God of hosts” (*’elohim tsebaot*); verse 19 “LORD God of hosts” (*yhwh ’elohim tsebaot*). The refrain grows from the generic appellation “God,” a term for deity with cognate forms throughout the Semitic languages, to the addition of the honorific “of hosts,” to the addition of the proper name unique to Israel’s God. Doubtless the expansion of the divine name would have been accompanied by a corresponding crescendo or musical figure with each repetition. The refrain encapsulates the purpose of the psalm, to implore God to restore God’s people.

The long form of the divine name reappears in verse 4, a question that introduces the psalmist’s complaint. The NRSV’s “angry” is an interpretation of a metaphor; the Hebrew asks how long God will “fume” against the prayers of the people. Certainly to “fume” frequently means to be furious, and to show it outwardly. One thinks of cartoon figures with smoke coming out of their ears. It is also possible, however, that the metaphor here conveys divine indifference. Isaiah 6:4 portrays the heavenly temple as filled with smoke. Perhaps our psalmist envisions the prayers of God’s people never quite penetrating through a thick haze of divine indifference to the suffering of God’s people. The psalmist calls for God to “shine forth” (v. 1), and to “let your face shine, that we may be saved” (vv. 3, 7, 19). This divine light, a symbol of transcendent

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mystery. At no point within the psalm does the poet assume that the people are suffering because of their sins. This is an especially instructive insight for the contemporary church. Although foolish and reckless behavior can lead to suffering, the church needs to hear that sin and suffering do not always line up in direct correlation. Far too often, trouble, illness, setbacks, depression, and a host of other manifestations of suffering carry guilt as part of the baggage. The terrorist attacks in September of 2001 prompted a number of reprehensible “interpretations” of God’s purposes within that event. The psalm is an outcry in response to sustained, community-wide, and confusing misery, originally the Assyrian assault on Samaria. Although contemporary preachers will stop short of blaming God for cruelty, they will give voice to the laments of the community without assuming that the suffering is a deserved punishment for wrongdoing.

In the tension between theology and experience, creative new understandings and growth can occur. The sensitive preacher will explore the specific ways that tension occurs in the congregation. A skillful sermon on this psalm will enable the congregation both to move beyond simplistic theological assertions and to deepen a sense of trust in God in spite of life’s pain that erupts unexpectedly and inexplicably. The preacher will want to reflect on how the congregation might express God’s power. How might one convey the sense of God’s majesty behind the phrase “enthroned upon the cherubim”? What image might work best in a particular congregation? How might the people in a local church understand God’s particular interest in them, as expressed in the poem by the metaphors of shepherd and vinedresser (which does not appear in the part of the psalm recommended by the lectionary committee)? In what ways do the members of the congregation experience God as absent, or even as oppressive? Would any member of the congregation dare to express an understanding of God as angry? The members of the congregation may not acknowledge having such sentiments. A careful exploration of this psalm, with its honest ventilation about God’s active participation in the suffering of the people, may help the congregation give voice to suppressed frustration at God. Permission to express anger at God can be liberating.

The psalm expects a concrete action from God. The psalmist pleads on behalf of the people for God to intervene in a specific situation. In the earliest form of the psalm, the poet wanted God to intervene



# Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

## Theological Perspective

repeated “let your face shine” (80:3, 7, 19) are particularly striking. They immediately evoke the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:24–26 (“the LORD make his face to shine upon you . . . the LORD lift up his countenance upon you”) and carry reminders of the divine radiance that figures so vividly in the Sinai stories—especially that of the transfiguration of the face of Moses by the glory of the Lord, in Exodus 34:29–35.

For Christian readers, the transfiguration accounts in the Synoptic Gospels also come readily to mind—and understandably so, given the close literary and theological connections between the Sinai narrative and the earliest accounts of Christ’s transfiguration.<sup>3</sup> The shining face the psalmist seeks is not simply a figure for divine favor; it is more fundamentally a theophany that is being sought, a manifestation of the divine reality that will restore the people to the life that they are meant for. God’s energizing radiance brings not only illumination or the assurance of favor, but life itself.

And where does that glory shine forth? Here too the connection with the transfiguration narratives can be a crucial key, just as those narratives themselves are a kind of key to what has been going on (and will continue to go on) in the events of Jesus’ life: the enfleshment or becoming human of God, and the restoration of humankind in God.

An important aspect of the transfiguration motif in the Orthodox tradition is its ascetical significance. That is to say, we are unprepared to see the light of God’s glory where it is being manifested: in the humility of Jesus. “Our hearts are conditioned by the society in which we live far more than by the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> The reconditioning of our hearts—painful as that process may be—is part of what we rightly pray for, when we pray this psalm in Advent. “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

CHARLES M. WOOD

## Pastoral Perspective

God’s past faithfulness, when God’s countenance did bless them, and it expresses their hope that God has the power to save them now.

As a book about a high school girl’s basketball team affirms, “hope is a muscle.” In Psalm 80, the congregation builds their muscle of hope and faith with three repetitions of “Restore, shine, save.” Each repetition expands the image of God’s power. The “O God” of v. 3 becomes “O God of hosts” (v. 7) and finally “O LORD God of hosts” (v. 19).

As often happens in times of loss, hope is mixed with longing for the past. “Restore us” comes from the Hebrew word *shub* (“turn again”), the word Orpah used to tell Ruth and Naomi to go back home. “Let your face shine,” recalls Moses’ encounter with God on Sinai and his brother Aaron’s blessing on the people (Num. 6:24–26). Longing for the “glory days” is not limited to the original community of Psalm 80. Especially at Christmas, our congregations are often filled with people with that same yearning for restoration of a life we once knew, be it the life of our families, relationships, churches, or even nation.

But while we may look back, God always looks ahead. For Christians, the psalm leads not to the past but to the future when God did “give ear.” Indeed, the Shepherd of Israel gave much more, namely God’s whole self. The Lord God of hosts left the throne of cherubim and joined the rest of us in Psalm 80’s congregation, who can also know what it is like to feel that God has forsaken you.

God answered the demand, “Let your face shine that we might be saved,” though not as anyone expected. Not in a return to the glory days of the past, but in the light of the Child born in Bethlehem, the light the darkness has never overcome.

TALITHA ARNOLD

<sup>3</sup>See John Anthony McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), chap. 1.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

## Exegetical Perspective

power throughout the religions of the ancient Near East, cuts through the smoke, whether of anger or indifference, restoring God's beneficent interest and unleashing power to save.

The complaint continues, conveying grief and suffering through the metaphor of food and drink consisting only of tears (v. 5). The "scorn" of verse 6 relies on a textual variant; rabbis Rozenberg and Zlotowitz translate the line, "You have sown strife with our neighbors."<sup>1</sup> This reading would point toward an attack by enemies, as opposed to a natural catastrophe. In any case, the psalmist sees God, not enemies or nature, as the cause of Israel's suffering. This is not a psalm of confession; the psalmist nowhere mentions the sins of the people. Rather, the psalmist cries out to God for restoration, rescue, and, in verse 16b, the punishment of Israel's enemies. (The first reading for this Sunday, Isa. 64:5–6, connects God's anger with the people's sin.)

After the metaphor of the vine (vv. 8–16), the psalmist calls for God to convey power to the earthly, or possibly messianic, king (v. 17), promises fidelity and faithfulness in return for the gift of life (v. 18), and drives home the request for salvation, invoking the long form of the divine name in the refrain (v. 19).

The metaphor of God as shepherd-king lays the foundation for the messianic expectation that Jesus invokes. Whereas Psalm 80 anticipates that God will act by conveying divine power upon the Davidic king, the one at God's right hand (v. 17), Jesus points toward the ultimate rescue, the consummation of history, "the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26). Jesus identifies himself with the shepherd in Mark 14:27, and in 14:62 Jesus declares to the council that he is the one "seated at the right hand of the Power."

PAUL D. BRASSEY

## Homiletical Perspective

in the Assyrian crisis. As the final form of the poem evolved, it was reworked in other situations, but usually with a specific outcome in mind. How can we speak of God acting in the individual and community crises of the contemporary congregation? How do we hope God will act? How might we tell if God's face is shining in our midst? Would the difference be in our circumstances or within us? Certainly we can hope and pray for God's intervention in specific situations. We can pray for the capacity to trust when situations do not change. That the psalm was written initially for one situation in Samaria and then reworked for subsequent situations indicates that God's intervention never settles the matter. New trouble, new suffering break out afresh. In lamentation the people and their leaders maintain a dialogue with God. That dialogue is always better than giving up on God.

The season of Advent is marked by anticipation, which presupposes a sense of longing. This psalm gives expression to the longing of an ancient people for God to act. The opening stanza calls for God to do four things: give ear, shine forth, stir up might, and save. The preacher can proclaim how God has done these things in the birth of Jesus, where God did not act in the way this psalmist would have expected. God did not end political and military oppression. God's might was expressed in the vulnerability of a baby who grew up to die at the hands of the oppressors. The first advent sustains us until the second advent, when God will establish the dominion in its fullness. The birth of Jesus the Christ shows God's response to this psalm. God has given ear, has shone forth, has stirred up might, and has brought salvation. God's answer to this psalm sustains us until God acts fully for salvation. We are freed from the assumption that all suffering represents punishment and anger from God. We can trust that God will continue to lead us as a shepherd and tend us as a vinedresser until the time when all of creation recognizes God as the one enthroned on the cherubim.

CHARLES L. AARON JR.

<sup>1</sup>Martin S. Rozenberg and Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), 499.

# 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup>just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

## Theological Perspective

This text points to one of the unique characteristics of the Christian religion: the intimate relationship between God and the Christian community that God bestows in and through Jesus Christ. Among the world religions, Christianity gives witness to an intimate relationship among God, creation, and, in particular, the Christian community. This relationship is contextual: in other words, it takes its life and its shape from the particular terms of people's cultures. Hence, Jesus is our brother, our Lord, our ancestor, our beloved one, our enlightened spirit. While modern and postmodern arguments focused on historical evidence and/or propositional statements continue to frame most theological discussions about the uniqueness of Christ, Christianity's uniqueness springs from an intimate relationship between God and God's followers *in and through* Jesus Christ.

Paul celebrates the grace of God given to the community through Jesus Christ (v. 4). *In* Jesus Christ, the Christian community "has been enriched" in all ways of being—"in speech and knowledge *of every kind*." *In* Jesus Christ the Christian community in Corinth lives the way of Jesus, living out the faith *en lo cotidiano* (in daily life) and, reciprocally, strengthening the testimony of Christ among the church. Paul provides us with a

## Pastoral Perspective

In this lection Paul offers words of blessing and thanksgiving as part of his initial greeting to the church in Corinth. First words and last words often are vested with particular significance, because the hearer tends to them with unusual care. So Paul chooses his words carefully.

After brief words of greeting (not included in this lection), Paul proceeds to bless the Corinthian congregation. He has some urgent matters to take up with them, but those can wait for a time. Instead, Paul begins by offering a gift of blessing. It is an offering that, in itself, reminds his readers of the bonds they share as pastor and people. A pastor, after all—or, in this case, before all—is one who offers blessings. Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* portrays the act of blessing as central to the pastoral vocation. At one point the narrator, Pastor John Ames, writes to his young son:

I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you, but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. It's a thing people expect of you.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 23.

## Exegetical Perspective

Our canonical 1 Corinthians is not Paul's first communication with the Corinthian churches, nor is it even his first letter to them. The interpreter does well to bear in mind that contemporary readers of 1 Corinthians eavesdrop not only on someone else's conversation but on a rather small part of it.

The greeting, "grace to you and peace" (1:3a), which occurs in virtually every Pauline epistle, comes not from the letter writers Paul and Sosthenes (1:1) but from "God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3b). The apostles write not on their own but on behalf of the one who has commissioned them. The letter also ends with a reminder of the grace of the Lord Jesus (16:23) as well as the apostle's own love for his addressees (16:24).

The letter's thanksgiving (1:4–9) telegraphs to readers at the outset the basic concerns of the writer. In this case, Paul's concerns are several related issues pertaining to the welfare of the house churches in Corinth: their charismatic giftedness (vv. 4, 7), their wealth—particularly but not only in terms of speech and knowledge (v. 5), the revelation of Christ in glory on the Day of the Lord (vv. 7, 8), and the faithfulness of the God who has called them (v. 9). Each of these subjects recurs throughout 1 Corinthians.

Paul thanks God first for the grace that has been given the Corinthians in Christ Jesus (1:4). This

## Homiletical Perspective

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul confronts a number of divisions and controversies in the church in Corinth. Here at the beginning of the letter, however, Paul does not even mention these conflicts. Instead, he gives thanks for the church. Even in speaking to a divided church for which he will later have some strong words, Paul is able to discern the gifts and the promise of the people.

In these opening words, Paul offers a helpful reminder for preachers who may be tempted to dwell on the challenges facing congregations and ignore the gifts that are already present and active in the church. Giving thanks for a congregation's gifts and promise provides one way to begin building up the community of faith, even in the midst of situations of conflict and division. Such words of thanksgiving may provide encouragement and vision for a congregation and possibly inspire them to begin living more fully into the realities for which the preacher gives thanks. Prophetic, challenging, critical preaching need not be thoroughly negative, but can take place in the context of thanksgiving and appreciation. Indeed, such words of thanksgiving may open congregations to hear more fully the words of challenge that also need to be spoken.

Paul's approach to thanksgiving, however, is carefully chosen. He does not simply celebrate the

# 1 Corinthians 1:3-9

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beautiful two-way movement. *In and through* Jesus we live like Jesus, so that our testimony is strengthened and our community's faithful are edified. *In and through* the grace of God in Jesus, we become partners in God's testimony in and for the world.

This gift of grace *in and through* Jesus Christ nurtures and prepares the community for its journey of faith. *In and through* Jesus Christ the intimate relationship between God and the Christian community generates life and perseverance, steadiness and testimony, so that we can wait for the complete revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 7). *In and through* Jesus Christ the faithful are equipped, "not lacking in any spiritual gift" (v. 7), to remain faithful until Jesus Christ is fully revealed. Living *in and through* Jesus Christ, the Christian community discovers and rediscovers the grace of God, over and over, fresh every time. *In and through* Jesus Christ, we are faithful witnesses of God's grace; and in our witness, which is Christ Jesus' witness, we rediscover an intimate and intentional relationship with God. Surprisingly, this is how we truly know who Jesus Christ is!

This two-way movement is part of a spiritual continuum. Unlike a tangent to a circle, the grace of God *in and through* Jesus Christ flows not only between God and the Christian community, but also in the Christian community's daily experience and history. The spiritual continuum constantly embodies "the testimony of Christ" that strengthens the community. It is this testimony of God's grace *in and through* Jesus Christ that "will also strengthen you to the end" (v. 8). The spiritual continuum is an eschatological vision and journey of the Christian community sustained throughout history by God's gift of grace. Again, "the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you" (v. 6); consequently, we also give testimony of Jesus Christ's grace and "may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul reasserts that the Christian community will be sustained in this spiritual continuum for one crucial reason: "God is faithful" (v. 9). Briefly shifting his emphasis from Jesus Christ to God, Paul reminds the faithful that by God "you were called *into the fellowship* of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 9). This fellowship is what makes Christianity interestingly different from other world religions. As indicated above, it is an intimate relationship between God and the Christian community that God bestows in and through Jesus Christ. The character of the fellowship is God's embodied and

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Offering a blessing may not be a uniquely pastoral act, but it is so associated with the pastoral vocation that it warrants keen attention, in worship and elsewhere. When we tend to the task of blessing, to first words and last words, a benediction becomes so much more than familiar words intoned by rote. Such a moment is laden with possibility. God's presence can become palpably present. Indeed, in that hope, worshipers often listen to such words with expectant attentiveness.

Although Paul begins most of his letters with a blessing that includes the words "grace and peace," in the context of the Corinthian community, this greeting is anything but generic, because "grace and peace" are just the qualities that this particular congregation most needs and most lacks. In this one short sentence of blessing, Paul reveals that he knows them well. Blessings gain in power as they gain in specificity.

Paul then goes on to offer thanks for the ways God has graced the congregation with every spiritual gift. Those familiar with the rest of the letter know that shortly Paul will take them to task for the ways they have misrepresented the gospel in their teachings, in the ways they have ordered their lives, and, most particularly, in the ways they have created a fractious community. So are Paul's words of thanksgiving mere flattery? Is he trying to get the Corinthians to let their guard down, so that he can really let them have it? Or could he be indulging in a bit of sarcasm, as some commentators have suggested?

On the contrary, this is an instance when Paul shows his pastoral wisdom. He knows that he has difficult issues to take up with the Corinthians, so he chooses to begin by reminding them of the basis of their being together in the first place—because they are called by Jesus Christ and enlivened by the presence of Holy Spirit. He sets their sights on higher places so that they might begin to stop wallowing in the petty particulars of their present circumstances. Paul is reminding them of the very height and depth and breadth of their call, as a wise and experienced pastor finds frequent occasion to do.

When Paul says elsewhere, "Give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18), he is commending thanksgiving as a spiritual practice. Practices help us to live out truths that we may have a hard time affirming at the moment: we are told to pray because sometimes God seems distant; we are told to forgive because our usual impulse is toward revenge; we are

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grace is what creates the church and marks it as God's own, the grace that empowers Paul's ministry (3:10; 15:10), with which he thankfully eats whatever food God provides without being hampered by religious scruples (10:30), that marks God's victory over sin and death (15:57), and that evokes the Gentile churches' gift to the Jewish Christians in need (16:3). This grace is most particularly the source of the "grace gifts," the charismata (wisdom, ecstatic speech, prophecy, healing, and so on), that both enliven and threaten to divide the Corinthian fellowship (12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31).

Paul's gratitude for the church's spiritual wealth (1:5) sounds a bit ironic, if not disingenuous, when we read the rest of the letter. Although the Corinthian Christians may not lack any spiritual gift, they act as though they were themselves responsible, as if spirituality were a human endowment rather than a divine empowerment. "What do you have that you did not receive?" he asks at 4:7. The church's wisdom and knowledge, although great, are clearly insufficient when believers choose to settle their differences before non-Christian judges rather than among themselves (6:1–9). The Corinthians' conflict at the Lord's Table stems from conventional cultural attitudes toward unequal wealth: Paul says their practice of eating and drinking without regard for each other "show[s] contempt for the church of God and humiliate[s] those who have nothing" (11:22). Most significantly, he laments their poverty in regard to the greatest spiritual gift, love (chap. 13). Paul sees the church's giftedness not only in the proliferation of its charismatic gifts, but also in its knowledge (1:5), a subject to which he returns when he discusses the conflict over idol meat. Although "all of us possess knowledge" about the reality of God and the unreality of idols (8:1), that knowledge does not prevent members of the church from injuring one another, something only love can prevent (8:1–13).

Twice in the same sentence Paul points to the return of the risen Lord in glory: "you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:7–8). This too sounds ironic in view of the fact that a good number of the Corinthians appear not to be waiting for much of anything. Their spiritual giftedness suggests to some of them that they already reside with Christ in glory. Paul says they are "puffed up" with pride or "arrogant" about their religious status and independence from one another (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4). They think that in their baptisms they have already been raised with Christ and no longer face

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human efforts of the community. In fact, he does just the opposite. Everything for which Paul gives thanks is a gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. His opening word of greeting in this text sets the tone: "grace" (v. 3). And his opening words of thanksgiving flesh out this greeting: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus" (v. 4). Paul's thanksgiving leaves no room for human boasting, which, in fact, is part of the problem in the Corinthian community. His very thanksgiving begins to shift the focus of the church away from human standards and accomplishments that can create divisions to the grace of God that is the source of the community's "peace"—the second key word in Paul's greeting (v. 3).

Paul's understanding of grace in these few verses is worth careful consideration by preachers. Preachers often speak of grace primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of forgiveness. And, of course, that is an important dimension of grace. Here, however, grace is a dynamic power or energy within the people that bears fruit among them; grace moves with a power and activity similar to that of the Spirit. The grace of Jesus Christ enriches the community in speech and knowledge; it strengthens the testimony of Christ among them; it overflows in spiritual gifts; it enables the people to wait for the coming of Christ and to be strengthened to stand blameless on the day Christ comes. The grace of Jesus Christ encompasses the entirety of the community's life—past, present, and future—not simply as the forgiveness of sins, but as the power for faithful living.

Paul proclaims grace as an empowering force for discipleship. Grace and works are not somehow opposed to each other, but are integrally related. There is no "cheap grace" here; grace, by its very nature, bears fruit in faithful works. Rather than setting grace and works over against each other, Paul's words invite preachers to explore the deep relationship between the grace of Jesus Christ and the faithful discipleship of the church. Such an approach to grace might be exciting to congregations today, who ache not simply to be forgiven, but to be empowered for the adventure of discipleship.

Paul's emphasis on grace also serves a deep, social purpose in the context of the letter. Paul not only greets and gives thanks for the church, but he sets forth the theological grounds that will shape his response to the divisions and controversies in Corinth. Because grace is the source of the

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active faithfulness *and* our own struggle to live and give witness to God's grace *in and through* Jesus Christ. This fellowship is, hence, an incarnational experience of God's grace *in and through* Jesus Christ and the Christian community's spiritual continuum.

The Christian religion is experiencing one of the most dramatic demographic transformations in its history. As the old centers of the faith shift from the Euro/Atlantic context to the Southern Hemisphere—Africa, Asia, and Latin America—one crucial question is, “Who is Jesus Christ?” While many see Jesus Christ as a static mediator between God and human beings, Paul's description of God calling us “into the fellowship of his Son” opens possibilities for a fully embodied and culturally relevant intimate relationship between God and the Christian community that God bestows *in and through* Jesus Christ.

Fellowships are always shaped by culture. Ways of relating to the Divine, to other human beings, and to the natural world change with time and geography. For example, among many African Christians, Jesus Christ, as a protoancestor, honors God's calling to Africans into the fellowship of his Son. Ancestors nurture daily life and bring fullness to the community. Ancestors and community are in a reciprocal relationship. Therefore, when referring to Jesus Christ as a protoancestor, many African Christians discover a *new orientation* in their spiritual continuum: *in and through* Jesus Christ their faith is enriched, their testimony is strengthened, spiritual gifts are given for true testimony, and they live in fellowship with the Son of God—our protoancestor. Moreover, as they give testimony—*in and through* Jesus Christ—they rediscover their protoancestor. As a result, their African worldview is renewed by the discovery of Jesus Christ as an ancestor, and their Christian faith is renewed. They rediscover a new way of understanding what it means to be *in* Jesus Christ and to be, by God's faithfulness, pulled into the fellowship of his Son.

The two-way movement of God's grace *in and through* Jesus Christ for the community and the community's witness *in and through* Jesus Christ need not be seen as a menace to our monotheistic faith. In the fellowship of the Son, given to us by our faithful God, we continuously rediscover an intimate relationship that is contextual and dynamic.

CARLOS F. CARDOZA-ORLANDI

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told to confess our sins because we are practiced at seeing ourselves as innocent. And we are told to give thanks because sometimes it is hard to see reasons for thankfulness. When Paul received word about what was going on in the Corinthian congregation, his first impulse would not likely be thankfulness. Nevertheless, in such a circumstance the practice of thanksgiving is no less important; it is just more difficult.

When Paul speaks of the giftedness of the congregation, he is not attempting to induce guilt in them for having squandered what has been given to them. Rather, he is referring them back to the basis of their hope. Paul offers thanks for the Corinthians because the promises of God have not been abandoned. Even in the midst of the fickle Corinthians, God's faithfulness abides. So Paul's tone here is one of confidence.

The placement of this lection at the beginning of Advent is a reminder of the real setting of the anticipated birth—not in some pure and glittering place, but in the grit of Bethlehem. A liturgy in keeping with this lection will remind the congregation that that is just the sort of unlikely place where God is always showing up—in Bethlehem, of all places, and in other messy and unpromising places, such as the church.

This passage also affirms the eschatological hope, which reminds us that we are living between advents. At such a time, it is most appropriate that the liturgy be a celebration of God's steadfast promises.

The first Sunday of Advent often corresponds with the weekend when Americans celebrate the national holiday of Thanksgiving. This passage invites us to offer thanks to God, not for material gifts, but for spiritual gifts found in the church. A litany of thanksgiving appropriate to this passage will shift a congregation's focus to the kind of giftedness Paul celebrates. It might also serve as a reminder that the gathered body, the body of Christ, is itself intended to be a feast of abundance laid out for the sake of the world.

MARTIN B. COPENHAVER

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death or judgment (chap. 15). They presume that their redemptions are complete and that they live in the private safety zone of the spiritually perfect. In response, Paul repeatedly reminds them of the unfinished character of redemption and the imminence of God's judgment (2:9; 3:13; 4:5; 5:5). Paul's discussion of resurrection in chapter 15 underscores the church's present life in the shadow of Jesus' cross as prelude to its resurrection on the Day of the Lord. The futurity of resurrection and the reality of death make right ethical relations essential in the church. The body is not irrelevant to spirituality, nor is it to be suppressed, so neither libertinism nor asceticism (both present among the Corinthians) is the proper response to the gospel.

The faithfulness—or trustworthiness—of God's call (1:9) surfaces repeatedly in 1 Corinthians. Rather than opposing "faith" to "works of the law," Paul uses the concept to talk about loyalty, both God's loyalty to the church and the church's loyalty to God in Christ. The character of Christian life as initiated and preserved by God, rather than by human beings, is a persistent theme in this letter. Even the believer's confession of faith is God's doing: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (12:3). By the same token, the Christian's loyalty to Christ in an idolatrous and seductive world is unavoidably part of the Christian's loyalty to the brothers and sisters for whom Christ died (8:11).

The contrast between Paul's thanksgiving to God and the realities of the Corinthians' life together is thus more than ironic. There is a theological conviction at the heart of the apostle's gratitude: Paul trusts God to complete in the church what God has initiated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The church is not what it will be. The concrete reality of the Spirit's presence and the electricity of the church's experience of the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God provide assurance that they are indeed the body of Christ. The factionalism, competition, and privatism that mark the church disobey, but cannot destroy what God will accomplish in them.

E. ELIZABETH JOHNSON

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Corinthians' gifts, boasting is prohibited. The grace of Jesus Christ, which is the source of the community's faith and life, undercuts all divisions in the community based on human accomplishments or status. Grace here has radical social implications; it is not simply a word spoken to individuals or a power at work in individuals. Grace creates a new kind of community—one in which the divisions and hierarchies of the world no longer function because the grace of Jesus Christ, not human accomplishment or status, is the source of the community's life. There is no room here for superior and inferior, because all gifts have the same source and are consequently equally valued. Even in his opening thanksgiving, Paul invites the Corinthian church—and the contemporary church—to become an odd, new people in the context of a culture divided between superior and inferior, honored and shamed, insider and outsider. The grace of Jesus Christ is the source of that new kind of community.

In his opening words, then, Paul not only greets and gives thanks for the church in Corinth, but he prepares to address the conflicts and divisions in the community. Most importantly, he does all of this at the *theological* level. His thanksgiving is thoroughly theological, emphasizing the grace of Jesus Christ. Similarly, in the rest of the letter he will address the divisions in the church at the theological level—also focusing on the grace of Jesus Christ.

Paul's approach is critical for preachers. The conflicts and divisions in the church will not fundamentally be addressed by conflict management classes or outside consultants or therapeutic interventions, as valuable as these may be. Rather, these divisions and conflicts will be addressed most significantly when preachers proclaim the deep, underlying *theological* affirmations that empower the church for life together as an odd people in the midst of a divided world.

CHARLES L. CAMPBELL



*Mark 13:24-37*

<sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,

<sup>25</sup>and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

<sup>26</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup>Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

<sup>28</sup>“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

<sup>30</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>31</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

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Does this text predict the future? If so, whose future? When? I shall argue, first, that Mark 13 anticipates multiple futures. Second, it reflects a common apocalyptic scenario about how God works. Third, the apocalyptic visions that present this scenario are recycled for new contexts; as such, they are comments on present circumstances more than predictions of future events. All this means that, fourth, we must understand how our context today may be similar to ancient contexts, so we may discern how to be faithful people of God in our time.

From the standpoint of the historical Jesus, “the Son of Man coming in clouds” (v. 26) sounds like the resurrection. Indeed, Christian theology sees the resurrection as a definitive, eschatological event. And this makes sense of 14:62, where Jesus offers the same saying to the high priest, who is looking for an excuse to have him put to death.

From the standpoint of Mark’s original readers around 70 CE, much of this speech sounds like commentary on the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem. After Jesus’ prediction that the temple would be destroyed (13:2), the speech responds to the question, “When?” (13:4). The Jewish revolt is the most plausible historical context for Jesus’ warning to flee (13:14) and his woes to women who are pregnant or nursing “in

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Most congregations do not need to be told to “keep awake” during Advent. They are already operating in a state of sleep deprivation. At a church in the western suburbs of Chicago, nobody could accuse us of being asleep at the wheel. Rather, we might be accused of scurrying and overscheduling, running but getting nowhere, like bourgeois bunnies on the rabbit wheel. As Advent begins, the fall season has swept us through the “back to school season” of taking children to sports practices, choir rehearsals, and dance lessons. The church has aped the rhythm of the world, with programs now in full gear, from youth groups to adult studies and festive events. And now, suddenly, the rush of Advent.

With all there is to get ready for the holidays, secularly and sacredly, nobody needs to tell us to “keep awake.” As a pastor, it strikes me this may instead be the season to pass out the sleeping pills or the chamomile tea, to a revved-up, overcaffeinated culture of busy-ness.

But let us be clear that while the world’s busy-ness may seem to be pointed toward Christmas, it is seldom pointed toward the coming Christ child. As Advent progresses, the number of shopping days left before the big day offers a countdown that stresses us out and keeps us up late. These days we are startled into extra hours of wakefulness in a

<sup>32</sup>“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup>Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup>It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. <sup>35</sup>Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, <sup>36</sup>or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. <sup>37</sup>And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

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*Watching and Waiting.* “It is the end of the world as we know it” is not simply the stuff of twentieth-century rock song lyrics or twenty-first-century televangelist sermons. Ideas inherent in both apocalypticism and eschatology can be found in today’s gospel lesson.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of apocalypticism grows out of difficult political and social crises; thus, it is no surprise that an apocalyptic mind-set is reflected in the writings of the postexilic era of Israel. As the Judeans grapple first with Babylonian, then Persian, Greek, and Roman oppressors, the covenant theology of the prophetic era gives way to an apocalyptic worldview, as writings such as 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and Daniel attest.

Scholars debate the origins of the worldview or mind-set known as apocalypticism; they also debate the constitutive elements of the literary genre known as an apocalypse; however, it is generally agreed that both include elements of dualism (good versus evil); pessimism (times are extremely tough); and imminence (so tough, in fact, that the world as we know it is about to end).<sup>2</sup> This final tenet,

<sup>1</sup>Eschatology as a technical term was not coined until the nineteenth century, but apocalyptic thinking is often filled with talk of the end times.

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent analysis of apocalypticism in antiquity, see David Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983).

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On the first Sunday of Advent, as the church begins its telling of the Christian story once again, this lection turns our attention to last things. The passage, which is a portion of what is often called “the little apocalypse,” puts us in the presence of the adult Jesus offering both prophetic judgment and prophetic comfort. He anticipates the end times when heaven will literally quake and stars will begin to fall out of the sky. What sounds like a disaster, however, actually prepares the way for the “Son of Man” and his gathering of the elect. Advent eventually takes us to a babe in a manger, but it begins by traversing the cosmos. Those who assigned the lectionary texts for Advent seem to have been following the advice of epic movie director Cecil B. De Mille: “Start with an earthquake, then build to a climax.” Certainly, from the very first word, there can be no doubt that there is much at stake in this season, and in the very beginning of the story we are given a glimpse of its ending.

It can seem strange, at first, to begin our anticipation of the birth of Jesus by being exhorted to wait for his coming again. After all, this talk of Jesus’ return seems out of sequence because, in the context of the liturgical year, we are still awaiting his birth. In one important respect, however, it is entirely fitting, because it places us squarely with

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those days” (13:17). And the calamitous events of 70 CE account for Jesus’ statement that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place” (30).

From our standpoint today, however, 70 CE hardly qualifies as the end, no matter how traumatic that year was at the time. We might notice, therefore, that Jesus predicts not one but multiple wars and calamities (13:7–8). Also, the Son of Man “will gather his elect . . . from the ends of the earth” (13:27). This sounds like preparation for the judgment. Further, verse 32 (“about that day or hour no one knows”) seems to rule out a date in 70 CE. And again, Jesus urges, “What I say to you I say to all” (13:37), indicating that his words apply beyond his immediate circle of disciples to Mark’s readers, even to us.

So the predictions in this speech seem ambiguous, applicable to multiple circumstances. How, then, do we make sense of them? We must notice that the “Son of Man coming in clouds” (13:26) is from Daniel 7:13, and the “desolating sacrilege” (13:14) is from Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11 (cf. 1 Macc. 1:54; 2 Macc. 6:1–6). Mark instructs us to pay attention to Daniel (“let the reader understand,” v. 14). What we have in Mark 13 is a basic apocalyptic scenario lifted from Daniel and applied to new situations. The basic message of apocalyptic visions is this: The rebellion against the reign of God is strong, as the wicked oppress the righteous. Things will get worse before they get better. But hang on just a little longer, because just when you are sure you cannot endure, God will intervene to turn the world right side up.

In Mark 13, things are bad, and they will get worse. The “end is still to come” (v. 7); this is “the beginning of the birth pangs” (v. 8); “suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation” (v. 19). It will feel like the cosmos is falling apart (vv. 24–25). But before things become unbearable God will “cut short those days” (v. 20).

In 167 BCE, the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes banned all foreign religions. For Jews, that meant no circumcision and no sacrifices. It was illegal even to own a copy of Torah. In the context of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus, the author of Daniel reached back into Jewish lore and recovered stories of the slave Daniel, who kept his faith in a pagan land even under threat of death. The book of Daniel exploits an analogy between the Babylonian oppression of Jews in the sixth century BCE and the Seleucid oppression of Jews in the

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liturgical season that annoyingly presumes we might be asleep. No wonder we tune it out, like teenagers hearing a parent’s repetitive lecture and knowing that mom simply does not understand.

But of course, God does understand. In this way, the Scripture from long ago reads us, not the other way around. In Advent, we are indeed asleep to much of what matters.

Like people who have lived by the train tracks for years, we no longer hear the sound of the train. After years in church, we get used to the noise of Advent, to the coming of Christ, so much so that we no longer notice it. Or if we do, it has ceased to jolt us awake and has become instead a low, dull rumble.

As children, when we first learned of Advent, we anxiously awaited the Christmas pageant, and even the God it pointed to. But now tired parents might see that pageant as one more activity to drive the kids to, in a busy week. New members who have been away from sacramental life return to the season of Advent with delight and wonder as the purple banners and Advent wreath appear. But after a few years, these signs of the season become mere decoration.

Like the house hunter who noticed the train tracks on moving day, but later sleeps through the whistles and the engines that rush by, we can miss the thing in the season of Advent that might have been most obvious and important at one time—the coming of Christ.

We may not be physically asleep; quite the opposite. But in our wakefulness to worldly ways, we fall asleep to the spiritual season, and so we need a wake-up call from the Gospel of Mark.

It is a strange wake-up call for people who no longer hold fig trees as key metaphors in our cultural life. When we do encounter figs, they tend to be mashed inside that moist little comfort food cookie, or we might have a fig alongside a piece of fine cheese.

But as for the fig trees themselves, I do not see any on the carefully mowed lawns outside Chicago. If we do mow our lawns, rake our leaves, it is as a chore, often for appearance’s sake. We do not normally find ourselves considering the branches of the fig tree and how they produce or do not produce fruit. Fruit production happens at the grocery store, when we take the food from shelf, to bag, to car trunk, to pantry; and then suddenly, on our granite countertops, fruit has been “produced.”

Yet most of us long for a richer sense of how fruit comes into the world, with its rhythms of leaves and

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imminence, is related to the concept of eschatology, the doctrine of the end times. Apocalyptic reflections often address the imminence of judgment and the hope of better times ahead.

Today's Gospel lesson is from a chapter often referred to as "the little apocalypse." The material in Mark 13 is a narrative break in the Gospel, set between Mark's recounting of Jesus' teaching on the temple mount (Mark 12) and the passion narrative (Mark 14–16). In the opening verses of chapter 13, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and then, crossing over to the Mount of Olives, he begins to talk with Peter, James, John, and Andrew about the end of the age. Mark 13:5b–23 comprises a series of warnings regarding false indicators of the end. Jesus admonishes his disciples to watch and wait, for the end will come and they must be alert. The Gospel reading for this first Sunday in Advent is the second half of this chapter, and easily divides into three sections: Mark 13:24–27; Mark 13:28–31; and Mark 13:32–36.

**Cosmic Signs.** In the first section, the author shifts the readers' attention from false prophets and deceptive omens to the actual signs of the times. With apocalyptic imagery borrowed from Isaiah (13:10; 34:4); Joel (2:10; 3:4; 4:15); Ezekiel (32:7, 8); and Daniel (7:13), the evangelist employs a common trope of disturbances in the cosmic order to herald a significant event. It is not unusual in apocalyptic writing to call on cosmic imagery to describe the indescribable; in this instance it is the coming of the Son of Man that is spotlighted. Just as Isaiah, Joel, and Ezekiel use cosmic imagery to predict divine judgment, and just as Daniel writes of the coming Son of Man, here the evangelist creates a synthesis of images and allusions from the biblical tradition for the readers/hearers of the first century.

**Lesson from the Fig Tree.** An earlier story of the fig tree (Mark 11:20–22) focused on the destruction of the temple; Mark 13:28–31 is a short parable about a fig tree with the focus not on an end but on a beginning, offering hope in the imminence of the coming of the Son of Man. Just as the fig tree is the harbinger of summer, so will the signs Jesus is describing portend the coming of the Son of Man. One difficulty in this section lies in the statement in Mark 13:30, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (reminiscent of Jesus' words in Mark 9:1). Although some of the events were realized by the first century, not all were. It is not unlikely that the qualifications offered in

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those who awaited the birth of the Messiah. Neither those who awaited the first coming of the Messiah, nor those who now await his return, know when he will appear.

In other respects, our contemporary anticipation of the coming of God's Promised One at Christmas is quite different from the experience of those who awaited the Messiah. After all, we know whom we are waiting for. We know the day he will arrive. It is circled in red on our calendars. We have Advent calendars and Advent candles to help us count down to the promised day.

By contrast, of course, those who lived before the birth of Jesus did not know the day or the hour of his arrival, so they needed to live in a continual state of watchfulness. The birth of the Messiah could only be celebrated as a surprise party that could take place on any day, at any moment. By anticipating the return of the Son of Man here, at the beginning of Advent, we wait in the same way those who lived before Jesus was born waited, not knowing the day or the hour when the Messiah would appear. We also join them in hearing—and needing—the same exhortation to be watchful and to keep awake.

A preacher might approach this text by considering the differences between waiting for Christmas and waiting for Christ. Obviously, we know when Christmas will arrive and what it will be like when it does. We know the script, and all we need do is follow it. But waiting for Christ to come—or to come again—requires something more, an expectant watchfulness, because we never know when he will appear.

This requires from us a different kind of waiting. Some waiting is passive. But there is also active waiting. A girl who stands on a street corner waiting for the bus to arrive will experience one kind of waiting, a passive waiting. That same girl on the same corner hearing the sound of a parade that is just out of sight will also wait, but it will be a different kind of waiting, full of expectation, a waiting on tiptoe, an active waiting.

A fisherman finds it burdensome to wait for spring to arrive because it is a passive waiting. Once he is fishing, however, he does not find it a burden to wait for the trout to rise to his fly because it is an active kind of waiting, full of expectation. At the pool of his favorite trout stream his waiting is filled with accomplishing all the many things he must do, all injected with an active sense of anticipation because he never knows when the trout may appear. That is the kind of active waiting Jesus had in mind

## Mark 13:24-37

### Theological Perspective

second century BCE. So also Mark exploits analogies between the Seleucid oppression and the Roman oppression of God's people in the first century.

Apocalyptic visions are always available to be recycled and applied to new situations. The point is not to predict specific events in the future. Rather, apocalyptic theologians look to understand God's mighty acts in the past as a framework for understanding how the people of God should respond to the present. It turns out that the enemy is not any one empire; but all political and economic powers are liable to be co-opted by Satan.<sup>1</sup> They seek their own, worldly agendas at the expense of ordinary people.

The theologian must find analogies between the present and past circumstances in which God acted decisively, as recorded in Scripture. From an apocalyptic perspective, we might ask, How does Satan try to influence every situation? How does God remain faithful in the midst of a crisis that is spiraling out of control? How can people of God tell the difference between following Satan and following God in any situation?

Amid the smoke of battle, the fog of politics, the confusion of economic distress, the babble of would-be leaders wearing God masks and claiming divine authority, how shall we know which way to turn? God's people should not be surprised or confused, because Jesus warned us ahead of time that such things would happen.

The powers that be will lull us to sleep by reassuring us that they have our best interests at heart as they pursue their worldly agendas. They play to our fears, our prejudices, our self-interests, so we do not notice their demonic behaviors. Beware. Keep alert. Keep awake (vv. 33, 35). The one who endures to the end will be saved (v. 13).

CHRISTOPHER R. HUTSON

### Pastoral Perspective

seasons. So whether we walk in orchards or drive around the suburbs, the image of the fig tree transports us to another world. There we imagine people who tend branches, not for the fun of it or to decorate a garden that decorates a house. We imagine a place where fruit trees are tended to because they make a difference in our survival. We imagine a time when figs were a regular part of the diet and helped fill stomachs that might have been left empty, if someone had not faithfully tended those branches.

In a season that is gearing us up to shop, we consider what it would mean to stay away and engage the natural world, rather than the world of neon malls and sales. This life is precious and unpredictable. Its seasons are short. Let us not have it slip away, only to realize that we spent it shopping.

On the first Sunday of Advent, there is still time to wake up from that bad dream. There is still time to encounter instead the presence of Christ in our waking hours.

An agricultural, natural image pulls no punches. The seasons pass, and the fig tree's growth follows an order, but that fig tree is fragile itself. Some figs will not make it; they simply will not flourish. Staying awake matters, not so much to protect ourselves, but also to notice the beauty in the moment. By staying awake, we may catch the second when the branch is tender, and learn that summer is near. By staying awake, we may be there to see the master who arrives when we are least expecting it, at midnight, at cockcrow, or at dawn.

Amidst the holiday parties and late-night shopping trips, the gospel reminds us to be awake to God in the world. This is a way of being awake that might actually be restful, and give us peace.

LILLIAN DANIEL

<sup>1</sup>"Satan" is a metaphor for the negative (fallen) form of what Walter Wink calls "the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power" (*Naming the Powers* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984], 104). For thoughtful analysis of how to confront fallen powers, see Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

## Exegetical Perspective

verse 31 come from the Markan era as the community grappled with the delay of the coming.

*Parabolic Warning.* The closing parable of chapter 13, the story of a man on a journey, seems to serve several purposes in the narrative. Just as Mark 13:31 seems to reflect the evangelist's attempt to deal with the delay of the Parousia, so too does Mark 13:32 call the hearer to think beyond the moment because "about that day or hour no one knows." The lessons here admonish the hearer to be more concerned with being prepared and alert than with knowing the day or hour.

In addition to offering a window onto the audience of Mark's Gospel and their concern over the delay of the second coming, the parable in this final section of chapter 13 also serves a proleptic function in the narrative. Note, for example, how in verse 35 Jesus warns his listeners to "keep awake," because the time of the return of the master is unknown; it could be "in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn." Here in the close of this narrative break is a foreshadowing of significant elements in the passion narrative to follow.

*A Word for Today.* The Gospel reading for today fits well with the other readings (Isa. 64:1–9; Ps. 80:1–7, 17–19; and 1 Cor. 1:3–9) for this first Sunday of Advent. They all carry the theme of waiting. In this Advent season we must watch and wait! As we move through the season, as we move closer to the coming of the Christ child, the admonition to be alert once again cries out across time and space. With the people of the texts we cry out this Advent season, "Where are you, God? When are you coming? Come now." Jesus reminds us now, as he reminded them then, that he will come again. We need not get lost in the details. Better to concentrate on being ready.

JUDY YATES SIKER

## Homiletical Perspective

when he enjoined his followers, "Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13:33).

It is clear that Jesus does not intend for us to predict when he will return. Rather, he is urging us to live as if his return were just around the corner. So there is no time to nod off in a waiting room. Rather, we are to be more like a waiter who is continually busy in serving others and so has no time to sit down and count the tips.

At the same time, we are to be attuned to the signs of his rule around us, because, indeed, he has already arrived. It would be a mistake to preach so persuasively about awaiting Christ's return that listeners might forget, for a moment at least, that he came in the first place.

This text forces the preacher to wade into one of the most important paradoxes of the gospel: the "already/not yet" quality to the portion of the divine drama in which we live. *Already* Jesus has established the means through which we are drawn into relationship with God, but *not yet* do we live in complete communion with God. *Already* the realm of God is evident, but *not yet* is that realm fully established.

In this portion of Mark's Gospel Jesus addresses those who have to live in the meantime, the challenging meantime between the "already" and the "not yet." By keeping alert and awake, by living our lives in accord with the One who has already come, died, and been raised, not only will we be prepared to live in the promised realm of God when it comes, but we may experience even now some of what life in the realm will be like.

MARTIN B. COPENHAVER