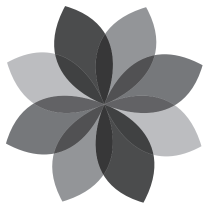
Year A, Volume 2

Lent through Pentecost



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship

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Introducing Connections

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JENNIFER L. LORD
Connections Editorial Board Member

Connections

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58:1–12
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21
Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

Isaiah 58:1–12

[1]Shout out, do not hold back!
    Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
    to the house of Jacob their sins.
[2]Yet day after day they seek me
    and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
    and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
    they delight to draw near to God.
[3]"Why do we fast, but you do not see?
    Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
    and oppress all your workers.
[4]Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
    and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
    will not make your voice heard on high.
[5]Is such the fast that I choose,
    a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
    and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
    a day acceptable to the LORD?

[6]Is not this the fast that I choose:
    to loose the bonds of injustice,
    to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
    and to break every yoke?
[7]Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
    and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
    and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
[8]Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
    and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
    the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
[9]Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
    you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
  the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
[10]if you offer your food to the hungry
  and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
  and your gloom be like the noonday.
[11]The LORD will guide you continually,
  and satisfy your needs in parched places,
  and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
  like a spring of water,
  whose waters never fail.
[12]Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
  you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
  the restorer of streets to live in.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Isaiah 58:1–12 resides in the section of the book to which scholars typically refer as Third Isaiah (chaps. 56–66). The events of the entire book of Isaiah span three centuries. In Third Isaiah, the tone and style of poetry shifts from the longer poetic reflections on restoration in Second Isaiah to shorter oracles of judgment that are loosely tied together. The oracles in Third Isaiah reflect a time after the exile but before a full realization of the restoration Second Isaiah (chaps. 40–55) promised. Isaiah 58 seems to fit this time period well, especially with its reference in verse 12 to the rebuilding of ancient ruins, streets, and walls. Perhaps this text reflects the tumultuous time of reconstruction, between 536 BCE and 520 BCE in the Persian period, when certain projects such as the temple rebuilding had commenced, but faltered. It probably predated rebuilding projects such as those by Nehemiah. There are, however, no precise historical markers in this passage to suggest a specific date during the reign of a particular Persian emperor or Judean official.

In 58:1–12, the prophet suggests that the current state of economic and national malaise is due to the people's disregard for the poorest in society. The prophet utters an oracle against public displays of piety that ignore the plight of those suffering economic injustice, though the prophet seems to suggest that the people are earnestly seeking to know God's ways and have a personal encounter with their God. Verse 3 suggests that God's apparent absence befuddles them. God refuses to bless them in their current circumstances despite their intention of piety.

The prophet directly answers this inquiry with an indictment. Even though the people have performed a ritual fast (and made a show of it), they still go about daily business practices that take advantage of the working poor. Verse 4 suggests that the pursuit of piety is a competitive one: "Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist." The following verse suggests a scene in which those participating in the fast are comparing their misery almost as if they are asking whose belly is growling the loudest or whose demeanor is the most sullen. God, however, disregards such pompous piety.

The prophet does not simply call out the wickedness of false piety, but outlines actionable items the community can perform in order to rectify the communal order, thereby repairing their relationship with God. God does not call the people to fast, but to feed. Instead of taking a few days intentionally to make themselves hungry, the prophet instructs the people to feed those who are legitimately and perpetually hungry.

Give Pleasure to Your Lord

Above everything else, choose for yourself humility. Set an example and foundation by means of all your good words. Bend down as you worship, let your speech be lowly, so that you may be loved by both God and other men and women.

Allow the Spirit of God to dwell within you; then in his love he will come and make a habitation with you; he will reside in you and live in you. If your heart is pure you will see him and he will sow in you the good seed of reflection upon his actions and wonder at his majesty. This will happen if you take the trouble to weed out from your soul the undergrowth of desires, along with the thorns and tares of bad habits.

Have a love for penitence, then; put your neck under its yoke. Give pleasure to your Lord by changing from bad actions to good. Be reconciled readily, while there is still time, while you still have authority over your soul.

Evagrius, "Admonition on Prayer," in Sebastian Brock, ed. and trans., *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 68–69.

Instead of calling the people to bind themselves with cords of self-ablation, the prophet calls them to loose the cords of the oppressed, setting them free. Instead of bowing themselves low under the yoke of a self-imposed sense of depravity, the prophet suggests that they break the yoke of the heavily burdened labor class.

As if anticipating the challenge that such lofty goals are impossible to realize in the face of systemic injustice, the prophet gives even more direct and specific instructions in verse 7: share bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, and pay attention to everyone in the community. The practices that create a socially and economically just society are the fast that God desires. These actions will garner the positive attention of God once more, and the inclusion of the poor in restored Israel's social vision will hasten the rebuilding process for the entire community (Isa. 58:12).

Isaiah 58 itself may seem to stand in tension with the other lectionary texts from the Hebrew Bible on Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 and Psalm 51:1–17. Joel 2:12 calls the people to fast in response to the terrible coming of the Day of YHWH. Joel 2:14 suggests that such a fast, coupled with weeping and lament (Joel 2:12), might persuade God to relent and restore. Isaiah 58, however, reminds the people that the inward piety of Joel 2:12 ("return to me with all your heart") must also manifest itself in outward expression. It is almost as if the people asking why their fast did not work in Isaiah 58:3 recalled a sentiment similar to Joel 2:12–17. God, through the prophet, condemns their self-interested piety.

The literary context of the superscription of Psalm 51 attributes the psalm to David after Nathan confronted him regarding his adultery and murder. One might imagine those who fast in Isaiah 58 reciting this psalm during their pretense of self-deprecation. We might ask, Does the prophet in Isaiah 58 agree with the psalmist on what an acceptable sacrifice is (in Ps. 51:17, a broken or contrite spirit)? Would a broken and contrite spirit inherently lead one toward breaking the bonds of injustice?

The understanding that true piety must always include economic justice stands in continuity with the greater Isaiah tradition and previous prophets, particularly Amos and Micah, who also decry the practice of false piety divorced from an ethic that maintains justice for the poor. Amos, for example, indicts the Jerusalem elites for oppressing the poor and flaunting said oppression in the context of worship as they recline on garments taken in pledge and drink wine bought with fines they imposed on the poor in God's house (Amos 2:8; cf. Exod. 22:26–27).

The familiar passage in Micah 6 asks what type of sacrifice would appease God. Instead of burnt offerings, thousands of rams, or even human sacrifice, God demands justice, kindness, and modesty (Mic. 6:7–8). None of these texts suggest that there is anything inherently wrong or otherwise displeasing about fasting or sacrifice. Rather, these texts, particularly Micah, demand an inward attitude of humility, coupled

with the outward practices of economic justice and opportunity for all within the community.

The New Testament lectionary passages also reflect Isaiah 58's concern that social ethics must accompany religious ritual. Second Corinthians 5:20 reflects the goal of the fasts in Isaiah 58 and Joel 2 with its emphasis on reconciliation with God. The passage calls on the community to be ambassadors of God's righteousness (2 Cor. 5:20–21), while warning them not to accept God's grace in vain (6:1). The claim in 6:10 that "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" also connects to the prophet's admonishment to attend to the social needs of the oppressed (Isa. 58:6–7).

Of course, Jesus' condemnation of brash public piety in Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21 has strong connections to Isaiah 58's understanding of fasting. Both texts suggest that empty piety displeases God. Matthew 6 assumes economic assistance to the poor is a standard practice (Matt. 6:3–4), reflecting the prophet's concern to feed, shelter, and clothe the needy (Isa. 58:7). Matthew's condemnation of storing wealth can also be an expression of Isaiah 58's admonitions to use wealth to help those whom society leaves behind, a sentiment that is also pivotal in one of Jesus' most famous teachings (Matt. 25:31–40) to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the incarcerated. As Ash Wednesday ushers in some of the most prominent rituals of the Christian tradition, Isaiah 58 reminds us that true piety involves loving all our neighbors publicly by creating a just and equitable society.

DAVID G. GARBER JR.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Ash Wednesday. It has always struck me as peculiar that on Ash Wednesday the lectionary suggests a text in which God seems to spurn the wearing of ashes (Isa. 58:5). The very practices of penitence that characterize the season of Lent appear at first glance to be rejected. Should we not impose ashes to mark the beginning of Lent? Is the prophet calling to the twenty-first-century-CE church from his sixth-century-BCE vantage point to tell it to be less liturgical? No. This prophecy is concerned not about correcting worship practices but, rather, about fostering a holistic spiritual life, wherein social justice is itself a spiritual practice, a means of encountering God.

The people long to encounter God—the text does not question their sincerity on this point—and so formally abstain from certain physical needs in order to draw God's attention. Like Christian observances of Ash Wednesday, where the imposition of ashes and exhortation to "remember you are dust" remind worshipers of their own inevitable deaths, fasting in postexilic Israel also evoked mortality. Sackcloth and ashes (v. 5) suggested the burial shroud and earthen grave.[1] By contrast, the prophet describes the elements of God's desired fast with images that portray the everyday corporeal needs of life: food, shelter, clothing, and human companionship (v. 7). Even the word translated in the NRSV as "kin" is *basar*, most literally "flesh," emphasizing the physical body: "not to hide yourself from your *flesh*." While the addressees of Isaiah 58 humble themselves in ways that mimic death, they neglect to lift up the needy toward a flourishing life. God remains distant.

My grandfather, a United Methodist pastor, used to remind me that "death is a part of life." Read in the liturgical context of Ash Wednesday, Isaiah 58:1–12 emphasizes a similar sense of the ways in which life and death are intertwined. Moreover, the prophet tells us "life" itself is not divided into compartments; God desires no separation between our physical, spiritual, and moral lives. One's behavior in the workplace is as relevant to worship as one's behavior in the sanctuary.

Preachers might catalog the rituals that define many of our daily activities—banter with the

1. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66*, Anchor Bible 19B (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 183.

barista who sells our morning coffee, shared exasperation with a coworker about the weather, bedtime routines with children—in order to show how even the most banal parts of our lives have a liturgical flavor. In every encounter with our neighbors, we encounter God; our neglect of the neighbor impedes the encounter with God.

Spirituality and Wealth. Relationship with the neighbor has a specifically economic resonance in Isaiah 58. The petitioners addressed in the text seem to be people of some wealth; they have power over laborers (v. 3), and they have houses, bread, and clothes to share (v. 7). Isaiah 58:6 is thick with the vocabulary of "fetters" and "yokes," painting a clear picture of their fellow human beings in slavery—physical entrapment and forced labor. Ending this captivity is the "fast" God chooses, and implied throughout the poem is the fact that the Israelites being addressed have some power to do that.

The passage begins with a strident tone: God calls for the people to be condemned loudly, exposing their piety as hypocrisy.[2] This brash beginning crescendoes through the series of rhetorical questions in verses 5–7. Then, at verses 8–12, the tone begins to level off, revealing that the passage is not built on sheer condemnation but, rather, also finds its roots in God's pastoral care for the powerful Israelites whom the prophet is addressing. God is ready to answer their calls of distress (v. 9), offer them strength (v. 11), and provide restoration in the midst of devastation (v. 12).

In congregations where worshipers possess significant socioeconomic advantages, this text, like much of the prophetic corpus, calls for individuals with power to act with justice. Be they business owners or policymakers, CEOs or middle managers, people who have authority over employees and who hold significant wealth can be found in the pews of Christian churches across the world. Pastors who minister to power brokers have a sacred obligation to keep God's desire for economic justice at the forefront of their consciousness. At the same time, those pastors also know that feelings of loss, divine abandonment, and spiritual longing can be acute for any person, regardless of social status. Isaiah 58 addresses this dynamic well.

Far from portraying a strict dichotomy between the privileged and the oppressed, the Isaiah text acknowledges that *all* people long for God, even as the ways in which they seek access to God may differ. The poem draws attention to the petitioners' need for God's healing and vindication (v. 8) as they experience "parched places" (v. 11) and "ruins" (v. 12). Their worldly economic power does not eliminate their need for a restorative power beyond themselves, both as individuals and as a people. At the same time, the prophet does not claim that sincere spiritual need replaces the obligation to pursue social justice; instead, enacting social justice is itself a salve for the weary power broker's soul and a manifestation of a deep spiritual connection with the Divine.

The text's direct address to the economically advantaged does not preclude its proclamation to other communities. For individuals more likely to identify with the oppressed workers than the wealthy managers, this passage is a reminder that God values their physical and economic flourishing as much as their spiritual well-being. Moreover, the text can also draw attention to questions of systemic injustice: the ways that all people participate in the oppression of others, often unwittingly and unwillingly. Do we wear clothes sewn in dangerous, ultralow-wage factories? Do we use mobile phones containing "conflict minerals," mined in ways that perpetuate war and exploit civilians? Do we acquire consumer goods whose production erodes the environment, affecting the poor first?

These kinds of systemic ills have no easy solutions, and we cannot always extricate ourselves from our culpability in them. Nevertheless, Isaiah 58 calls us all to identify where we may have some agency to "loose the bonds of injustice" (v. 6) and "satisfy the needs of the afflicted" (v. 10), and to

2. Literature and film provide a bounty of examples of hypocritical characters, including ones with public religious or political personas subverted by criminality or immorality. Think of the titular character in Sinclair Lewis's novel *Elmer Gantry*, Robert Duvall's character Sonny in the 1997 film *The Apostle*, the warden in *The Shawshank Redemption*, or Frank Underwood in the Netflix television series *House of Cards*. While some of these characters only feign piety, Isaiah's addressees seem sincerely to desire a relationship with God.

understand that justice work is an integral part of our religious lives or, rather, simply part of our *lives* overall, whole and unsegmented.

Finally, this text can be a call to faith communities to examine whether their corporate lives balance care for worship practices with a robust sense of external mission. Measured by the prophetic words of Isaiah 58, a congregation's spiritual vitality does not lie solely, or even predominantly, in its liturgies, its pipe organs and praise bands, or the particulars of its Ash Wednesday service. A church encounters God when it pairs its worship with an active, justice-seeking love for the neighbor. Isaiah 58 ultimately reminds us—in ways that both convict and assure—that God cares about the totality of our lives. Pursuing freedom and justice for the oppressed amplifies our prayers before the God we seek.

CAMERON B. R. HOWARD

Psalm 51:1–17

[1]Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
[2]Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

[3]For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
[4]Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
[5]Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

[6]You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
[7]Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
[8]Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
[9]Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

[10]Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
[11]Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
[12]Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

[13]Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
[14]Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

[15]O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
[16]For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
[17]The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 51 represents the very soul of Lent. While the other lections for the day reflect concepts related to Lent, the psalm eloquently crystalizes the meaning and the feeling, the purpose and the path, of Ash Wednesday and the season it initiates. As such, it may present an opportunity to build the day's proclamation, or even the entire service, around the psalm.

One possibility is to remind the congregation that psalms are prayers and then share a congregational reading of the entire seventeen-verse text (this will be easier if it is printed in easily readable type in the bulletin or projected onto a screen). With everyone now familiarized with the text, pray it again as a body, proceeding through it in sections, each section followed by a brief meditation.

We may divide the text in various ways, while still remaining sensitive to its overall flow. One example: treat verses 1–6 as a unit of prayer, then verses 7–11 as a unit, and then verses 12–17 as a unit. Begin each of these short readings with, "Let us pray," and follow each unit with a reflection on that particular segment of the psalmist's prayer. Such an immersive exploration of Psalm 51 will produce a distinctive homily that is a Scripture-drenched experience of Lenten prayer. Such a prayerful experience is ideal preparation for ashes on the forehead and the Lenten journey ahead.

If, however, your context does not permit so adventuresome an approach, the psalm is still a helpful companion. This is the quintessential psalm of penitence, which means that it relates directly to both of today's other Hebrew Bible texts, each of which urges repentance.

Today's reading from Joel describes a catastrophic plague of insects, which the writer interprets as divine punishment and judgment: "the day of the Lord" (Joel 2:1). After quoting YHWH as inviting the people to repent and return (v. 12), the author adds an endorsement of God's merciful and loving nature, and suggests that it may not be too late for the people's salvation (vv. 13–14). He goes on to describe an extensive communal act of repentance that must be orchestrated among all the faithful, from infants to elders, newlyweds to priests (vv. 15–17).

A sermon might juxtapose this public expression of penitence with Psalm 51's private, personal expression. In its mood, the Joel passage feels almost frantic with noise and activity, while the psalm is intense, intimate, and inwardly focused. In its theology, the Joel passage enumerates human actions aimed at changing God's mind, while the psalm is all about God's actions to transform the penitent. Exploring that theological difference would be fruitful for an Ash Wednesday sermon. Although Joel clings to a hope that God might relent (v. 14), the psalmist begins by claiming God's grace (Ps. 51:1), which is the foundation upon which our faith is built. A sermon might also examine shared vocabulary, notably "steadfast love" (Joel 2:13; Ps. 51:1) and "return" (Joel 2:12, 13; Ps. 51:13), or shared concepts, including "mercy" (Joel 2:13; Ps. 51:1) and "heart" (Joel 2:12, 13; Ps. 51:6, 10).

Today's lection from the book of Isaiah is another glimpse into the reality of communal guilt and how that can—and must—be amended. A sermon about the hypocrisy condemned by this passage (Isa. 58:1–5) would be a potent way to launch Lenten disciplines. And the focus in Psalm 51 on fervent reliance on God's grace and transformative power offers a strong remedy that you can invite your congregation to ponder as the means by which they can be made people whose "light shall break forth like the dawn" (v. 8), people who are continually guided by the Lord (v. 11), people who "shall be called the repairer of the breach" (v. 12).

Psalm 51 is unmatched as a prayer of confession. The Hebrew Bible's full array of terminology for sin is present, translated as "transgression(s)/transgressor(s)," "iniquity(ies)," "sin(s)/sinner(s)," "evil," and "guilty" (vv. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 13). If the entire reading seems too long for your service, consider omitting verses 5–8, or build a responsive confession in which one reader names specific sins to which the congregation repeatedly responds by praying the psalm's first verse.

For millennia, Psalm 51's beauty and power has been a liturgical resource. It is, therefore, easy

to find it set to music. In addition to those direct settings of the text, hymns that complement this psalm include "Amazing Grace," "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy," "God of Compassion, in Mercy Befriend Us," and, with its deeply faithful yearning for God's transformative companionship, "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me."

Ash Wednesday is the door that leads into Lent. Psalm 51 is not only the key to that door; it is also a map of the journey we will walk with Jesus from here to the cross and onward to the empty tomb.

LEIGH CAMPBELL-TAYLOR

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

5:20b We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6:1 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. 2 For he says,

"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! 3 We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, 7 truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

On Ash Wednesday, we stand at a characteristic tension of the Christian life. As we receive ashes as visible, tangible reminders of our mortality, we also confess the hope of the resurrection. We will die, yes, but Jesus has already lifted us up from the clutches of death. One day, yes, our breath will still, but Jesus walks before us through that death and into everlasting life. Yes, we are divided now, but God has promised the gift of reconciliation.

Our passage helps cast a vision of the shape of reconciliation, but also of the paths upon which such reconciliation is experienced and tested. The verses immediately preceding our text help contextualize our passage. Second Corinthians 5 explores the tension of earthly lives infused with the resurrection power of Jesus and the "eternal" (2 Cor. 5:1), heavenly existence that awaits us. That tension, however, ought not to hamper our confidence in God's deliverance of our communities, according to Paul. Such confidence inspires his continued ministry in the midst of many challenges and travails, "for the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (vv. 14–15). This storytelling echoes the Adam and Christ typology Paul evokes in Romans 5:12–21. That is, Paul's confidence is rooted not in his own power, but in what God has already done for all of us. Here Paul is telling a story not just about himself but about the whole of humanity. After all, "all have died," and "one died for all" (2 Cor. 5:14–15). Jesus' death and our death along with him means a radical shift in our perspective. We see Christ in a new light, for he indeed has made us a "new creation" (vv. 16–17). This is how "reconciliation" has been effected. This is how God has drawn us to God's embrace and toward one another.

Thus our passage begins with the admonition to "be reconciled to God" (v. 20). This is

not so much exhortation as recognition, not a command to be as much as a call to see and experience whom God has made us to be. Live as if you have already been reconciled to God by God! It is in this way that we "become the righteousness of God" (v. 21). Note here that the term translated "righteousness" (Gk. *dikaiosynē*) could also be translated as "justice."[1]

What would it mean for us to imagine ourselves as the "justice of God," as embodiments of God's setting right of the world? Righteousness might suggest to some a religious correctness that does not encompass such justice for all. Such justice, however, is at the center of God's reconciling activity with, through, and among us. After all, what shape would reconciliation take if not for the presence and power of God's justice? As Lois Malcolm notes, "Being reconciled to God is not an escape to some transcendent sphere (an easy ticket to heaven) but a call to serve in God's reconciling work (2 Corinthians 5:18)."[2] Reconciliation comes at a heavy cost, as Paul will outline soon.

The next chapter starts with stirring admonition. God's promises to listen, to intervene, to save are trustworthy; for this reason, "we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain" (6:1). God's grace is trustworthy and true. It is also timely. As Paul seems to cry out, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation" (v. 2). This prophetic promise is fulfilled before us, experienced right here and right now. Before we assume that such salvation is an easy path, Paul reminds the Corinthian followers of Jesus of the vibrant tensions he has experienced in his ministry. In a litany of marked contrasts, Paul notes that the day of salvation has included all kinds of turmoil for him (v. 5). In the midst of such travails, Paul names the values that keep his eyes on God's righteousness and grace (vv. 6–7), including a reference to weapons that I find particularly provocative in a US context so frequently interlaced with gun violence.

Paul wields "the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left" (v. 7; Eph. 6:10–17). Once again, the tensions of faithfulness emerge. These metaphorical "weapons" have nothing to do with retribution or bitterness or fear of neighbor or violence against the other. These weapons do not kill; they proclaim God's abundant life. These weapons do not pave a path to grief and loss; they reconcile erstwhile enemies. These weapons do not tear apart communities; they draw them back together.

Yet, even as Paul subverts the power of weaponry by turning this image upside down, does he not also create the possibility that some might understand that these are not "weapons" in any significant sense? Worse yet, might not the appeal to the language and imagery of weapons already limit our ability to proclaim the gospel because we are participating under the terms such metaphors have set for us? Can we ever escape the use and purpose of weapons, even as we draw upon this image metaphorically and subversively? Perhaps even metaphorical "weapons" cannot be stripped of their intended use and purpose. Isaiah's call to "beat . . . swords into plowshares" (Isa. 2:4) may apply to our words and metaphors as much as it does to metallic arms.

Paul closes with particularly striking contradictions. An impostor yet true. A stranger yet known by all. Dead yet alive. Afflicted but breathing. Grieving yet joyful. Poor yet having it all. These tensions are characteristic of Paul's ministry. Resolving them would oversimplify the gospel. Choosing one or another of a binary pair would leave us poorer still.

A sermon might invite a community to name the living tensions that characterize them, to claim the ways they are living here and in between, and to embrace an interstitial reality. For instance, we might name how our hopes for racial reconciliation are both a sure promise God has made and also a distant reality in so many of our communities; even as we hope for freedom from racism, we remain embedded within cultures and systems that continue to feed us the lie of white supremacy.

Just as important may be to return to the very notion of reconciliation, a notion running

1. Cf. Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American Perspective*, trans. Sharon H. Ringe (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991).
2. Lois Malcolm, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10," n.p. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3571.

through our text. For many, reconciliation is a compelling theological idea pointing to a resetting of relationships among human and God. Reconciliation shimmers with the hope that those things that divide us may one day fade, but in other communities, reconciliation may sound a bit hollow. In communities that have expressed historic oppressions, the "re" in reconciliation makes us wonder when we were all conciliated in the first place!

Reconciliation is not a return to a unified past, after all, but a transformation of relationships in the future. Such transformation cannot come about without repair, without the setting right of injustice.[3] Reconciliation is not just mutual forgiveness but a mutual commitment to God's justice. Reconciliation does not erase a dark history; true reconciliation wonders how such a history can be told well, reconstructed honestly, and its effects repaired justly.

ERIC D. BARRETO

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

One of the first rules a researcher working with data learns is the crucial distinction between correlation and causation. The fact that two patterns seem to have something to do with each other does not mean that one causes the other. Many a mistaken finding has resulted from a researcher claiming causation when that which was binding two patterns was more complicated than what first met the eye.

At the beginning of the season of Lent, as faithful people commit to aligning their lives more attentively with God's will, the distinctions between correlation and causation become important to the believer's relationship with God. We do not give up for Lent that which is repelling us from God because we think we can get God to love us more; we do not embrace new spiritual disciplines to cause God to approve of us over our less-observant neighbor. Yet giving up that which is not life-giving does cause us to feel closer to God, and taking up new faith practices can be deeply satisfying. What does the apostle Paul have to say about the connections—or lack thereof—between the *actions* of the faithful and God's *unconditional* love?

Second Corinthians 5:20b–6:10 opens with a stark contrast, and then the paradoxes just keep on coming. The passage, appointed for Ash Wednesday, opens with the sinlessness of Jesus and the sinfulness of humanity. Jesus takes on our sin in order to bury it, and then to rise again. Paul next moves into what sounds like a locker-room pep talk at halftime for a team that is losing, enumerating the adversities the church has overcome. This series of what New Testament scholar Wayne A. Meeks calls "antithetic clauses,"[4] followed by paradoxes regarding the suffering and success of the church, speaks volumes about Paul's understanding of God's grace. That understanding surely had as much to do with Paul's life experiences and culture as it did with his faith.

Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is known among Pauline scholars as the one most impervious to interpretation. Gathered together from a set of fragments, the boastful and confident tone suggests that Paul was seeking to distinguish himself among competing Christian missionaries. We do not know who the rivals were, but the passion in Paul's tone might suggest that tensions were running high due to fear of losing the battle. Perhaps Paul was concerned that the church was losing faith in his leadership.

Grace is the gift of God's love. It can be neither earned nor lost based on human behavior. Why is it, then, that Paul goes to such great lengths to describe the good that has come from the hard work and suffering of the church? Why does he suggest that those in Christ not "accept the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor. 6:1b)? One possible explanation is that Paul and his

3. See Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).
4. Wayne A. Meeks, ed., *HarperCollins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version ed. (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 2172.

listeners were speaking to those shaped in a culture of highly choreographed gift giving.

In his article entitled "The Expectation of Grace: Paul on Benefaction and the Corinthians' Ingratitude," B. J. Oropeza suggests that it would have been inconceivable for recipients of a gift in Paul's time to accept that gift without a strong sense of obligation toward reciprocity.[5] Believers in Corinth would surely understand concepts of giving and receiving gifts much more readily than they would grasp the idea of unconditional love. Oropeza suggests that the culture of reciprocity, with its attendant taboo against failing to respond to one gift with another, played a shaping role in Paul's theology of grace. Paul seizes on the church's impulses to give back, teaching them that the appropriate response to God's grace is a deeper faith and a stronger church. Today, social graces call upon us to be good hosts and good guests, and to say "please" and "thank you." Because these conventions are still widely held, helping a community to understand the passage within the context of reciprocity is both possible and useful.

Preaching about the potential benefits of Christian self-sacrifice presents nettlesome liturgical and ecclesiastical challenges. From an ecclesiastical perspective, many in our pews are suffering already for reasons that have nothing to do with Lent. Telling them that they need to suffer even more can be alienating in the extreme. Yet the connection—correlative, not causative—between self-sacrificial suffering and a deepening of a person's faith is unmistakable.

The social and ethical dimensions of this text provide fertile soil for preachers who appreciate paradox. I once had a colleague teach me a valuable lesson about ministering to youth and young adults: *adversity builds community*. I have chanted those words to myself like a mantra during many a difficult ministry moment—not to mention family reunions, and marriage and parenting in general. Adversity calls upon us to trust God more deeply and to get over our illusions of control. Yet it is hard to imagine a God who loves us wanting us to present our suffering as an offering. God's grace understood as anything other than a gift that cannot be reciprocated in kind is simply not grace.

In my education of seminary students, I have worked closely with clergy mentors. One of the lessons I teach regarding appropriate professional boundaries is this: amid unequal power relationships we can find mutuality, even when we cannot find reciprocity. The mentor might find great satisfaction in her work with a student. The student might find tremendous learning in the mentoring relationship. When the giver and the receiver do not stand on equal footing, reciprocity is not expected or appropriate; but mutuality, where both receive something good, is what makes a relationship worthwhile.

When preaching on this appointed text on Ash Wednesday, we must avoid the temptation to point to the suffering of the early church as a way in which those churches were somehow inherently better than ours. We must also defuse any interpretation suggesting that human suffering, in the form of grief or pain or depression, is somehow pleasing to God. We can, however, name the fact that, from the very beginning, Christians saw a connection between their striving for what is good and the depth of their faith. Sometimes that striving came at a high cost, but it was worth it.

The human knowledge and personal resources this text provides come in the form of encouragement to live abundantly, even amid adversity, in response to God's gift of love. The sacrifices we make during Lent indeed can bring us closer to God, but they should be understood as a response to God's grace, not as what earns it. Reciprocity is not the name of the game, as we do not have God's power to give without counting the cost. However, mutuality is possible; in fact, a response of striving to be more and more faithful might be exactly the appropriate gift we can give to God. Suffering for Christ and depth of faith: yes, there is a correlation. No, there is no simple causation. At least not one we can, through this mirror dimly, understand.

SARAH BIRMINGHAM DRUMMOND

5. B. J. Oropeza, "The Expectation of Grace: Paul on Benefaction and the Corinthians' Ingratitude (2 Corinthians 6:1), " *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 2 (2014): 207-226.

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

[1]"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

[2]"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. [3]But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, [4]so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

[5]"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. [6]But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. . . .

[16]"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. [17]But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, [18]so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

[19]"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; [20]but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. [21]For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, the beginning of Eastertide. Today, we begin to prepare for the Great Feast. We fast. We receive ashes. We are reminded that we will, all of us, sooner rather than later, die: "From ashes, you were made; to ashes, you will return." We are marked as walking dead. We are marked as dust of stars. We set our face as flint toward Jerusalem. We commit ourselves to confront empire. We follow Jesus on the way of sorrows. All this on this one day in the annual journey that helps us, all of us, little by little, year by year, decade by decade, to walk nearer and nearer to the path Jesus walked.

Then, just then, we read: "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others" (Matt. 6:17–18a). If this is a day—and a season—of imitating Christ, of getting back on track, it seems rather odd, does it not, that we do not actually listen to what Jesus, rather plainly, is saying.[1] In the midst of this collection of teachings that the author of the Gospel we call "Matthew" has gathered into a rather disjointed sermon, Jesus counsels the crowd about religious practices: "Give alms, but do so in secret. Pray, but do not make a show of it. Fast, but do not look pained as you do. Wash your face!" The preacher should not run away from this clash of lectionary, festival, and contemporary circumstance. Often the homiletical key emerges in the struggle to hold such tensions. What might we say at the intersection of Jesus' words and our imposing ashes and our sending of the people out as witnesses?

1. For historical roots of this disjuncture, see Thomas J. Talley, *Worship: Reforming Tradition* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1990), 61–64. For a constructive critique of Lenten lectionary selections, see J. Frank Henderson, "The Lectionary for Ash Wednesday and the Sundays of Lent: Critique and Alternative Vision," at www.jfrankhenderson.com/pdf/lentstudy.pdf.

Our reading falls at the midpoint of Jesus' rather choppy Sermon on the Mount, his first extended teaching in this Gospel. In chapters 1 to 4 (and we read from chap. 4 in the upcoming Sunday, Lent 1), Jesus' identity is established and his mission defined. The commencement of his public ministry is preceded by his own forty-day fast, out in the wilderness; he asks no more of us than he asks of himself (4:2). As chapter 4 ends, Jesus has called the first four disciples and begun to teach, to announce the coming new kingdom, and to heal. He is getting famous. He is drawing larger and larger crowds. He climbs a hill and sits down and begins to teach.

First come the Beatitudes, which Matthew (as opposed to Luke) tends to spiritualize: blessed are the poor in spirit (not just those who are actually poor) and those who hunger after righteousness (rather than those who simply do not have adequate food). Perhaps here is a clue: Does our fasting retune our hungers? Despite his weakened state and his power to transform stones into bread, Jesus stays hungry as he debates the tempter. Might our fasting help us retain our saltiness, our leaven, our light? Here, Jesus suggests, just a chapter earlier, that we remove the covering over ourselves so that others "may see [our] good works" and give God glory (5:16). In fact, despite his contentions with Pharisees and other interpreters of the law, here Jesus is quite explicit that he has not come to abolish the Torah but to fulfill every jot and tittle of the Torah. Further, if one does not keep every commandment and avoid leading others astray, if one does not in fact exceed the righteousness of scribes and Pharisees, one cannot enter the kingdom that he has come to announce (5:20).

As the sermon goes on, Jesus continues to "amp up" the commandments. From "do not commit adultery" to "do not lust"; from the concession for men to declare divorce to no divorce at all; to no oath-taking; to turning the second cheek; to giving one's cloak as well as one's coat; to loving enemies. His talk about almsgiving and fasting (and his instruction to pray oh-so-simply, 6:7–15, which we skip over today) is situated within this larger discussion about exceeding the law, about being more righteous . . . even . . . about being perfect!

In our chapter, chapter 6, Jesus speaks in terms of contrasting models: do not be like *A*; be *B*. In verses 7–15 and 22–34, those in the *A* category are Gentiles. Gentiles apparently heap up empty phrases as they pray. Instead, pray simply and directly; God already knows what you need anyway. Gentiles also strive for material comforts, for food and fashion and finery. Again, God knows what you need; do not worry. God will provide.

In our verses, Jesus castigates the "hypocrites." Whether in synagogue or on the street corner, these fellow Jews call attention to themselves. The almsgiving is appropriate, so too the praying—but not the style. While these are those whose righteousness we are to exceed, we are not to imitate them. It is not others whom we need to impress. It is only God who is to confirm our fulfillment of the commandments—unto excess, unto perfection. Jesus seems to want it both ways: "Fast, but wash your face, show no discomfort," and God will reward you; but also, "Do your good works openly so that others may bear witness and give God glory." Just here we must study our own intentions and attitudes, the why and the how of our Lenten disciplines.

So too our other lections build bridges between Jesus' teaching and our practices. "Create in me a clean heart, O God," we sing with the psalmist. Perhaps this and similar passages motivated Jesus' teaching: what God desires is not public sacrifice but a broken and contrite heart—so that we are enabled to move from acknowledgment of sin to an acceptance of guilt and so to repentance and on to joy and praise. For Joel, the call to fast, to weep over our failings, and to gather to plea for mercy responds to an existential threat. If God does not relent, the people truly will be no more. The relatively secure may contemplate the efficacy of acts of contrition; those at risk assemble and cry out for the blessing, for the divine help that will sustain them.

Isaiah presses us beyond reflection on personal failings to critique of the social structures that foster inequity and exploitation. The prophet, like Jesus in Matthew 25, challenges us to concrete acts of compassion and justice on behalf of the poor, the homeless, the naked, those in prison. Here the consequence concerns not our final resting place but our present situation. If we change

our ways, light will dawn upon us now, our ruins will be restored now, our streets will be tranquil, the nation and the world will be at peace . . . now!

Similarly, in his letter to the community in Corinth, Paul—while tooting his own horn a bit—counsels us not just to receive grace, but to do something with it. God, in Christ, has banished sin and established us as righteous. So let our ministries commend themselves to all as witness to God's grace. Let the fast we choose—like the hardships we may endure—issue in the declaration of good news, the building up of the body, the invitation to all to the feast.

W. SCOTT HALDEMAN

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

On Ash Wednesday, congregants around the world will hear in their native tongues the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (see Gen. 3:19). We are reminded of our solidarity with every human being with whom we share mortality and finitude. In modern American culture, the rituals of death and burial have mostly been scrubbed clean of earlier Christian practices in which the living saints care for and accompany the body of the deceased believer to his/her final resting place "in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life though our Lord Jesus Christ."[2] In place of this liturgical drama that recalls the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we find memorial services under the direction of professional funeral directors (whose role has displaced the minister in much the same way that the wedding planner has usurped the role of the minister in Christian marriage ceremonies). In contrast, Ash Wednesday calls for deep and slow theological reflection on mortality and death.

It is in this Lenten context that the preacher leads the congregation in meditating on Matthew 6. Jesus explores three expressions of authentic Jewish piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. This triad of Jewish practices was widely recognized in antiquity, and these practices continue, in varying degrees, to remain part of the church's mission and purpose. Prayer is central to the life of faith, yet its practice both in the life of individual believers and the communal life of congregations is sometimes thin. Fasting has diminished in its importance as a Christian practice, though it is still observed, especially during Lent.

Christian believers, during the Lenten season, might learn from the Ramadan experience and practice of Muslim neighbors. Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar and is a holy time devoted to fasting and spiritual devotion. Making time for the required prayers five times a day, daily readings from the Qu'ran, fasting between sunrise and sunset, and attending evening mosque services can be challenging for any busy Muslim with family and work responsibilities, especially in a non-Muslim country.

Dilshad Ali, a Muslim journalist and social-media blogger from Richmond, Virginia, has written in "Ramadan: It's Not Just a Food Fast" of the challenges and rewards from her religious experiences with prayer during Ramadan over the past twenty years. Her advice is helpful not only to the Muslim observing Ramadan, but also the Christian participating in Lent:

> Ramadan [is] a whole-body awareness of God and a humble thankfulness for whatever blessings He has granted. . . . Do dhikr (reciting short du'as, or supplications) silently while you're driving, waiting in line somewhere, or doing endless household tasks. . . . Not Muslim? Spending whatever downtime you have to remember God or peacefully meditate is a great idea for everyone. Thousands of hours go by every year in our work commutes, in chauffeuring our kids around, in keeping the house going. Why not try to use that time to quiet our minds, remind ourselves of a higher being, and appreciate what we've been given?[3]

2. "The Committal," *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 485
3. Dilshad Ali, "Ramadan: It's Not Just a Food Fast"; http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/islam/2009/08/ramadan-its-not-just-a-food-fast.aspx.

Almsgiving in the form of charitable giving is a regular congregational activity (though the average percentage of charitable giving per person has decreased in modern society). What is often missing in the modern appropriation of these practices is the understanding of their redemptive nature, particularly of almsgiving. The book of Tobit observes, "Prayer with fasting is good, but better than both is almsgiving with righteousness. A little with righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to lay up gold. For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life" (Tob. 12:8–9). In some quarters of the early church almsgiving was elevated to the level of a commandment (1 Tim. 6:14; *Didache* 1:5; Polycarp, *Phil.* 3.3–5.1).

The impact of prayer and fasting on individual spiritual life is at least acknowledged (if only, at times, in lip service), but making charitable contributions or almsgiving is generally viewed as an altruistic act, whose only beneficiary is the recipient(s) of the charitable deed. Atoning almsgiving in the early church, however, was believed to hold the power to cleanse the sins of those who practiced this mercy, a point Jesus makes later in this text when he says, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20; Jas. 5:2 details the consequences of ignoring the almsgiving command). This view and practice stood in sharp contrast to docetic Christianity, which had disregard for the bodies of the poor and for the harm such disregard had on the social body. The benefits of almsgiving to both giver and receiver could be explored in a Lenten meditation.

The preacher might also explore the social and ethical implications of the Matthean text. Up to this point in the Sermon (chap. 6), the implied audience, it seems, is male: the would-be murderer's anger is directed toward a brother (5:21–22); the adulterer lusts after a woman (v. 28); the husband initiates divorces with his wife (vv. 31–32); the one who has been sued is commanded to give not only his overcoat but his inner tunic as well (v. 40), an impossibility for a female auditor. Generally speaking, contemporary preachers are encouraged to put the male-dominated language of ancient patriarchal society into more inclusive idiom.

The preacher might explore the implications of these instructions for Matthew's male auditors from a gender-specific point of view. With a presumed male audience, these instructions from Jesus to pray, fast, and give alms "in secret" are countercultural. They represent a shift from the male-dominated public space of the house of worship or the street corner to the home, and the "male listener, lover of public recognition of his worth, is expected to forgo that reward."[4] The shift from public to domesticated space removes the honor that accrues to the *man* publicly engaged in these practices and turns the focus to interior benefits of intimate encounter with God, our guest. Once that point is made, the preacher can then draw out its "inclusive" implications!

Finally, a brief glimpse of the history of interpretation of the *place* of prayer (6:6) might also reward the proclaimer. We typically imagine Jesus instructing believers to withdraw to their "prayer closet" in solitude, but the call to pray "in secret" is not necessarily a call to do so in solitude. In the ancient urban setting in which Matthew's Gospel would have first been heard, the "room" (*tameion*) was often a storeroom or room for sleeping. Jerome later translates the word as *cubiculum*, a term connoting a small bedroom (from which we also get the word "cubicle"), but without the connotation of a storeroom. These rooms were not very private and were often in plain view. The *cubiculum* was the site of activities intended to be done in secret, concealed from the public at large, but still not in private, as least not in the sense in which that word functions in the modern West. Sometimes they functioned as a reception area for guests of similar social standing or intimate friends. It is no wonder that the cubiculum became a metaphor for the human heart that receives God as its guest during prayer.

MIKEAL C. PARSONS

4. Carolyn Osiek, "'When You Pray, Go into Your *TAMEION*' (Matthew 6:6): But Why?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 723–40 (737).

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

[1]Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near—
[2]a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
nor will be again after them
in ages to come.
. . . .
[12]Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
[13]rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.
[14]Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD, your God?

[15]Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
[16]gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the aged;
gather the children,
even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her canopy.

[17]Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,
and do not make your heritage a mockery,
a byword among the nations.
Why should it be said among the peoples,
‘Where is their God?’”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Repent: the Day of the Lord is near. The fourth-century-BCE prophet Joel provides a classic "repent now before disaster strikes the nation" warning. Repentance or change of life direction will avert God's punitive action.

I suspect that many folks in contemporary congregations do not find threats of divine punishment helpful. Only some would admit to seeing forecast catastrophes—whether economic, weather, contagions, political or international conflicts—as instruments of divine punishment. Such forecasts do not usually prompt repentance as prevention. We do not think much about repentance anyway, do we?

More likely, I suspect, disasters and crises overtake us—whether "natural" (weather, earthquakes, floods, and so on), health, family, financial, work, relationships, damage from alcohol/drug dependency, violent verbal and/or physical attacks, and so on. We respond, lamenting, "Why me/us? What did I/we do to deserve this?" We might, perhaps, see it as a wake-up call and change our eating habits, start exercising, undergo therapy or medical treatment, abandon or repair a relationship, go to church, or . . . and we would not call any of this repentance. Life happens.

Perhaps this passage will prompt us to think about what comprises repentance, if repentance is required, what it signifies, what place it might have for lives lived faithfully in relationship to God. Is repentance reserved, or even appropriate, for all crises? Might it take its place in the rhythm of faithful living—along with confession, worship, thanksgiving, learning, service, fellowship, faithful endurance—when it is not automatically linked with crises?

Joel 2 anticipates the approaching Day of the Lord, first mentioned in 1:15. This proverbial day of destruction denotes the action of the powerful God, "the Almighty." This is not a "day" in which God saves and blesses the people. Like previous prophets (Amos 5:18–20; Zeph. 1:14–18), Joel warns that it is a day of judgment, a day of "darkness and gloom" (cf. Amos 5:18, 20), to be met with trembling, not eager expectation.

This day "is coming, it is near," he declares (Joel 2:1–2). The trumpet blast and the alarm should alert residents of Jerusalem to danger from an approaching enemy army (cf. Hos. 5:8). This army approaches "like blackness spread upon the mountains." It is "great and powerful" (Joel 2:2b), incomparable in size. According to verse 11, this is God's army; God is the commander-in-chief "at the head of his army; how vast is his host! Numberless . . . . Truly the day of the LORD is great; terrible indeed—who can endure it?" This army seems to be metaphorical (note the comparative "like" in vv. 4–5). It is an unparalleled "apocalyptic" army bringing judgment. Joel sees it. Can his listeners? He warns them: the enemy is on its way, and the enemy is God. God is attacking God's people in judgment.

Some congregants know the experience of God the enemy, of being overrun by "God's army" of disease, family crisis, financial ruin, the daily news, professional sabotage. They know the experience of feeling judged, punished, condemned—whether it is merited or not. Others?

The passage constructs the people under the curses of the covenant. It assumes disobedience; judgment is punishment. In the covenant curses, the many punitive options comprise "disaster, panic, and frustration . . . defeat before your enemies" (Deut. 28:20–25).

Yet the curses are not the final word. A change of ways will mean blessing instead of curse (30:1–10).

Do crises and disasters always portend punishment? What about those circumstances *people perceive to be judgment* but about which they/we can do nothing, concerning which we have no agency? The passage does not consider them; the preacher must break the nexus that "disaster equals (avoidable) punishment."

Assuming agency, verses 3–11 (omitted from the lectionary reading) continue to describe the approaching army of God.

Verses 12–14 issue the call to repent. "Even now," says the Lord, there is an opportunity to "return to me." God initiates this invitation to reorient whole lives and society toward God's ways. God the enemy becomes God the gracious inviter. To embrace this invitation will change the course of history. The call is very general, not specifying particular sins or injustices.

The call evokes the covenant summons to repent by using the covenant phrase "with all your heart" (Deut. 30:2, 10). This interior reorientation, this change of heart and mind, is manifested in external practices of fasting, weeping, and mourning. Genuine repentance is rooted in the heart: "rend your hearts and not your clothing" (Joel 2:13). The contrast does not disparage the latter rite of lament, but it insists on joining the interior and exterior (so Matt. 6:16–18).

Verse 13 continues to evoke the covenant to encourage repentance. God is described as merciful and gracious. On Sinai, God reveals Godself to Moses as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love (Exod. 34:6). In Numbers 14, the people complain against the Lord, who threatens to punish them. Moses intercedes for the people, reminding the Lord of precisely these qualities of mercy and grace so as to "forgive their iniquity" (Num. 14:18–19). So here God reminds the people that God "abounds in steadfast love and relents from punishing." The terrible, punitive Day of the Lord offers the possibility of blessing prevailing over curse, mercy over punishment, new life over destruction (so Ps. 51), God the gracious over God the enemy.

God can repent.

Verse 14a reasserts the possibility of this divine turning or "relenting" from punishing sin. To relent means that God abandons curse for blessing. God restores the blessings of productivity annihilated by the plague of locusts described in chapter 1, which preceded this imminent Day of the Lord. Several verses note the devastation of food supplies in that plague (Joel 1:7, 10–12, 17, 19) including the loss of grain supplies (1:11, 17). Verse 9 specifically mentions that "the grain offering and the drink offering are cut off from the house of the LORD"; the priests cannot offer them.

The situation of curse and punishment can be reversed with human *and* divine turning. Not only will the created order be realigned with the divine purposes of fertility; but so also will the covenant relationship and worship in the sanctuary.

Verses 15–17 summon the people again to gather and express repentance. The command to gather the people repeats 1:14. The trumpet blast echoes the warning about the approaching army of verse 1, but foregrounds the call to repent. That is, fear of God's enmity and punitive army should motivate a return to God the gracious and merciful. Again, fasting is mentioned as an appropriate act (1:14; 2:12, 15). It involves serving God, forgoing food, work, and sex in mourning sin, reorienting life to the Lord.

Verse 16 depicts the gathered congregation very deliberately. The elders or the aged were addressed in 1:2, suggesting those with some communal power and leadership. Then follow the children and infants, the next generation that will not exist unless the terrible army is turned back with human and divine repentance. Then follow the bridegroom and bride, the source of future generations. The future of the people and its well-being are incentives for repentance.

The priests lead the assembly with weeping and prayer. The priestly prayer adds a further reason for divine action. Whereas verses 13–14 appeal to God's character, verse 17's prayer appeals to God's honor and reputation among the nations. If God wipes out the people, the nations will respond with mockery (compare Num. 14:13–16).

The passage foregrounds a nexus of disobedience, crisis, and judgment, but also the possibility of divine and human turning. It does not consider scenarios of crisis not linked to disobedience and not requiring repentance. Preachers must engage them.

WARREN CARTER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Ash Wednesday services take place with death and disaster in the wings. In the church year, Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem. In every year, fear lurks that, as W. B. Yeats writes in "The Second Coming," "the centre cannot hold," and that some "rough beast" is slouching

toward birth, even in our sacred places. It has always been so on Ash Wednesday, from the trembling potential martyrs of the early church, to the grieving woman with ashes on her forehead at the Parkland, Florida, high school mass-murder scene in 2018.

Life's fragility encircles Ash Wednesday liturgies. From a global vantage point, the earth is sick with chills and fever from climate change; nuclear weaponry increases along with war talk; and pandemic disease stalks an ever-increasing world population. In smaller frames, images arise of children gassed, of refugees drowning in hopelessness, of schools converted to charnel houses. Science and technology offer us a clearer view of the big picture, and a closer view of its consequences than ever before; but suffering and death continue unabated. The task for the Ash Wednesday liturgy is, first, to confess this personal, communal, and global reality—and then to respond to it in faith.

Joel issues trumpet calls to awaken and to respond to this reality. The first trumpet (Joel 2:1) calls complacent mortals to see their vulnerability in the face of an annihilating plague of locusts, and links this vulnerability to the unendurable last judgment facing unrepentant humanity. Following Joel's description of the only path from death to life—an appeal to God for deliverance (vv. 12–14)—the second trumpet (v. 15) calls God's repentant people to their proper faithful response: a worship service (vv. 16–17).

Joel's call to gather in solemn assembly gives Ash Wednesday worship its proper template. In the prophet's summoned assembly and in Ash Wednesday services, confession of oneness with a creation in which death and dissolution are natural and inevitable opens the possibility of hope through oneness with the God of that creation. This Creator God, infinitely merciful, may yet offer deliverance to those with repentant hearts.

Ash Wednesday, in parallel with Joel 2, calls first for confession of our inability to save ourselves; then it points a way forward: "Remember, you are dust and to dust you will return. Repent and believe in the gospel." Like steps one and two of the Alcoholics Anonymous twelve-step program, recovery begins with admitting we are powerless to manage our lives, and that only a higher power can restore us. Many contemporary media portray a distorted intuition of this human condition. The global or even universal disaster genre (whether of natural, human, or alien origin) is a cinema staple of the last fifty years. Its resolution usually comes through violent resistance (*Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, 2017), modern technology (*Armageddon*, 1998), or submission to inevitable death (*Melancholia*, 2011). In most of these films, modern media sound Joel's cry to awaken to death's approach; but Joel's second call to dependence upon God as the sole sane response is missing.

Ash Wednesday offers an alternative to futile violent resistance and to nihilistic resignation in the face of approaching apocalypse: communal repentance before God. Acceptance of ashes on the forehead confesses mortality. This is more a humble (from the Indo-European root for ground) admission of earthy reality than a confession of wrongdoing, more an acknowledgment that we are creatures than a confession that we are evil. The ashes in cross shape link our gifts of earthy life and death to those same gifts in Jesus, who created new life through them. To "repent and believe the gospel," is to accept death itself as a servant of life in oneness with a merciful God who leaves a grain offering in a loaf of bread and a drink offering in a cup of wine. Symbols of a broken and bloody body become the doorway to new life rather than to life's end.

Ash Wednesday's communal confession of mortality and heartrending return to God's good news is not a deterrent against sorrow, loss, or death. It is, however, a stand against ultimate entropy, the inevitable gradual decline of all things into disorder. Christians weep, but our tears plead our hope (v. 17). Iwan Russell-Jones contrasts T. S. Eliot's poems *The Waste Land* and *Ash Wednesday* to show how art can reveal this truth.[1] In the former, the pre-Christian Eliot portrays modern life as fragmentary, disconnected, and meaningless. In the latter, after his conversion, the same realities become charged with meaning through seeing

1. Iwan Russell-Jones, "Shall These Bones Live? The Ash Wednesday Promise of Art," *CRUX* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 13–20.

human life and death in light of Christ's habitation in the flesh. Russell-Jones quotes literary critic Northrup Frye's summary of Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, "a desert, a garden, and a stairway between them." In the Ash Wednesday service, we stand on the stairway, we orient ourselves to our dusty home via ashes and locusts, and we turn, repent, believing the gospel life will lead to a garden door.

Ash Wednesday, like Joel's solemn assembly, requires a communal act of worship. It takes the whole *ecclesia* to shift reality. Joel calls everyone: the aged, the children, unweaned infants, brides and bridegrooms, as well as priests (vv. 16–17). All lament how things are, and hope for how things may become, God willing.

Can a liturgical service change the world's condition? For many, worship has a poor reputation in our day. Many Christians prefer action over liturgy, but in Joel liturgy *is* action. Some current scholarship supports this. The idea that gathered communities with focused hearts and minds change community consciousness, thereby changing lived reality, is growing in acceptance. David Nicol writes of "subtle activism," the use of meditation and prayer to support collective transformation.[2] Drawing on the thought of such writers as Teilhard de Chardin and Wendell Thomas, as well as various mystical religious traditions, Nicol explores the hidden spiritual connections within large social changes. Social activism of the traditional sort necessarily continues, but in a new reality created by communal spiritual practices. What worshipers once saw from a human point of view, they now see differently. The facts remain, but worship changes the communal vision, like one of those "magic eye" pictures for the soul. Through worship, a greater power, deep in reality, offers active alignment with a new communal future enabled by a new consciousness of belief in good news.

The individual's task in the Ash Wednesday liturgy is to prepare for a holy death, one that opens the door to life rather than closing it. The ashes symbolize oneness with personal mortality as part and parcel of an impermanent creation in which all passes away. Realizing this dusty state frees mortals to look beyond themselves, perhaps to glimpse the loving One who first breathed life into that dust, and might again. Julian of Norwich's visions enabled her to see an undying Love at the heart of all creation, and to know that it is knotted up with every human soul, which she called oneing with God.[3] The incarnate Christ is the clearest evidence of this merciful Love knot. The Love at work in creation during the darkest times, as Joel intuited, is merciful (v. 13). Those under the mark of ashes and the cross have reason to believe God may remain in and with us when dissolution, decline, and death have done their worst. All manner of things shall be well.

WM. LOYD ALLEN

2. David Nicol, *Subtle Activism* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).
3. See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (New York: Paulist, 1978), chap. 53, 284.

First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7
Psalm 32

Romans 5:12–19
Matthew 4:1–11

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

> [2:15]The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. [16]And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; [17]but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." . . .
>
> [3:1]Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" [2]The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; [3]but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" [4]But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; [5]for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [6]So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. [7]Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

It comes as no surprise on the First Sunday in Lent to find lectionary readings pondering temptation. The Genesis reading focuses on God's first prohibition. Despite this text's rich history of interpretation, many questions remain. Why does God place the tree of knowledge in the garden in the first place? What is the nature of the knowledge it bestows? Why does God not want the first humans to have this knowledge, a knowledge that would also grant them moral agency? Why do the first humans not die on the day in which they eat the fruit as God has threatened? Our obsession with such questions, however, testifies to our resistance to learning the lessons the text itself wants to teach, lessons about the consequences of human decisions.

Genesis 3:1 describes the serpent as the craftiest (*'arum*) of all the wild animals. In Genesis 2:25, we learn that the man and woman were naked (*'arummim*), yet unabashed. The use of *'arum*, the Hebrew term that describes the serpent as "crafty" or "clever" in 3:1, links this verse to the previous chapter and introduces a pun that envelops 3:1–7 when the first humans realize their nakedness (*'arummim*) and experience shame. Elsewhere in Scripture, the term *'arum* designates the crafty language of iniquity: "For your iniquity teaches your mouth, and you choose the tongue of the crafty [*'arum*]" (Job 15:5). The serpent displays its craftiness, anticipating the first woman's own "why" questions by offering a plausible interpretation of God's words in 2:17: God does not want the humans to partake of the fruit because they will become like gods themselves, knowing both good and evil. While the narrative does not reveal the serpent's inner motivation, paradise begins to crumble as the serpent introduces suspicion into the relational dynamic between God and humankind. While some might characterize the serpent in this case as deceptive, Genesis 3:22

confirms God's fear that the humans would become like God.

As Phyllis Trible has argued, the first theological conversation in the Bible occurs between the woman, still unnamed, and the serpent.[1] Eve becomes the first interpreter when she adds to the prohibition "nor shall you touch it," reckoning that in order to eat the fruit, she must first touch it (Gen. 3:3). The woman ponders three categories of delight as she contemplates the fruit of knowledge. First, she sees the fruit as good for food. Second, she sees it as pleasing to the eyes. Third, and perhaps most importantly, she considers the wisdom the fruit offers. Throughout the text, the man remains silent, but the suggestion that the man is "with her" in verse 6 implies that he has overheard the conversation, thereby making him complicit in the disobedience.

The fate of the first humans' forbidden feast is death, but death from a certain point of view. While we know that the first humans did not die immediately, they did suffer many allegorical deaths. First was a death of the bliss that stems from ignorance. Their realization of nakedness is not necessarily shame over their sexual nature, but with their newfound knowledge, they now realize the potential for abuse. As two autonomous moral agents, they can now recognize the potential in the other for both good and evil, a potential that can also awaken mutual suspicion in the same way the serpent aroused the woman's suspicion of God.

As we see in the verses following the lectionary reading, this suspicion leads to accusation. When God interrogates the man, the man points a finger first at the woman and by proxy at God, blaming his decision to take the fruit on "the woman whom *you* gave to be with me" (3:12, emphasis added). The first man's refusal to accept responsibility for his own actions constitutes the original sin of patriarchy, which haunts the Western tradition to this day. Likewise, the woman blames the trickster serpent (v. 13). The humans' disobedience leads to alienation from each other, from the created order (represented by the serpent and the work needed to yield a crop), and from God (vv. 14–19). Finally, they experience the death of exile, as God casts them out of the garden, lest they eat also of the tree of life that grants immortality. At the beginning of Lent, the text invites us to contemplate these "deaths" that result from our decisions.

Trible's reading suggests that God's original intent for humanity involved a more egalitarian relationship between man and woman, suggesting that patriarchy was the result of the post-Eden curse in 3:16.[2] Others, however, have pointed out that the history of interpretation too often shapes our understanding more than the original text. Gale Yee, for instance, cites the deuterocanonical book of Sirach: "From a woman sin had its beginning, and because of her we all die" (Sir. 25:24). Similarly, 1 Timothy 2 justifies the silencing of women by using this sentiment and shifting the blame from Adam to Eve: "and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:14), a clear misreading if we take into account God's punishment of all parties—man, woman, and serpent—in Genesis 3:14–19.[3] While the history of interpretation might consistently blame the fall of humankind on the woman, the epistolary reading offers a countertext to this idea, reminding the reader that death entered into the world through the sin of one man (not Eve) and has perpetually haunted humankind (Rom. 5:12–14).

The remaining lectionary readings support a traditional theological understanding of Genesis 3 representing the fall of humankind. Psalm 32 suggests that acknowledgment of and repentance from sin lead to redemption (Ps. 32:5). An intertextual reading with this psalm might suggest that the main point of the Genesis narrative is not the original sin of partaking the fruit or even of disobedience. Disobedience is part of the human condition that the Genesis narrative describes. What may matter more is the reaction of the first humans, once they realize their nakedness. Additionally, the Gospel reading, Matthew 4:1–11, illustrates Jesus' capacity to

1. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 109–10.
2. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 128.
3. Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 59.

resist sin. When taken in tandem, these three lectionary texts provide hope through God's willingness to accept those who repent (Ps. 32), to God's plan for redeeming the world from the consequences of sin (Rom. 5:12–19), and to Jesus' perfect example as one who resists temptation (Matt. 4:1–11).

When we read beyond the confines of the lectionary text in Genesis 3, we also see the grace of God from the beginning. In addition to God providing clothes to the first humans, Eve gains a name: the mother of all living. Ultimately, this lectionary reading is not a text about the doctrine of sin, about the fall of humankind, or about the "why" questions behind God's motivations. The text, however, does describe the little deaths that occur as the result of our knowledge of good and evil. We are dead to the ignorance of sin and corruption. We are dead to an anxiety-free existence in paradise. We continually experience the death of alienation from one another, from creation, and from God, but the text also introduces the possibility for reconciliation between Eve and Adam, who perpetuate life through their children, as well as between humanity and a gracious God, who remains in relationship with humans despite our disobedience.

DAVID G. GARBER JR.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Reading this text within the liturgical season of Lent inevitably draws attention to the theme of sin. Yet the story also invites consideration of the relationship between work and the human condition. The opening line of this lection asserts that God put the first human in the garden "to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Life in Eden was never one of pure leisure, but instead involves work from the start. Only after the humans' disobedience does the ground become cursed and the work become painful (3:17–19). That very first work was stewardship of the rest of God's creation: keeping—as in both guarding from harm and tending with care—the vegetation in the garden, along with the waters and soil that make the garden thrive. In the Eden story, work, understood as the daily, God-given, life-giving activity with which humans occupy themselves, is stewardship; humanity's first job is to care for creation.

So often today our work is at odds with an Edenic vision of stewardship. We produce goods in ways that exploit the earth rather than care for it. We value the things produced more than the people who produce them. We have been offered the earth's abundance, and yet we keep reaching for more and more beyond our own need, while others go without. We tend to value the *pain* of work rather than the primordial joy of the work itself. We "humble-brag" about how busy we are, how tired we are, what time we sent that e-mail, forgetting all the while that we human beings are part of God's creation, and thus in stewarding creation, we must also take care of ourselves.

Reading Genesis 2–3 through the lens of work has ecclesial implications as well. Rather than reserving talk of stewardship for the church's fund-raising season, broaching the topic in Lent helps to cultivate a year-round consciousness of how a congregation and its members spend their time and money. Moreover, sustained, honest talk about work and finances with congregants can also help to establish healthy parameters for salary, work hours, and expectations for pastors in their service. Given the Ash Wednesday reading from Isaiah 58:1–12, which names injustice in the workplace as an impediment to encountering God, and the vocational overtones of the call of Abraham passage (Gen. 12:1–4a) appointed for the Second Sunday in Lent, the Year A Old Testament readings open space for sustained Lenten reflection on work as both a blessing from God and a context for sin.

References to the story of Adam and Eve in art, literature, music, and popular culture are legion. Among the most enduring retellings of Genesis 2–3 is John Milton's seventeenth-century masterpiece *Paradise Lost*. While the lengthy epic poem offers innumerable points of connection with the biblical account, I find

its emphasis on human companionship to be among its most compelling angles. Watching Adam and Eve in love in the garden, a jealous Satan describes them as "Imparadised in one another's arms, / The happier Eden" (*Paradise Lost* 4.504–5). The first couple's relationship, which includes both desire and fulfillment, is acknowledged as its own form of paradise.

The last four lines of the poem, which describe the couple's journey out of the garden, strike a surprisingly optimistic note, reminding the reader that despite their expulsion, they face their new life together, and under God's watchful care:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
> Through Eden took their solitary way.
> *Paradise Lost* 12.646–49

Milton's juxtaposition of "their solitary way" with the image of Adam and Eve walking "hand in hand" emphasizes that, despite the losses the two have suffered and the distinct struggles each one now faces, they have not lost each other. Although sin and disobedience have driven them from paradise, Adam and Eve still retain "the happier Eden" of their love.

While Milton highlights Adam and Eve's conjugal joys, the notion of human companionship in Genesis 2–3 need not be limited to romantic pairings. The ending of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first film in Peter Jackson's adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, provides a different example with overlapping themes. Frodo Baggins, the hobbit protagonist, is on an epic quest only he can fulfill: to destroy the one ring of power by throwing it into the fires of Mordor. When it becomes clear that his journey is endangering his friends, he tries to run off for Mordor by himself, only to be tracked down by his dearest friend and caretaker Samwise Gamgee. Frodo waves him off, shouting, "I'm going to Mordor alone, Sam!" Undeterred, Sam yells back, "Of course you are! And I'm coming with you!" Like Milton's Adam and Eve, Frodo and Sam have their own daunting quests to fulfill, their own vocations to inhabit, and yet their solitary journeys are made possible by the companionship they provide for each other. For us, as for Frodo and Sam, friendship mitigates hardship; relationships mitigate the fractures wrought by human sin.

The lectionary's particular choice of verses from Genesis 2–3 draws attention to the apparent discrepancy between what God says (2:16–17), what the woman says that God said (3:2–3), and what the serpent says (3:1, 4–5). Emily Dickinson's poem "Tell All the Truth but Tell It Slant—" can provoke reflection on which of these characters is telling the whole truth. When juxtaposed with the biblical text, Dickinson's assertion that "Success in Circuit lies" invites readers to reflect on which of the story's character(s) has rightly characterized the conditions in the garden, and which character(s) has achieved some success through subterfuge.[4] Dickinson's poetry also contains many more direct references to "Eden," especially to convey the idea of "paradise."[5]

Finally, Genesis 2–3 functions as an etiology: an origin story for all of humanity. Most comic-book superheroes have origin stories that describe how those heroes come to be who they are and do what they do. Many involve some sort of childhood trauma, such as the death of a parent. In the Black Panther series, T'Challa's mother dies in childbirth, and his father is later murdered. In the Batman comics, Bruce Wayne witnesses his parents' murder. Superman is sent away from his home planet just before it explodes.

The Eden account in the book of Genesis likewise provides an explanatory backstory, not to describe an individual, but to provide a narrative backdrop against which to understand human nature as a whole. Adam and Eve's disobedience does lead to a superpower of sorts: knowing good and evil, described as becoming like gods (3:5,

4. For more on truth-telling in this lection, see Cameron B. R. Howard, "Commentary on Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3183. The language of "alternative facts" or "fake news" that has entered media discourse may also illuminate some of the ambiguities in the story.

5. See, for example, "Wild nights—Wild nights!" and "Eden is that old-fashioned House."

22). That newfound knowledge opens the possibility of immortality, resulting in the trauma of being expelled from the garden (3:22–24). Read next to the classic comic-book genre, Genesis 2–3 resounds with both tragedy and promise in ways that once again recall the end of *Paradise Lost*: humanity, flawed yet still cherished by God, leaves home to venture into the rest of God's creation, where new adventures await.

CAMERON B. R. HOWARD

Psalm 32

[1]Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
[2]Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

[3]While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
[4]For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

[5]Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

[6]Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
[7]You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

[8]I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
[9]Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.

[10]Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
[11]Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Given that Lent is our traditional time of repentance, it is hardly surprising that the season's first Sunday would feature this collection of lections: the Genesis text that recounts sin's origin story; a passage from Romans that considers that ancient story along with the God-given antidote to sin, namely, Jesus Christ; the Gospel of Matthew's demonstration of Jesus' perfect resistance to temptation and sin; and Psalm 32, which needs only eleven verses to move from the blessedness of forgiveness (Ps. 32:1–2) to the wretchedness of guilt (vv. 3–4) to the relief of confession (vv. 5–9) and, finally, to the joy of righteousness (vv. 10–11). The psalm, thus, is an overview of the human experience of sin and, therefore, this poetic prayer relates to each of today's other texts.

Losing the Holy Image of God

Let us never set up our own will against the holy will of God. There was not only liberty allowed to man, in taking the fruits of paradise, but everlasting life made sure to him upon his obedience. There was a trial appointed of his obedience. By transgression he would forfeit his Maker's favour, and deserve his displeasure, with all its awful effects; so that he would become liable to pain, disease, and death. Worse than that, he would lose the holy image of God, and all the comfort of his favour; and feel the torment of sinful passions, and the terror of his Maker's vengeance, which must endure for ever with his never dying soul. The forbidding to eat of the fruit of a particular tree was wisely suited to the state of our first parents. In their state of innocence, and separated from any others, what opportunity or what temptation had they to break any of the ten commandments? The event proves that the whole human race were concerned in the trial and fall of our first parents. To argue against these things is to strive against stubborn facts, as well as Divine revelation; for man is sinful, and shows by his first actions, and his conduct ever afterwards, that he is ready to do evil. He is under the Divine displeasure, exposed to sufferings and death. The Scriptures always speak of man as of this sinful character, and in this miserable state; and these things are true of men in all ages, and of all nations.

Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible*, Monograph, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhcc.ii.ii.html.

Psalm 32 may be especially helpful as a counterbalance to today's Genesis lection. Seasoned worshipers will be aware that following today's lesson, the Genesis text goes on to recount the expulsion of the first man and the first woman from God's garden, a fate that follows the awful moment when God lays curses upon each of the two. Mindful that those ominous developments are in the wings, we may welcome Psalm 32 as something of a balm for that accursed banishment: while the Genesis text makes clear that God will not abide human efforts to make ourselves godlike, the psalm makes clear that God is also ready to forgive us (vv. 1, 5), to preserve us (v. 7), and to surround us with "steadfast love" (v. 10).

This image of God "surrounding" (vv. 7b, 10b) us "with glad cries of deliverance" (v. 7b) as well as with "steadfast love" (v. 10) is an especially potent and poignant contrast to the idea of God exiling people from God's presence. Even in the wasteland of sin, we are never beyond God's gracious reclamation.

Psalm 32's initial two verses are parallel lines of poetry, each with the classic beatitude opening: "Happy [or blessed] are those . . ." (vv. 1–2). While these verses are similar in form, the subtle difference in their content could be useful in preaching on the accompanying lections.

In the psalm's first verse, the reality of sinfulness—and our resulting need for forgiveness—is acknowledged: we are happy when our sins are forgiven. In the second verse, by contrast, although the initial phrase continues the preceding verse's focus, the second phrase modulates to a slightly different idea: we are happy when "in [our] spirit there is no deceit" (v. 2b).

This could provide a helpful angle for preaching today's Genesis lection, in which we uneasily witness the moment in which deceit is born. Note that the woman has not practiced deceit simply by talking with the serpent, nor are she and the man being deceitful even when they eat the forbidden fruit (that action is a sin because it contradicts God's instructions, but it is not "deceit"). Only when they eat the fruit and thereby become "wise" (3:6) do these people choose to practice deceit by hiding from God, as related in the verse that immediately follows this story.

Sin is sometimes defined as that which separates us from God, and these chapters in Genesis are telling a tale of exactly that sort of deliberate human participation in what we know is in opposition to God's will. Psalm 32 also includes

such a story; it begins, "While I kept silence, my body wasted away" (Ps. 32:3a). The psalmist quickly resolves the story: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity . . . and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (v. 5).

This sequence of events is ideal material for constructing a confession sequence. In calling the people to confession, one might say, "The psalmist speaks to God, saying: 'While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, I did not hide my iniquity, and you forgave the guilt of my sin.' Confident that we too may rely on God's steadfast love and forgiveness, let us now confess our sin." The final verse of the psalm might serve as the basis for a declaration of forgiveness: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace."

To know that we are forgiven and, therefore, able to be truly at peace is to follow the outline of Christian salvation history, moving from the despair of leaving Eden behind to the glory of leaving the tomb behind. Every Lent is a miniaturized version of that transformative arc: through the journey of Lenten penitence, we leave behind the solemnity of Ash Wednesday and move toward celebrating the joy of Easter Sunday. Psalm 32 offers welcome signposts.

The psalm also serves well as a call to worship, for example using verses 1 and 6:

Reader 1: Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.
Reader 2: Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to God.

In addition to musical settings of Psalm 32 are some well-known hymns that complement the day's texts: "Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy," "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go," "O Worship the King, All Glorious Above," and "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me."

In Lent, when we are called to recognize our sin in order to repent of it, Psalm 32 is like a kindly companion who tells us the truth. With its happy opening verses and its glad closing verse, the psalm sets our Lenten penitence within the surrounding embrace of God's gracious Easter promise.

LEIGH CAMPBELL-TAYLOR

Romans 5:12–19

[12]Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— [13]sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. [14]Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

[15]But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. [16]And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. [17]If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

[18]Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. [19]For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Romans is bursting at the seams with stories. What if more of our preaching of Romans took on this narrative dimension? This lection provides an ideal text, but also an ideal point in the liturgical calendar to recount the cosmic story Paul tells. In brief, the story is this: Through one person, Adam, sin entered and wrecked the world God created. Through one person, Jesus, sin and death are not just held at bay but utterly defeated. If these are the basic contours, the details and the theological imagination evoked here take a bit more work to unpack.

First, we ought to remember where we stand in Paul's argument. Romans 4 recounted Abraham's faithfulness as proof that God's grace comes by faith, for Abraham's trust in God preceded the law and circumcision alike. In that way, Abraham becomes an ancestor to both Jews and Greeks. Thus, chapter 5 begins by summarizing, "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). Thus we can boast in the gift of "our hope of sharing the glory of God" (v. 2), but also boast in the travails we face because "God's love," the guarantor of our salvation and wholeness in the midst of joy and suffering alike, "has been poured into our hearts" (v. 5). That is, God is faithful, through and through. So faithful is God that Jesus dies for us while we were still mere sinners, enemies of God.

In this way, Paul brings us to a narrative contrast between Adam and Christ. These two are types or symbols. They represent two distinct trajectories in the story of God's intervention to deliver the world. So also, death and sin perhaps ought to be read as Death and Sin. That is, death and sin are not mere nouns or things, one pointing to the moment our lives end, and the other to the many ways we break relationship with God and one another. No. Death and Sin need to be capitalized, for they represent personified forces.[1] They are the names of those

1. See Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 56–84.

who afflict us but whom Jesus defeats. They are leading actors in the narrative Paul is recounting, not just bit characters.

Thinking of Death and Sin as personified forces helps bring additional exegetical clarity to verses 12–14. Sin is an invading force, an impostor smuggling itself into a law meant to bring life and grace. Sin's interference has distorted the law from within, and Sin draws Death in its wake. Death here certainly includes when we draw our last breath; but also every instance of harm, oppression, injustice. Death breaks God's good world; but the power of Sin and Death, while widespread, even universal, is not absolute. Death *has had* dominion, but something has changed. Paul weaves a story about these forces, Death and Sin, between a story about Adam and Jesus.

Notice that Paul never names Adam explicitly, though the reference to this figure of the Hebrew Scriptures is unquestionable (cf. the first reading, Gen. 2:15–17; 3:1–7). Why not name Adam if Paul names Christ explicitly? Perhaps because of the caution of verse 15: "But the free gift is not like the trespass." We are misled if we assume that Jesus is a mere counterweight to Adam's disobedience and fall in the garden. The scales in Paul's narrative are not equal.

Indeed, many have died on account of "one man's trespass" (v. 15), but God's grace and Jesus' "free gift . . . abounded for the many" (v. 15). The trade is not fair. The terms of the negotiation are not equitable. Why? Because God's grace, love, and free gift are in no way comparable to the story of death one man inaugurated. After all, "the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin" (v. 16). Indeed, Paul's argument will reach a crescendo at the end of chapter 8 when he declares that nothing whatsoever "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39).

What is parallel is the scope of the effect of these two men, Adam and Jesus. One imprisoned us all; the other frees us all. Jesus' obedience is key. His faithfulness to proclaim the good news, to heal and exorcise, to die an unjust death, and to rise makes all the difference. His obedience is not the inverse of Adam's disobedience; Jesus' faithfulness obviates Adam's fall. Jesus' resurrection is a resounding rejection of the twin forces of Sin and Death, and his overcoming of them is immediate. We are living in the aftermath of the defeat of Sin and Death, not just in anticipation of this eventual conclusion.

Psalm 32 evokes many of the themes we have named above. The deep need for sin to be forgiven, for our broken relationships to God and one another to be healed echo in the voice of the psalmist yearning for confession, deliverance, and forgiveness. Perhaps Romans and the psalm together can help us voice our own deep yearning for deliverance from our iniquities. A preacher might note the personal dimensions of such sin, the weight of guilt we carry about things done and left undone.

To that personal dimension, a preacher might draw us to see the relational, communal, systemic aspects of such yearnings. We yearn for deliverance also from the plagues of racism, sexism, homophobia, gun violence, environmental degradation. Both the psalm and Romans echo in response that God's love and grace abound, since God has already forgiven and restored us. The question that lingers is how we will live into God's embrace. How will we embrace forgiveness? How will we live as if we really truly believed that Death and Sin have been defeated, even as they surround us?

Romans is full of stories. What are the defining stories in your community? Are they stories about loss or progress, resentment or joy? A combination of both? How can those local stories be woven into this cosmic story of fall and deliverance; defiance and obedience; death, injustice, and scarcity over against abundant resurrection life? The first step in drawing these stories together may be to preach this text less as a list of theological assertions and more like the persuasive, compelling story it was for Paul and the Roman churches.

This homiletical challenge reminds me of the story within the story told in the last installment of the *Harry Potter* films. Hermione, one of Harry's best friends and constant companions in danger and adventure, reads a child's story about three magical items called "The Deathly Hallows." The details of the story are not as important for us as the mode of storytelling. The live-action movie shifts to an animated mode for the first time in eight films,

the look of this part of the movie jarring in its symbolic representation and artistic rendering. That is, the director could have had Hermione simply read the story while capturing the reactions of the other characters. Instead, a shift in visual cues alerts the audience that something pivotal is happening. Stories are made memorable not just in what they narrate but how they are told. Perhaps then our understanding of the genre of the sermon might itself come into question in light of this text from Romans. We are accustomed to mining Paul's letter for theological insight, less so to hearing—and even living—the story he weaves.

ERIC D. BARRETO

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In the cosmic battle between life and death, life now wins—every time—but it has not always been that way. These words would be a fitting "once upon a time" preamble to the campfire story that Christians gathered around the fire hear from Paul in the fifth chapter of his Letter to the Romans.

Paul's Letter to the Romans includes significant attention to the way of the world before Jesus. In the passage appointed for the First Sunday in Lent, Paul's letter draws attention to Adam and Adam's sin. Paul argues that all of humanity suffered for Adam's sin, paying the price for it as though the sin were their own, until Jesus redeemed humanity through his death and resurrection. The Letter to the Romans argues that the law, as received by Moses on Mount Sinai, interrupted but did not upend that history of all humanity suffering for Adam's misconduct. If anything, the law might have made matters more complicated, misleading people into thinking that they knew all they needed to know about what God wanted from them. Only Jesus' free gift of love was enough to reverse the fortunes of a humanity that had inherited sin from its earliest ancestor. Jesus' forgiving, redeeming love is mightier than Adam's sin. Where Adam's sin held onto us, Jesus' gift of love releases humanity from bondage, once and for all.

Paul expresses this view of human history through a series of binary contrasts: Adam versus Christ, death versus life, sin versus righteousness, transgression versus free gift, condemnation versus justification.[2] Peter Leithart, president of the Theopolis Institute in Birmingham, Alabama, writes of two dimensions in this passage from Romans that are significant for Christians today. First, he says, this text deals with the heart of Christian Scripture: "The fundamental problem the Gospel addresses is the reign of Death."[3] Second, he points out that Augustine's doctrine of original sin uses language from this particular passage, helping us to understand how Augustine came to the conclusion that we are born in sin and must convert through accepting Christ's free gift.

The liturgical significance of this text, perhaps due to Augustine's interpretation of it, points directly to the practice of Christian baptism, for all practices of baptism but particularly for those groups that practice infant baptism. Why would a baby need to have sin washed away if not for the fact that the baby has inherited sin as though it were a genetic condition? Furthermore, and perhaps more relevantly to the position of this text in the liturgical year, Lent descends upon us every year, whether or not we have experienced a particularly vice-filled year. Every year during Lent, we have something on which we must work, something for which to atone. Our fallenness is our natural state, and the free gift is all that will relieve us; we cannot do anything rightly enough to redeem ourselves the way Jesus redeems us at Easter. In Lent we reenact this history in order to connect with human beings from every time, even before humanity received the gift of God's love.

2. Peter J. Leithart, "Adam, Moses, and Jesus: A Reading of Romans 5:12–14," *Calvin Theological Journal* 43, no. 2 (2008): 263.
3. Leithart, "Adam, Moses, and Jesus," 273.

These practices of infant baptism and Lenten disciplines of self-sacrifice do raise questions about how free the free gift of Jesus' love actually is. It would be unbecoming for Christians saved by Jesus to cheer, "I can do whatever I wish!" as a response to Jesus' crucifixion. We hear in this text that Jesus' free gift of love is so very much stronger than Adam's sinfulness. The ethical and cultural significance of the practice today of infant baptism (babies born sinful, already in need of turning around) and Lenten self-sacrifice therefore must be framed as a response to God's love, not an act meant to earn God's love. Our goodness and our humility in the face of sin is our thank-you gesture, not our penance. When a parent presents an infant for baptism, the parent is saying, "I know I am not enough for this child." When a good person takes on a Lenten discipline, the person says, "I know God loves me the way I am, and I also know that I have work to do."

Personal implications of this text, and the passage's connection to larger human knowledge, can be found in the arc of human history Paul presents. Paul describes human history as fallen from the start (Adam), relying on laws as a temporary stopgap measure (the law) en route to true redemption (Jesus). We experience a similar arc in our human lives. First, we are born in a literal mess, crying and bloody and unable to take care of ourselves. Those who care for us, or those who control us, give us rules to live by. We need those rules to be safe, at first, and then later we need rules to relate appropriately with each other. As we mature, we shed those rules as snakes shed skin. Our characters and our morals develop over time, gradually replacing a rule-bound approach to living together with a deeper set of commitments to goodness and righteousness. The ultimate accomplishment takes place when we transfer our dependence upon rules to rootedness in love, where our conduct might look the same, but wells up from the depth of our souls.

The Picasso Museum in Madrid, Spain, displays Pablo Picasso's paintings in chronological order, over the course of his life. The visitor can see that as a boy Picasso did not just follow the rules; he mastered them. His early work evidences classical training and studied determination to capture outward reality. Over time, Picasso's work changes. One can almost sense the moment when the source of his genius transitioned from the rules he had learned to a creative vision originating from within him. The arresting beauty of his later work is, of course, less concrete; and in its abstract nature, it is difficult to describe. Yet its capacity to connect with its viewer makes one mindful that the rules get us only so far. As Paul expresses in this and other letters, the greatest gift and guide is love.

My husband teaches high school English. In the beginning of the year, he requires his students to write twelve-sentence paragraphs, with each sentence serving a particular function. Midway through the year he loosens that requirement. Unfailingly, a student or two asks, "Mr. Drummond, is it okay if I keep writing twelve-sentence paragraphs?" The discipline is something of which they are not ready to let go, and of course he says yes. Until the law is fulfilled, it remains a needed guide. When that law is fulfilled in a new ethic of love, the law remains respected and appreciated, but it no longer has nor needs to have the last word. To say the law has been fulfilled does not mean it has been replaced, but rather that it has found the destination toward which it was pointed all along.

During the season of Lent, we build structure around the conduct we think a fitting response to God's love for us. We impose rules on ourselves. The best goal to which we can strive during Lent is that our motivations gradually transition from a desire to follow self-imposed rules to a deep need to respond to God's love. That love, unlike our rules, never runs dry and can carry us into Eastertide changed, renewed, and redeemed.

SARAH BIRMINGHAM DRUMMOND

Matthew 4:1–11

[1]Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. [2]He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. [3]The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” [4]But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

[5]Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, [6]saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

[7]Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

[8]Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; [9]and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” [10]Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

[11]Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In the construction of the lectionary, especially in the great seasons of Resurrection and Incarnation, the choice of the Gospel text governs the choice of the other readings, especially the second text from the New Testament. However, this week, the Romans texts seems to challenge the pattern. Whatever one may make of Paul’s description of the typological economy of salvation—that through one man’s trespass came condemnation and, just so, through one man’s act of righteousness comes grace sufficient to wipe away both sin and death—it demands the preacher’s attention. What is our Gospel text about but the exploration of this righteous one, Jesus the Christ, who—as Paul will tell us a few chapters later—not only refuses to condemn us but actively intercedes for us, claiming us with a love from which nothing can separate us?

The question of who this Jesus might be is also highlighted by our move backward in Matthew’s carefully constructed chronology. On Ash Wednesday, we read from chapter 6; on this First Sunday in Lent, we now read from chapter 4. What is chapter 4 but the culmination of Matthew’s construction of our introduction to this one man, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ?

Matthew establishes Jesus’ place in the ongoing history of Israel, but over and over again, with little twists. In the first half of chapter 1, Matthew demonstrates Jesus’ royal, even foundational, lineage. He is son of Abraham, son of David, son of the exiles, son of those who

return—fourteen generations and fourteen generations and fourteen generations of continuity. He is also son of: a prostitute spy, a survivor of rape, an adulterer and murderer, captives, rebuilders, the occupied, a carpenter. Of course, all this is actually his "stepfather's" lineage—Jesus' only by adoption.

In the second half of chapter 1, we are introduced briefly to his mother. Fulfilling a prophecy, she bears Emmanuel without intimate relations with Joseph. This child is special—so Joseph is assured; accept him, name him, make him yours, an angel in a dream counsels. The child's distinctiveness is again emphasized in the first half of chapter 2, as we meet foreign astrologers who know of him, who seek him. They follow a star. They offer gifts. They are changed and take a different route home. In the second half of chapter 2, this Jesus is under threat, flees to exile, lives as a refugee until the death of the king who fears him. He returns. His father being first assured and then cautioned in two subsequent dreams, the family moves not back to Bethlehem but to Nazareth in the Galilee. Having grown up, in chapter 3 this Jesus approaches John the Baptist, asking to be baptized. John protests but acquiesces. Immersed in the waters of the Jordan River, this one is claimed as Beloved by a voice from the heavens as the Spirit alights. A royal if tainted bloodline. A complex—even scandalous—nuclear family. The fulfillment of prophecy. Subject of devotion of foreign dignitaries. Threat to a vassal king. Crosser of borders. Successor to the Baptizer. Beloved. Emmanuel, God-with-us. Here is Matthew's Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ.

There is one more step to take before beginning his public ministry—and so the story in our passage, the first half of chapter 4: Jesus, like Moses, like Elijah, must fast. The excursion into the wilderness is Spirit-led. Forty days, like Noah, like Moses, like the years of wandering, speaks of fullness. Enough! He is famished. Emmanuel is weak with hunger. Right on time, the tempter arrives. It is better to remain hungry than to take the bait. He knows he is Beloved; there is no need to call upon angels to prevent his crash into the temple courtyard. He has no need of worldly kingdoms and their splendors; he knows who holds the future. Scripture twisted. Scripture claimed. Away with you, Satan. Now the angels can come. They minister, not in dreams as to his adopted father, but directly, to this one man. It is time for him to begin. Matthew has made clear to us who this Jesus is.

To return to Paul's letter, this is the one man whose "act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all" (Rom. 5:18), the one who has grace abundant enough to bestow righteousness as a free gift upon all. Paul's Jesus Christ is a type. Matthew's Jesus is a man—a branch on a twisted family tree, a vulnerable child, a refugee who dares to return despite ongoing imperial rule, one who submits to baptism, one who becomes famished, one who faces the tempter. Perhaps the power of the type is precisely in the particularity of the life of the man; Paul needs Matthew to make the identity of this righteous one stick.

I must note at this point that I have not written the word "man" this many times when thinking homiletically and theologically since encountering Phyllis Trible at Union Theological Seminary more than thirty years ago.[1] Paul led me this way, but Matthew too suffers from phallocentric logic. Yes, women appear in his genealogy—and are crucial to it—but he traces Joseph's line. His birth narrative is about Joseph; Mary barely appears and neither speaks nor is spoken to. To the contrary, as Sojourner Truth reminded opponents of woman's suffrage more than a century ago: "That little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him."[2]

Further, this tale of fasting is shaped as a hero's journey—a man overcoming obstacles to prove his worth. Today's text from Genesis provides an important counternarrative. Eve is the central figure. She too faces a tempter. She carefully

1. See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).
2. Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851 speech), in Miriam Schneir, *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 94–95.

considers the tempter's words, God's words, the quality of the fruit, and the likely benefits; she may not exactly have counted the costs. Having engaged in reasonable if incomplete theological reflection, she takes and eats. She hands what was probably a pomegranate to the man. He does not hesitate. He does not think. He does not weigh costs and benefits. He eats. For Paul, this Adam is the one man through whom sin entered the good, the very good, creation—and so death too. Eve disappears.

A third and final counternarrative comes in our psalm: the sinner who does not hide iniquity, who acknowledges sin, receives simple, uncomplicated forgiveness—and shelter, instruction, and guidance. The body wastes and strength dissipates, not from fasting, but because faults are hidden in silence. Confess and know grace. Turn and you will be delivered, you will be glad and rejoice.

Our story of temptation is the final episode in Matthew's "introductory chapter." We now know who Jesus is. As a character, Jesus also now knows who he is. The public ministry is begun. As a Lenten Gospel text, the story invites us to follow Jesus in fasting. We too should prepare ourselves to confront those who twist Scripture. We too should not take the bait, keeping our eyes on the prize. Here is one last twist. The one who refuses to turn stones into bread is the same one who feeds more than five thousand with only five loaves and who offers himself as bread, as body, to satisfy all hunger . . . all!

W. SCOTT HALDEMAN

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Drawing on a vast amount of data, including some 500,000 interviews, Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, demonstrated how increasingly isolated we are from family, neighbors, and friends.[3] According to Putnam, we visit with family and friends less frequently, know our neighbors less well, belong to fewer social organizations, and even, as the title suggests, bowl alone rather than participate in bowling leagues. The reasons for this ironic increasing person-to-person isolationism in the midst of our high connectivity to the "virtual community" are complex, but one result is clear. "Alone" has become a frightening word. Being alone can mean having no friends and no community. It can mean feeling excluded and left out. Being alone, though, can also mean inhabiting a stretch of time all alone with nothing. No distractions, no books, no TV, no magazines, no video games. We tend to avoid that kind of aloneness as well. Most of us do everything possible not to go there.

The wisest people among us have always chosen times of aloneness. They have chosen aloneness in order to open themselves to prayer, to letting go, to making choices. Anthony the Great was among the first of the so-called desert fathers who ventured alone into the wilderness in the third century to confront temptations and his struggle to obey God. The life of faithfulness was not easy, but it was not impossible. This time of solitude enabled Anthony to pursue the virtuous life with more clarity.

Jesus too pursued solitude before he started his ministry. Before he was healer, teacher, and liberator, he chose aloneness. In the desert, Jesus considered unworthy alternatives and overcame them. Empty and vulnerable by choice, Jesus was brought face-to-face with the dark options of another path. In those moments, he remembered who he was, who God declared him to be at the river just days before: "My Son." "My Beloved." When the seducer came, Jesus could speak from the deep wellspring of knowing who he was—God's Beloved Son—and say, "No." However vast the difference between Jesus' relationship with God and ours, we too are daughters and sons of God. We too are God's Beloved—and we do the work of aloneness to confirm, clarify, and sustain that identity.

We do not do all the work of aloneness by ourselves. There is a kind of being alone that we

3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

share communally. Part of the purpose and mission of the church is to remind believers through life together that they have been made sons and daughters of God. We come to worship to enrich and clarify that identity. We form our identity as God's children through the study of the living Word and celebration of the Table. We strengthen that identity in community together.

When assaulted by the adversary, Jesus did not have to make up a response on the fly, but he could speak it from the overflow of instruction from family and synagogue. This then is the church's mission too. The work of sustaining and clarifying our identity as God's Beloved never ceases, because in this world of clamoring idolatries, it is easy to forget what the beloved daughters and sons of God must affirm and what they must deny. This work of faith is done best in communal aloneness.

Other monastics knew this truth. Pachomius (292–348) emphasized cenobiticism, communal monastic life. In his community, Pachomius sought a balance of the solitary life, in which the monks lived in individual cells, with communal life in which the believers worked together for the common good. In his novel *Jayber Crow*, through his fictional protagonist Wendell Berry has captured this vision of the church as gathered community working, sometimes imperfectly, for the common good and each other:

> My vision of the gathered church that had come to me. . . had been replaced by a vision of the gathered community. . . . My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.[4]

The liturgical season of Lent, in which this text is read, provides believers the same opportunity to enter together as a community a period of aloneness, of self-emptying, of ego-denial, in order to remember who they are. Lent, of course, points toward its culmination in Holy Week. Jesus spoke to the theme of remembrance on that last night at the table with his friends: "Do this in remembrance of me." Jesus said it twice. Over broken bread, he said, "Remember." Over the cup, he said, "Remember" (1 Cor. 11:23–25). So we look to Jesus, and we recall all that he refused, and all that he embraced, and all that he gave for the sake of us all. We can live in the great remembrance of who we are: God's Beloved daughters and sons.

The preacher might also attend to the order of the temptations in Matthew. Unlike Luke's version (which has the last temptation occurring at the temple), the third temptation in Matthew occurs on a very "high mountain." Rhetoricians and preachers alike know that the last (or first) item in a story usually holds special significance. Settings can provide points of continuity for a story. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, there are three scaffold scenes, which serve as pivotal moments in plot development and character identity. In the first scaffold scene, at the beginning of the book (chaps. 1–3), Hester Prynne, holding her infant daughter, is publicly humiliated and condemned for adultery. Her lover, the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, conceals his own guilt and participates in the judgment of Hester. In the second scene, in the book's middle (chap. 12), seven years after the first scene, Dimmesdale surreptitiously scales the scaffold in the middle of the night to confront his demons. Hester and her daughter, Pearl, hear his cry, and join him on the scaffold, and he reveals to Hester what she already knows. In the last scaffold scene (chap. 23), a dying Dimmesdale publicly confesses his role in Pearl's birth. With his death, Pearl is freed to live her life more fully and compassionately. The scaffold scene serves both to advance and resolve deep conflicts in the novel's plot and to reveal the characters' development.

So it is with Matthew's Gospel, in which mountains provide the setting for important moments of disclosure of Jesus' identity. Here in Matthew 4, Jesus is revealed as the "obedient

4. Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 205.

Messiah." Other mountain scenes also reveal important aspects of Jesus' identity and vocation: the teaching Messiah (5:1); the praying Messiah (14:23); the healing Messiah (15:29); the glorified Messiah (17:1–2); and the apocalyptic Messiah (24:3).

Finally, Matthew ends with the resurrected Jesus, the universal Messiah, taking his disciples to a "high mountain" and commissioning them to go to "all nations" (28:16–20). From beginning to end, mountains function as the revelatory locus of Jesus' identity and vocation. Connecting the purpose of the last temptation of Jesus with similar settings in a modern novel such as *The Scarlet Letter* provides a compelling resource for fresh theological reflection on this Scripture text.

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