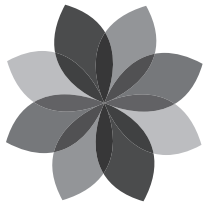


Year B, Volume 1

Advent through Epiphany



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
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Publisher's Note

“The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God,” says the Second Helvetic Confession. While that might sound like an exalted estimation of the homiletical task, it comes with an implicit warning: “A lot is riding on this business of preaching. Get it right!”

Believing that much does indeed depend on the church's proclamation, we offer *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. *Connections* embodies two complementary convictions about the study of Scripture in preparation for preaching and worship. First, to best understand an individual passage of Scripture, we should put it in conversation with the rest of the Bible. Second, since all truth is God's truth, we should bring as many “lenses” as possible to the study of Scripture, drawn from as many sources as we can find. Our prayer is that this unique combination of approaches will illumine your study and preparation, facilitating the weekly task of bringing the Word of God to the people of God.

We at Westminster John Knox Press want to thank the superb editorial team that came together to make *Connections* possible. At the heart of that team are our general editors: Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, and Carolyn J. Sharp. These five gifted scholars and preachers have poured countless hours into brainstorming, planning, reading, editing, and supporting the project. Their passion for authentic preaching and transformative worship shows up on every page. They pushed the writers and their fellow editors, they pushed us at the press, and most especially they pushed themselves to focus always on what you, the users of this resource, genuinely need. We are grateful to Kimberley Bracken Long for her innovative vision of what commentary on the Psalm readings could accomplish, and for recruiting a talented group of liturgists and preachers to implement that vision. Rachel Toombs joined the project on this volume, and did exceptional work identifying the sidebars that accompany each worship day's commentaries. At the forefront of the work have been the members of our editorial board, who helped us identify writers, assign passages, and most especially carefully edit each commentary. They have cheerfully allowed the project to intrude on their schedules in order to make possible this contribution to the life of the church. Most especially we thank our writers, drawn from a broad diversity of backgrounds, vocations, and perspectives. The distinctive character of our commentaries required much from our writers. Their passion for the preaching ministry of the church proved them worthy of the challenge.

A project of this size does not come together without the work of excellent support staff. Above all we are indebted to project manager Joan Murchison. Joan's fingerprints are all over the book you hold in your hands; her gentle, yet unconquerable, persistence always kept it moving forward in good shape and on time. We also wish to thank Pam Jarvis, who skillfully compiled the dozens of separate commentaries and sidebars into this single volume.

Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing *Connections*. President Theodore J. Wardlaw and Dean David H. Jensen have been steadfast friends of the project, enthusiastically agreeing to our partnership, carefully overseeing their faculty and staff's work on it, graciously hosting our meetings, and enthusiastically using their platform to promote *Connections* among their students, alumni, and friends.

It is with much joy that we commend *Connections* to you, our readers. May God use this resource to deepen and enrich your ministry of preaching and worship.

WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS

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 nonlectionary 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. But 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 connections 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.

JOEL B. GREEN
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General Editors

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, 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 between 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

First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 64:1–9

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

Isaiah 64:1–9

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
²as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.
⁵You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.
But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.
⁶We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
⁷There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.
⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Isaiah 64:1–9 is a prayer for God to act dramatically and decisively to save God’s people. The main problem is that the Holy City, Jerusalem, is in ruins. It has been “burned by fire” (Isa. 64:11) and “has become a wilderness” (64:10). The prayer appears in a section of Isaiah scholars often call Third Isaiah, which dates to the time just after 539 BCE. The glorious vision of

restoration in Isaiah 40–55 was not realized, and the temple remained in ruins (Ezra 5:14–17; Hag. 1:1–11). Thus the prophet pleads for God to act to change the community’s circumstances.

This lection is part of a larger prayer that begins in Isaiah 63:7 and ends at 64:12. Isaiah 63:7–14 recalls God’s graciousness when God’s servant Moses led the people through the sea

(63:11–12). The time of salvation, however, is a distant memory, and the people now languish and feel God is absent (63:11b–13a). This feeling is based in part on the community’s guilt over its sinfulness. Because of their unfaithfulness, they declare, “you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity” (64:7).

There is a spatial aspect to divine absence that arises from ancient Near Eastern cosmology. God dwells above the dome of the heavens that God created to hold back water from the earth (see Gen. 1:6–8). When Isaiah 63:15 calls for God to “look down from heaven,” it imagines God in this dwelling place far above the earth. God expresses zeal for God’s people by coming down from the heavenly abode to attend their circumstances. This conception, in turn, sets up the opening line of our lection. “Tear open the heavens and come down” assumes the dome of heaven is a barrier to God’s presence with the people. Thus the prayer is not just for God to “look down,” but to rip a hole in the dome and descend.

The prayer in Isaiah 64:1–9 also continues themes that began in Isaiah 62, where God promises not to “keep silent” (62:1), but to bring salvation to Zion (62:11). Isaiah 63:1–6 depicts God as a divine warrior returning from battle, having crushed Israel’s enemies. Isaiah 64:1–9 essentially asks the warrior God to return for Zion’s sake and to act again on Jerusalem’s behalf.¹

Isaiah 64:1–9 connects with the other lectionary readings in two important ways. First, with Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19, it laments the suffering of God’s people and pleads for God to be present and save. Three specific connections with Psalm 80 stand out. (1) Both Isaiah and the psalmist pray for God to “come,” as though God is distant (Ps. 80:2; Isa. 64:1). (2) Both passages plead for God to not be angry or to let the divine anger cease, for both speak of the present suffering as the result of God’s wrath (Ps. 80:4; Isa. 64:6, 9). (3) Psalm 80:3, 7 (and 19) and Isaiah 64:7 link God’s anger with God “hiding the face”; likewise, salvation comes when God

lets God’s face “shine” (Ps. 80:3, 7, 19). Psalm 80:16 also shares with Isaiah 64:11 the specific description of the enemy burning the temple and leaving the holy place in ruins.

Although the connection to 1 Corinthians 1:3–9 is not as obvious, Paul’s word to the Corinthians assumes the community’s suffering on the one hand and the imminence of God’s coming on the other hand. For Paul, “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” is the decisive day when God brings creation and history to a climax. This is Paul’s way of speaking of God tearing open the heavens and coming down to cleanse, heal, and redeem the world. The same is true of the connection to Mark 13:24–27.

Second, with Mark 13:24–27, the Isaiah reading speaks of God displaying might through cosmic signs. When the divine warrior comes, the heavens and the earth shake (Isa. 64:1–2; Mark 13:25). Mark shares the spatial understanding of God’s arrival. For Mark, the coming of God occurs through a heavenly figure, the Son of Man, a concept that Mark borrows directly from Daniel 7:13–14. For Isaiah and Mark, God appears from outside the human realm (on earth) because God’s true dwelling is above (in the heavens). God breaking into the space humans occupy naturally disrupts the present order and dramatically changes it.

Our passage is part of a community lament. It shares language and theological expression with other passages that belong to this genre. Community laments appear most often in the Psalms (and in the book of Lamentations). Isaiah 63:7–64:12 is much like psalmic laments and “could easily have found a place in the Psalter.”² They are prayers for help the community offered in worship. Such prayers include a mix of complaint, petition, and trust. They also typically rehearse what God has done in the past, especially in creation, in order to make “the suffering of the community an issue of the Lord’s sovereignty in the world.”³

The lection begins with a petition for God to reveal divine power in cosmic signs (64:1–2). Then it recalls God’s mighty deeds and

1. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 235.

2. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 386.

3. James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 25.

This Altar of Consolation

And now, O Jehovah. After having complained of their miseries, by which they were almost overwhelmed, they now more openly ask pardon from God and a mitigation of their distresses, and with greater boldness plead with God that still they are his children. Adoption alone could encourage them to cherish favorable hopes, that they might not cease to rely on their Father, though overwhelmed by the load of afflictions. And this order should be carefully observed; for, in order that we may be truly humbled in our hearts, we need to be cast down, and laid low, and almost crushed. But when despair seizes us, we must lay hold on this altar of consolation, that, “since God has been pleased to elect us to be his children, we ought to expect salvation from him, even when matters are at the worst.” Thus, with a view to the gracious covenant, the Israelites affirm that they are the children of God, in order that they may experience his fatherly kindness, and that his promise may not be made void.

We are the clay, and thou our potter. By means of a comparison they magnify the grace of God, and acknowledge that they were formed of despicable clay; for they do not seek the ground of superiority in themselves, but in their origin celebrate the mercy of God, who out of mean and filthy clay determined to create children to himself.

We all are the work of thy hands. Of the same import as the former is this second clause, in which God is called the Creator, and his people are called the work of his hands; because to God alone they ascribe all that they are and all that they have. This is true gratitude; for, so long as men advance the smallest claim to anything as their own, God is defrauded of his right. Now, Isaiah speaks not of the ordinary creation of men, but of regeneration, on account of which believers are especially called “the work of God;” as we have frequently stated in the exposition of other passages: Here they acknowledge a remarkable act of God’s kindness, in having elected them to be his people, and adorned them with benefits so numerous and so great.

John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, Vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 370–71.

graciousness in the past (64:3–5a). Verses 5–7 offer confession mixed with descriptions of the current turmoil, followed by an expression of trust and a final petition (64:8–9). As noted above, Isaiah 64:1–9 shares much of this content with Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19, but it also speaks in ways very similar to other community laments in the Psalter, such as Psalms 44 and 74. Recollection of God’s might in creation (Ps. 74:12–17) and the petition for God to redeem God’s people (Ps. 44:26) are prominent connections.

Despite these significant connections, Isaiah 64:1–9 and the larger passage in which it is part also have some rather unique features. The confession of sin exceeds the expectations of this type of prayer. The expression “God delivered” (Isa. 64:7) normally has an enemy as the object (e.g., Gen. 14:20). Here, however, God delivers Israel up to their sinfulness. Also, the line “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth” (Isa. 64:6) is like no other.

Likewise, the appeal to and expression of trust in God as father are noteworthy (v. 8). Although common in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 6:9), in the Old Testament it is quite unusual, and the confession “you are our Father” appears nowhere else. The lively nature of the metaphor is striking. Isaiah 63:16 mentions it first and contrasts God as Father with Abraham and Israel. The eponymous ancestors were thought literally to be “fathers” to the nation, but they were dead and gone. For Isaiah, God is a “real” Father, in that the people could call on him as they would a father who acts in care and concern, as redeemer (Isa. 63:16). Isaiah 64:8 mixes fatherhood, however, with another, more common Old Testament metaphor, that of potter. As God shaped the first humans from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7), so God formed these people from clay. This claim clarifies that God was not Israel’s father as pagan gods fathered human beings.

Rather, God was Father to them as Creator. They were the work of God's hand (Isa. 64:8). This combination of intimate relation (Father) and transcendent Lord was, in turn,

the foundation for the petition for God to “tear open the heavens” (v. 1) and the assurance that God would do so (v. 5a).

JEROME F. D. CREACH

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

This Scripture is a plea for God to rip open the heavens and announce the divine self, present and preeminent in our world. For the preacher, this is an explicit invitation to connect the episodes of our lives with the ways God forms and reforms us.

Liturgically, the setting of this text during Advent connects us to an experience of anticipation. It is helpful for preachers, when using this text for a sermon, to remember that preaching is anticipatory. As the Nicene Creed teaches us, our home is in the One who fashioned heaven and earth, the One who came down on our behalf, the One who will come again. The revelation of God's awesome deeds encompasses not only the memories of verses 3–4 but also the keen expectation of verses 1–2 in Isaiah 64. Trust and faithfulness become the ways we both look back and understand our place in the history of God's people *and* launch into God's future. We lean forward into God.

This Advent moment invites us not only to the remembrance of God's awesome deeds, but most importantly, to a deep and abiding faith in God's future revelation. This faith mortgages the farm, shoves all the chips to the center of the table, and believes even through the very heart of unbelief. We risk everything on God's promises. We risk everything on an uncertain future. We do it not from the intrinsic gifts or maturity within us. We do it because to live in God is life itself.

Ecclesially, we are created God's people not through our “oomph,” not through our own dedication and commitment, but as we are claimed by God in baptism. God's coming enfolds us into the family of faith. God's initiative remakes us from the inside out. God's mercy heals and transforms our broken hearts. Usually we get this backwards. As we hurry to point to our agency and importance, we

imagine a church and Christian life revolving around us.

So we misread the conclusions of verses 5 and 7. We expect a cause and effect centered on us. We think: We sin, and then God is angry; we turn away, and then are separated from the Lord. But God flips the script. The Holy One points to something far deeper. God's action makes all the difference. Without God's calling, we confuse our direction. Without God's naming, we have no identity. Without God's power, we cannot love and forgive. Without God's presence, we lose life and breath, depending instead on the false promises of technology. Human contact and community are reduced to consumer goods. God becomes a lifeless idol.

Socially and ethically, the voice of the prophet kicks the props out from under the systems of supremacy that surround us. For those of us who are deeply or blindly privileged, often oblivious to the power of being white, male, and/or straight, the text is a stark reminder that our identity lies only in God. No matter our circumstance, we are not permitted to cling to a shred of self-importance beyond our God-given stature. We are God's handiwork, formed by the Divine.

The tough love of the first seven verses of this passage is almost overwhelming. God is the foremost authority, the only arbiter over creation. God's appearing is transforming and radical, shaking the foundations and changing us in unexpected ways. God always gets to choose to reveal or hide the divine presence. Without the Lord, we are lost, but the pivot point of the final two verses is the voice of hope. We are claimed by God, who perseveres as our parent. We are formed by God, who continues to take ownership of us. We are named by God, who declares we are God's people.

The vision of this passage invites its hearers to a quest both daunting and full of promise.

How do we grasp an understanding of a God whose appearing is forceful and strong, whose presence can be transformative or consuming, who demands fealty even though the event horizon of our imagination is beyond our view? We preachers proclaim the One who is completely beyond our control, the One revealed only at God's choosing.

Culturally, the juxtaposition of all these dynamics is best represented by a dystopian work of science fiction. The 2014 film *Interstellar*, directed and cowritten by Christopher Nolan, is an excellent example. As the movie opens, nature has turned against humanity. Powerful dust storms and crop failures threaten civilization. The destructive powers of the moment seem beyond the promise of any intervention, human or otherwise. However, through the intrepid exploration of the far reaches of outer space, the characters experience the malleable nature of time and the multileveled experience of human purpose. Only as the characters see and hear in new ways—only as they have their imaginations stretched *beyond* the breaking point—do they discover their identities.

Like the movie, these verses from Isaiah are an invitation to see and hear far more than we first recognize, to picture God within and around us as active, living, powerful, transformative. Advent invites us to see through the ordinary, to catch the heavenly chorus pitched just beyond our hearing, to taste the sweet goodness of the Lord, the One who nourishes our spirits every day.

All these connections—liturgical, ecclesial, social, ethical, and cultural—lead us home to the questions of *personal* identity. We are grounded in grace and faith. We find direction for our lives as God appears as if out of nowhere. What first seems unclear comes into sharp focus as we discover the One who comes down and reveals goodness and the power of divinity.

At this juncture we come face to face with the key aspect of our human experience. On our own we are not enough. Even our best does not complete us as individuals. Even our most enduring does not persist in the time frame of eternity. No, not on our own, not when only for me and mine. This Advent moment—and the proclamation of Isaiah 64:1–9—becomes a liminal experience, as preachers point to the bedrock of our faith. God alone is supreme. God's presence, or absence, makes all the difference in human affairs. The Lord's primacy upends our all too common focus on ourselves. Our expectation and yearning for God's appearance give our life direction. Human purpose is discovered through our connections with our God and Creator.

These foundational truths from Isaiah stand in opposition to the siren song of our own self-importance. While the Holy One may truly be preeminent, the systems of supremacy of our age are insidious and ever present. White supremacy, misogyny, and the demonization of our adversaries are destructive in scope and depth. The self-determination of such systems threatens to reframe every context of our lives. Self-centered discretion becomes no longer action that avoids offense to a neighbor, but instead always the individual freedom to choose.

Life in Christ instead demands our sharpest vision. The energetic action of the Holy One reveals spiritual realities that at first may be unrecognized, just as fire ignites kindling or heats a pan of water to boiling. What first may seem clear and calm and ordinary becomes something else entirely.

We are formed and reformed through the One who is our potter. We are God's work. In that light, we are destined to become one with our neighbors, growing ever more in our participation in God's goodness. Truly we are God's people as we live in the light and power of the Lord.

GLEN BELL

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
³Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
⁶You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
.....
¹⁷But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
¹⁸Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.

¹⁹Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 provides a very fitting response to the first reading for the day, Isaiah 64:1–9. This is not surprising, since it is likely that the texts originated, or at least received their canonical placement, at approximately the same time. Isaiah 64:1–9 is part of so-called Third Isaiah (Isa. 56–66), which is usually dated between 539 and 515 BCE—that is, between the end of the exile and the completion of the Second Temple. While the exile is over, as proclaimed in Isaiah 40–55, the devastating effects still remain (see Isa. 64:10–11). Psalm 80, while it may have originated earlier, lies within Book III of the Psalter (Pss. 73–89). Book III contains most of the communal laments in the Psalter (besides Ps. 80, see Pss. 74, 79, 83, 85, as well as Ps. 89:38–51, which concludes Book III with

the words of one who appears to be a deposed Davidic descendant) and seems to have been arranged and placed to respond to the crisis of exile and its aftermath.

In any case, both texts suggest that something is desperately wrong in the life of God's people. Their pain is poignant and palpable. "Tears" are mentioned twice in Psalm 80:5, and "the bread of tears" here may be an intentional contrast to "the bread of the Presence," or more literally, "the bread of the [God's] face" (see Exod. 25:30; 1 Sam. 21:6; 1 Kgs. 7:48), that resided in the temple but was no longer available. The lament continues in verse 6, and it accords well with the description of distress in Isaiah 64:6–7, which contains the complaint that God has "hidden your face from us" (Ps. 80:7).

God's apparent absence or unavailability is construed in both texts as an indication of God's anger (Ps. 80:4; Isa. 64:5, 9; the Hebrew vocabulary differs in the two texts). The poignancy is increased in both texts by the remembrance of better times in the past. The Hebrew word translated "awesome deeds" in Isaiah 64:3 recalls the exodus (see Exod. 15:11), and Psalm 80 recalls the exodus as well (see v. 8, although it is not part of the lection). The exodus seems long ago and far away, and the sorrowful present leads both prophet and psalmist to call for a new manifestation of God's presence.

The request is made in both cases in the language of theophany (a divine appearance). The tearing open of the heavens makes way for God to "come down" in Isaiah 64:1, and the effects are typical for a divine appearance: mountains quaking and nations trembling (see Exod. 15:14). In Psalm 80, the plea "shine forth" (v. 1) is also the typical language of theophany (see Deut. 33:2; Ps. 50:2, where God's shining forth involves mountains, as in Isa. 64:1–3). This plea is reinforced by the repeated "let your face shine" (Ps. 80:3, 7, 19; a different Hebrew word underlies "shine" here), which may also allude to the current unavailability of "the bread of the [God's] face" and thus to the sad situation of having to eat "the bread of tears."

The ultimate desire of both prophet and psalmist is a restoration of the relationship between God and people. The prophet takes it upon himself to remind God that "you are our Father" (Isa. 64:8), that "we are all the work of your hand" (v. 8), and that "we are all your people" (v. 9). The psalmist prays repeatedly, "Restore us, O God" (Ps. 80:3, 7, 19), asking too that the divine "hand be upon the one at your right hand" (v. 17)—that is, the people (although some interpreters see this one as a royal figure).

The fervent expectation of a restored relationship, even in the midst of ongoing distress, is undoubtedly grounded in the people's faith that God is essentially gracious. This faith yields hope—"the conviction of things

not seen" (Heb. 11:1; see Rom. 8:24–25)—the hope of a transformed future that the next chapter of Isaiah will call "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17). This hope is not a naive optimism that denies pain or ignores distress. Neither is this hope a passive waiting. Rather, as the next psalm suggests, God calls a restored, transformed people not only to celebrate (Ps. 81:1–3), but also to "walk in my ways!" (v. 13), that is, to participate in shaping a restored, transformed future.

Advent is a season of hope, and the First Sunday in Advent is ordinarily the time to light the candle of hope. A sermon on Isaiah 64:1–9, in conversation with Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19, might point out that contrary to our usual expectations, honest lament and complaint are of the essence. The point is not to grovel in despair, however; rather, the point is to invite renewed trust in the God whose grace opens up the possibility of transformation.

An Advent sermon can remind us that genuine hope invites and energizes faithful action. A sermon could be followed by this affirmation of faith from "A Declaration of Faith":

We know our efforts cannot bring in God's kingdom.
But hope plunges us into the struggle for victories over evil that are possible now
in the world, the church, and our individual lives.
Hope gives us courage and energy to contend against all opposition, however invincible it may seem, for the new world and the new humanity that are surely coming.¹

As William Sloane Coffin once put it, "hope criticizes what is, hopelessness rationalizes it. Hope resists, hopelessness adapts."² In the final analysis, Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 is, like Isaiah 64:1–9, a criticism of what is and an affirmation of hope in the new selves, the new church, and the new world that God is making possible.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

1. *A Declaration of Faith* (Louisville, KY: PCUSA Office of the General Assembly, 1991), 10.5 (p. 24).

2. William Sloane Coffin, *A Passion for the Possible: A Message to U.S. Churches*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 88.

First Sunday of Advent

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Readers familiar with the telltale flourishes of Pauline epistles will immediately notice them at work here among the first verses of the First Letter to the Church at Corinth. After opening with a customary introduction of himself and his audience—two verses excised by the lectionary editors for this Advent 1 reading—Paul continues with familiar gestures of grace, peace, and thanksgiving. However, whereas Paul elsewhere thanks his congregations on behalf of their good works—to the Thessalonians, for their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3); to the Philippians, for their “sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:5)—Paul’s phrasing to the Corinthians is less about them and more about God, offering thanks “because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:4).

This inversion is not an isolated incident; throughout this opening, Paul seems reluctant to make more than faint praise for the Corinthian ministry. The closest thing to a genuine affirmation that he offers is a recognition that their ministry has been “enriched in [Jesus Christ], in speech and knowledge of every kind,” perhaps a reference to the elocution of the presumed letter to which he is now responding (1:11). However, these twin attributes of “speech and knowledge”—*logos* and *gnōsis*—will quickly come under Paul’s critical eye. Only a few verses later Paul notes that he

has been sent to evangelize “not with eloquent wisdom” (v. 17)—literally “not with knowledge of speech.” As the letter unfolds, Paul will consistently worry that “speech and knowledge” are insufficient in isolation for the holy work of worshiping as one community, that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1). It is with some ironic tone, then, that Paul opens with a celebration of these virtues—gifts of the grace of God, to be sure, but hardly sufficient in isolation for the work of Christian discipleship.

Paul’s tepid tone continues a few lines later, as the letter makes the first of many references to the question of spiritual gifts within the Corinthian community. We know from subsequent chapters that the church has expressed some question about how best to sort and value the spiritual gifts arrayed through the congregation. In chapter 12, Paul will respond at length to this question, observing that spiritual gifts—much like these cultural virtues of “knowledge” and “speech”—if misunderstood, make discipleship a matter of personal achievement, and thus create room for ego and division. Indeed, the presenting issue of the letter—the factionalism between Apollos and Cephas outlined immediately following this lectionary selection—is really an effect of a personal-achievement-oriented theology. Ego is running amok in Corinth, and Paul has no desire to fan its flames.

It is no coincidence, then, that Paul’s first reference to spiritual gifts intends to undercut this

theology from the first breath, noting that the Corinthians already “are not lacking in any spiritual gift as [they] wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7). They already have everything they need. This is a word of grace, but a potentially challenging one for a church so clearly invested in its own sophistication. Nor is it any less challenging to modern ears. In a contemporary landscape in which few Christians are immune from the pressures of achievement—whether preachers longing for elocution, or congregations longing for knowledge, or any of us in late Christendom longing for some revitalizing gift of the Spirit—Paul’s words come as an arresting reminder of God’s provision. We already have everything we need.

All that remains is the waiting. The lectionary editors place this text on the First Sunday of Advent precisely because Paul addresses the Corinthians as they “wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). It is the first time in the letter that Paul associates this church with an active verb, the first and primary discipline to which he calls them—not to anything so wrapped up in personal success, but to something much more humbling. Waiting, for Paul, is not a spiritual gift to be refined and enhanced, nor is it an achievement to be unlocked, nor anything to nourish the ego of the disciple turning toward Bethlehem. Apollos and Cephas will not get to compete on who waits better than the other. Rather, waiting sets the Corinthians into an altogether different posture: a reliance not on themselves but rather on the gifts of God, already present among them and yet to be fully revealed.

For modern Christians navigating the frenzy of the holiday season, this waiting is also a reminder that the work of Advent and Christmas is not fundamentally ours to do. Waiting is not something to be prepared, packaged, gift wrapped or placed underneath the tree. Waiting is not a pageant. It does not require supplies or costumes or volunteers. Waiting is the thing that happens after all the preparation has been made. Waiting is the thing that forces us to put our faith in provision that we do not provide. Waiting is the thing that finally allows this Corinthian church to gather together as one body. Paul closes this selection by reminding them that they were “called into the fellowship

of . . . Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9). Egos finally put aside, holy waiting happens together, a reminder that the real work of Advent preparation does not take place at the grocery store or in the online catalog, but rather in the ordinary worship of this extraordinary Creator.

Unsurprisingly, waiting appears elsewhere in the lectionary for this Advent Sunday. The psalmist longs for the restoration of Israel’s former might. Isaiah bids for the Lord to come and shake the earth with apocalyptic force (Isa. 64:1–3). In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus echoes this earth-shattering rhetoric, predicting the coming of the Son of Man and beckoning the disciples to a life of vigilance: “keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come” (Mark 13:35). There is urgency here, of course—even anxiety.

There is a gulf of sensibility between the heightened state of “watching” and the intentional slowness of “waiting.” The disciples in Jesus’ illustration are permitted neither sleep nor Sabbath. Paul, on the contrary, would insist on both, as regular reminders of the provision granted elsewhere. While both “watching” and “waiting” are clearly vital to the total imagination of the Christian life, the frenzy of our modern twenty-four-hour news cycle seems to make watchfulness the anxious default. Perhaps we need some reminding of what it is, instead, to wait quietly.

After all, it is only Paul’s voice among these lectionary texts that imagines the Advent season without the sound and fury of wind and thunder and earthquake, but, rather, within the simple, quiet bonds of fellowship and community. It is no surprise that his attention turns inward, away from the bombast of imperial politics, away from the melodrama of palace intrigue, to the rhythms and cycles and disagreements and reconciliations internal to this one small corner of Christ’s church. The coming of Christ into the world, Paul might say, may not be found in headlines that scream about the signs of the times. Nor may it be ours to create or produce or imagine into place. It may rather be ours only to anticipate: with grace, forgiveness, charity, mutuality, and all the other ties that bind us into one body as we gather to pray and to sing and to wait for the coming of the Christ child.

MATT GAVENTA

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In this passage, Paul provides the standard greeting in his letters to churches he serves. He begins with “grace” (*charis*). Since the great Reformation period of the Western church, there have been few words more powerful than “grace.” Paul’s second major word, however, is one of these remaining few powerful words. His second word of greeting is “peace” (*shalom*). This is a Hebrew greeting that captures a more powerful meaning than the English word “peace,” which usually means the absence of conflict, whereas *shalom* carries the proactive meaning of flourishing of the whole community. As Christians in Corinth learned to navigate a complicated first-century world, so we now navigate a twenty-first-century world in dire need of grace and peace.

Paul’s greeting may seem unsettling to us who lack such grace and peace. We become like a little child, frightened in the night. Her mother comes into her room to comfort her. “It’s okay,” she says to her daughter. “God is with you, even in the dark.” The little girl quickly responds, “But Mommy, I want someone with skin on.” In turn, Paul responds to the church of Corinth, “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). Paul’s theology sets the stage for the great debates of the church as to Jesus’ divine and human identity as he greets the Corinthian church in the mutuality of God and Jesus. What does all of this mean in a world today that has little patience with utopian words like “grace” and “peace,” and even with the mutuality within God? Put some skin on this idealism, people in the church of Corinth must have demanded—and we along with them. Sermons on this text might be able to provide connections with this question.

When Paul speaks of these matters, he does not do this only with words. Paul’s integrity lies in his optimism of grace and peace, not simply from an idealistic point of view, since in much of his life he ended up in prison, from which he wrote such optimistic greetings. Paul had quite the prison record! Some scholars surmise he served more than three years of his life as a prison inmate. The extensive list of letters

and materials he produced in prison ended up forming the Christian church. For example, in one of the first incarcerations at Philippi, the Jesus movement grew at such a pace that Paul and Silas ended up thereafter forming yet more churches (Acts 16:16–34). As Paul’s reputation spread, along with the sharing of the good news of Christ, so did stories of Paul’s suffering (Acts 21:10–13). Yet, in prison he remained optimistic in his understanding of grace and peace. He constantly sought the prayers of others as mentioned in his frequent stints of incarceration (Eph. 6:18–20; Phil. 4:2–4; Col. 4:10; Phlm. 13; 2 Tim. 4:9–18).

Paul becomes even more extraordinary in his serving time under trumped-up charges by the powerful who were intimidated by the Jesus movement. However, Paul does not take his suffering personally. He states, “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3). When Paul greets the church in his letter to the church of Corinth, he is not doing this simply out of a perfunctory obligation. His greeting is personal and heartfelt. We learn from Paul’s greeting of grace and peace a call to make sense of how one says such words while incarcerated.

One way to understand this is through his theology that Christians are called into “the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” What this fellowship means is that we also worship the convict Christ, who also made sense of grace and peace with the integrity of the cross. Sermons can introduce hearers to this image of Christ as convict, one wrongly accused, and reflect on how this might expand how we view persons wrongly accused and convicted. Others whom we also must admire in doing the same are more modern leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Nelson Mandela, whose prison experiences shed light on an extremely broken world worth fixing.

Paul believed the incarcerated could be redeemed. “He will also strengthen you to the

end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:8–9). However, many Americans do not believe this. The United States imprisons more people than any other country in the world. The repercussions are staggering. In 2016, some 5.7 million kids under the age of eighteen (around one out of every twelve American children) have had a parent incarcerated at some point in their lives. In 2004, over half the people in state prisons and nearly two-thirds of those in federal prisons were parents. In 2017, there were 225,060 women in prison, a 750% increase from 1980: 60% of these women have children under the age of eighteen. This is compounded by race, as African American women are incarcerated at a rate twice as high as their white counterparts. Nearly half of all parents lived with their children before becoming incarcerated, which leads to high rates in the termination of parental rights. This occurs because the average length of time a parent spends behind bars exceeds the amount of time children can spend in foster care before their parents’ rights are terminated.¹ Furthermore, new research shows that children face special long-term consequences of having had a parent incarcerated. These include higher rates of teen parenthood, increased likelihood of being charged with a felony, greater social isolation, and a higher risk of dropping out of high school.²

In light of this broken world, how does one practice the ideals of Jesus? My answer is through the concept of inhabitation or being called into fellowship with God. The goal of created life is to inhabit God. This might seem obvious, but it is not. Although I believe God always inhabits

our lives, because of seemingly irreconcilable differences among people, we seem far from inhabiting God. Theologically, in such a worldview, many caught up in an unfair world start out already behind. We see this with black and brown children taking standardized tests. We see this in the extreme comparisons of household incomes between black and white people.

Paul’s greeting and call into fellowship with Christ are extremely important, because inherent in such thought is that we do not have to worry about beginnings and endings, as long as we live in God. The vocation of a Christian inhabiting God is to see the limitless in the limited. Christians, however, who are Jesus’ disciples in the twenty-first century should not have a hard time seeing the limitless in the limited. Like Paul, the early Christians had a difficult time early on understanding how God’s kingdom was not only for Jews, but for Gentiles as well. This was a radical notion for early Christians, that God had reconciled the Gentiles. This was Jesus’ lesson to Paul and the rest of the disciples, namely, to stop practicing shallow forms of piety and instead practice living into the most profound relationship between God and humanity.

Today, in the twenty-first century, profound relationality between God and humanity in fact requires Jesus’ disciples to lose their control over what God reconciles. A prison chaplain once told me that most Western Christians do not believe in reconciliation, because we accept the prison system’s *raison d’être* to punish convicts. Our work today in responding to Paul’s greeting and inhabiting God’s fellowship expands such narrow vision. Sermons on this text can help to expand God’s vision of reconciliation and relationship.

MICHAEL BATTLE

1. “Incarcerated Women and Girls,” The Sentencing Project, June 6, 2019, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>.

2. Elizabeth J. Gifford, Lindsey Eldred Kozecke, and Megan Golonka, “Association of Parental Incarceration with Psychiatric and Functional Outcomes of Young Adults,” *JAMA Network Open* 2, no. 8 (August 23, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.10005>.

First Sunday of Advent

Mark 13:24–37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

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

²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.

³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

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

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Jesus spends the first days of his final week in Jerusalem fielding loaded questions from religious leaders in the temple (Mark 11:27–12:44). Such interrogation is scarcely surprising, given his dramatic table-toppling, business-disrupting entrance (11:15–16). Not normally given to histrionic displays, Jesus deliberately pushes the envelope at this critical juncture. He aims to be noticed, to drive home his prophetic challenge against a corrupt temple system that is failing miserably to be a sacred and safe “house of prayer for all the nations” (11:17; cf. Isa. 56:7).

Outside the temple, following Jesus’ debates with priestly and scribal officials, “one of his disciples” comments about its stunningly “large stones” and “large buildings” (Mark 13:1), owing to the recent renovation project of Herod the Great. Continuing his trenchant critique, however, Jesus responds by forecasting the total

destruction of this colossal facility: “Not one stone will be left here upon another” (13:2). Such an ominous announcement soon prompts Peter, James, John, and Andrew, the first called disciples (1:16–20) to ask Jesus: When and how are “all these [devastating] things . . . to be accomplished?” (13:4). They pose this question “privately” in a spot “on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple” (13:3). This “opposite” topographical position coincides with Jesus’ moral opposition to unfaithful temple leadership.

Our focal passage comprises the concluding segment of Jesus’ extended seminar with his confidants about impending cataclysmic events (13:5–37), portending the “end” (vv. 7, 13) of the present world order. He discloses a series of expected horrors surrounding the devastation of Jerusalem’s temple, including intensified eruptions of warfare, natural disasters, persecutions

of God's people, betrayals of familial trust, and false claims of messianic deliverance (vv. 5–23).

Such a devolutionary hell-in-a-handbasket worldview was typical of Jewish apocalyptic thinking rife in Jesus' day, born out of centuries of imperial conquest. As Babylonian armies in the sixth century BCE bulldozed the glorious temple built by Solomon, and Hellenistic forces in the second century desecrated the Second (rebuilt) Temple, it is no great leap to envision Rome's demolition of the Herodian (refurbished) temple—which *in fact happened in 70 CE*—some forty years after Jesus' death and only shortly after Mark penned his Gospel (65–70 CE). Mark's original audience was feeling the heat firsthand of the terrible scenario Jesus foresaw.

However, not all is gloom and doom. As prophetic warnings of unspeakable suffering and ruin throughout the Bible ultimately give way to hopes of salvation, restoration, and “new creation” (see the companion readings from Ps. 80 and Isa. 64, especially the wider context in Isa. 63:7–14 and 65:17–25), Mark's Jesus proceeds to highlight what will happen “in those days, *after that suffering*” (Mark 13:24, emphasis mine).

Jesus first drops one more bombshell, revealing that after *that* suffering we can expect the world to convulse in *more* suffering, of cosmic proportions, no less: darkening the sun and moon and shaking the stars and “the powers in the heavens” (13:24–25). Well, where is the hope in that, which seems for all the world to be the absolute *end* of the world? Here we confront a key point of biblical interpretation: taking scriptural language seriously does not mean taking it all literally. The Bible uses many dramatic images, metaphors, and figures of speech for effect—for *serious* effect, to be sure, but not actual representation.

The extinguishing and unmooring of celestial lights vividly conveys a theological, not astronomical, reality: the collapse of the moral, spiritual, social, and political order of things, a precipitous dystopian descent into the abyss, “lights out” for the universe. The dethroned ineffectual cosmic “powers” stand in for the demonic, despotic earthly powers that exploit the least and lowly and plunder the environment

for their own profit.¹ They will finally be snuffed out, Jesus implies, but so will everything else! So where is the good in that?

Amid the prospect of this final shakeup and shutdown of the nefarious world system pulses the promise of *another Power* coming from heaven to earth, bringing heaven to earth, re-creating heaven and earth from their crumbling, decaying present state (“heaven and earth will pass away” [13:31]) to their original “very good” design (Gen. 1:31). This renewing force is in fact a *Person*, “the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory” to gather and succor his beloved, beleaguered people “from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:26–27).

This “Son of Man” (“Human One” [CEB]) figure, whose climactic, restorative advent Jesus expects, echoes Daniel's hope for “one like a human being [son of man] coming with the clouds of heaven” to rescue the faithful sufferers in Israel during the brutal period of Greek-Syrian rule, resisted by Maccabean freedom fighters (167–164 BCE) (Dan. 7:13; cf. 7:14, 23–27). Consistently, Mark's Gospel identifies *Jesus himself* as the consummate Son of Man, God's agent of liberation for those beset by sin, sickness, and slavery (Mark 2:10, 28; 10:45), the Human One destined to die in solidarity with all victims of injustice, but then to *rise again* on the third day (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33–34) and *come again* to finalize God's peaceful, right-making realm (8:38–9:1; 13:26–27; 14:62).

Mark's faithful readers throughout the generations gratefully affirm Jesus' redemptive ministry and resurrection on the third day following his death, but in the throes of persisting struggles, with the first disciples we wonder *when this final advent* will happen. Jesus offers two mini-parables to address this pressing issue.

First, an arboreal analogy: as the fig tree's sprouting new leaves from tender branches signals “summer is near,” so accelerating world-shaking events portend the *nearness* of the Son of Man's return, as if he were standing “at the very gates” of a new kingdom (13:28–31). From the start, Jesus exclaimed and embodied God's restorative mission: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God *has come near*” (1:15, emphasis

1. See Eph. 6:10–12; Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

mine). Much work remains to be done, with no time to waste. The amassing of Roman legions at Jerusalem's gates in Mark's day makes Jesus' ultimate "gate"-way advent all the more urgent.

Jesus does *not* come within "this generation" (13:30) to rescue God's people from Rome's rampage in 70 CE. While many believers, then and since, have attested to Christ's fortifying spiritual presence during tough times, others have wondered how *near* he really was, lamenting with the psalmist, "How long, O LORD?" (Ps. 13:1). To which Jesus gives an honest, though not entirely reassuring, answer: "No one knows"—including the angels and *Son of Man himself*—but God alone. To clarify, "*about that day or hour* no one knows" (Mark 13:32, emphasis mine): "nearness" is a relative concept; indeed, the whole notion of God's relationship to time remains a mystery. The biblical aphorism

that "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years" (2 Pet. 3:8; cf. Ps. 90:4) provides only so much comfort when someone (or some nation) is in crisis.

The second parable, drawn from managerial life (Mark 13:32–37), addresses conduct during an uncertain interim. As a traveling estate owner puts his servants to their assigned tasks and posts a trusted keeper at the door/gate to his property while he is away, so Jesus entrusts the work of God's realm to his followers while they await his gateway return at *whatever hour*, convenient or not. The watchword is *Watch!*—along with the closely related *Wake!* This final section is framed by the exhortations "Keep alert" (v. 33)/"Keep awake" (v. 37), in faithful service, in active waiting, in hopeful expectation that our labor is not in vain.

F. SCOTT SPENCER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Mark's apocalyptic predictions of the arrival of the Messiah prevent the church from sliding into the pagan comforts of the pre-Christmas season. The Messiah's return is going to rock the world and your life. Get ready! Mark throws cold water over a church that sees the arrival of the Messiah in sappy, sentimental ways. Welcome to Advent.

Whether or not this sounds like good news depends partly on a listener's and a community's social location. A preacher will do well to help hearers notice and process their own reactions. To a community like the city where I reside, with one of the highest per capita murder rates in the country, the end of suffering and the arrival of the Son of Man is welcome news. "Son of Man" is a double reference for Jesus. It can be translated as "Human One," designating Jesus as a human being among other human beings, reinforcing his humanity. It also connects Jesus with the exalted, apocalyptic human figure in Daniel 7.

This "human one" has come to disrupt and to save the world. Stars fall and the moon darkens; the heavens notice and react! The world refuses to go on spinning as if drastic change is not

desperately required. Yet to those who are insulated from this suffering, or complicit in it, this arrival may sound terrifying. We may resonate with both sorts of reactions. Where do we long for deliverance in our world, and which parts of us need to change in preparation? Perhaps we long for deliverance from illness, an inability to find economic security, or from routines that no longer bring us life. Others may need to rearrange our lives to use less of the earth's resources, to share more with our neighbors in need, or to shift from a winner-take-all mentality toward openhearted hospitality. A preacher could point beyond the lives of individuals to the culture of a church, a community, or even a nation, asking the same questions.

Another point of connection is with Mark's tension between clear signs of the impending arrival of the Son of Man and the fact that no one knows when this will take place. Copious examples exist of Christians through the ages who sought to pinpoint the time of the Lord's coming—in spite of this declaration by Jesus (Mark 13:32). The preacher can point to the futility of naming that time, as well as invite listeners to examine the places in our own lives

where we look to time as the main source of our hope. “Time heals all” is offered as a word of comfort following the death of a loved one; athletes are encouraged to push through pain in order to reach a goal; teenagers are encouraged to forgo sleep for a time in order to study and do well on an exam.

In all of these examples, knowledge that the current difficulty will not last much longer is fuel for the stamina that is needed to endure. Mark seems to locate that fuel for stamina not in the knowledge of time but in the trustworthiness of God. Congregants could be encouraged to review their own lives, or a congregation its own history, to notice the faithfulness of God through difficult circumstances.

Another point of connection is with Mark’s rich imagery, beginning with the metaphor of staying awake. The danger for believers, according to Mark, is not a dramatic rejection of the faith or refusal to step up in a critical moment. It is the practice of being lulled to sleep, of losing vision for God’s presence and power before that presence and power come to full fruition. Neuroscience reinforces this notion by speaking of stages of sleep, which begin with the brain disengaging from the external world. Next, the brain shifts toward a kind of in-between stage that is not characterized as sleep by those who are forcibly awakened from it. We do not seem conscious of our own entry into the sleep process. The process of sleep progresses in these stages such that it is impossible for the one falling asleep to accurately define the point at which she actually “fell asleep.” Falling asleep might be more accurately described as sliding into sleep.

Perhaps a fall from faith happens in the same way. A community might be encouraged to examine their individual lives for places where their faith has begun to slide, or to look at their life as a community. Many Christian denominations with a checkered history in race relations have begun detailing their involvement in such things as theological defenses of slavery, the uses of slave labor for the building of institutions, and the unrepentant use of violence against people of color.

While these histories unfolded during a time when the dominant culture accepted white

supremacy as “true” and defended it with civil power, nonetheless there were white Christians who accurately recognized the evils of racism and called other Christians to repent of this injustice. For example, the Rev. John Rankin, whose writings shaped notable abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Henry Ward Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, preached against slavery in the first few months of his ordination in Tennessee in the early 1800s. Though their numbers were small, people like Rankin “stayed awake” when so many others slid into deathly sleep.

Following the metaphor even further, the text suggests that the role of believers may not always be to “win” through heroic acts of greatness, but to hold fast, especially in times when victory is not in sight. It brings to mind the children’s story of the tortoise and the hare. The heroic (and arrogant) rabbit is sure that his natural talent will win the race. The tortoise concedes his limitations but stays “slow and steady” to win the race.

Eugene Peterson, speaking at a ministers’ conference, once compared the church to the movement of a glacier. The advance of a glacier is a slow process, moving on average less than one meter per day; but the glacier’s movement crushes and redistributes rock, carving out canyons, making way for rivers, moving the earth in extraordinary ways. Staying true to God’s way may not move mountains in a quick moment, but in God’s time it reshapes the world in the church’s wake.

Finally, the text offers the image of Christ as a person on a journey, who has left us servants in charge, each with a responsibility for a portion of the household. Viewing one’s community as having responsibility for a little corner of God’s household until Christ returns has all kinds of implications for the church. First, the church exists not for itself but in order to steward whatever corner of the world God has charged us to tend. A congregation should be invited to see its mission not as the work of a single committee, but as the work of God.

Baking casseroles for the hungry, providing shelter for those without, speaking up for the preservation of creation that does not belong to us: these are acts we undertake in order to

fulfill the responsibilities that God has given to us, both individually and collectively as the church. Where is the congregation continuing to support that mission that Christ would have us undertake in partnership with God? In addition, no one is an owner in the church. We are servants in Christ's church. Our allegiance

is with Christ, and our individual work makes sense only in relationship to the shared work of others who have been similarly entrusted with responsibilities for tending to God's work of healing, loving, proclaiming, and holding fast while the Lord is away.

ANDREW FOSTER CONNORS

Second Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 40:1–11
Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Peter 3:8–15a
Mark 1:1–8

Isaiah 40:1–11

¹Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

¹⁰See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Isaiah 40:1–11 comes at a critical juncture in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 36–39 reports events at the end of the reign of King Hezekiah, when the Assyrians destroyed many towns of Judah and besieged Jerusalem (see parallel accounts in 2 Kgs. 18:13–37; 2 Chr. 32:1–19). Jerusalem miraculously escaped when the Assyrian king Sennacherib withdrew his troops from Judah’s capital and returned to Nineveh, where his sons assassinated him (Isa. 37:36–38; 2 Kgs. 19:35–37). Isaiah 39 reports that Hezekiah’s life ended in peace (Isa. 39:8), but before his death envoys from Babylon arrived and saw the treasures of Jerusalem (Isa. 39:1–4). This visit presaged Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of many of its citizens that would occur in 587 BCE (Isa. 39:5–7).

Isaiah 40:1–11 begins a new section of the book, often called Second Isaiah (Isa. 40–55). These chapters assume the destruction of Isaiah 39 has occurred and now promise that God will restore Judah’s fortunes. The double imperative in verse 1 (“Comfort, O comfort my people”) sums up the whole unit. The comfort God offers Jerusalem and its people is that “she has served her term” (Isa. 40:2). Now God directs messengers to deliver the news that salvation is at hand.

The lection has four sections (vv. 1–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–11). Verses 1–2 call for messengers to comfort God’s people. “Comfort” is a plural imperative. Many scholars believe the addressees were members of God’s heavenly council, similar to those in Isaiah 6:1–3 and 1 Kings 22. In verses 3–5 one of the heavenly beings issues another imperative: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.” Then another voice (presumably another heavenly courtier) calls, “Cry out!” and a voice answers, “What shall I cry?” (v. 6). The question arises from the problem of human weakness. Humans are like grass that springs up after a rain, but quickly fades in the sun (vv. 6b–8a). The promise, however, is that God’s word is constant and does not fail (v. 8b). Imperatives return in the final section (vv. 9–11), as a voice calls the Holy City Jerusalem to proclaim the good news.

Zion, the name of the hilltop where the temple was located, is here a synonym for Jerusalem. The “good tidings” (v. 9a) are essentially that “God comes with might” (v. 10) and shepherds Israel, the helpless flock (v. 11).

Verses 1–2 respond to the crisis for Jerusalem that Isaiah 39 foresaw. The entire book of Isaiah, however, is concerned with the plight of Jerusalem, and every segment of Isaiah 40:1–11 speaks to that theme.¹ Isaiah 1:1 introduces the book as “the vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” Isaiah 1:2–6 then indicts the nation for its sinfulness, and subsequent verses point out the danger Jerusalem faces as a result (Isa. 1:7–9): “daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.” Much of the remainder of Isaiah 1–39 alternates between judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (e.g., 1:21–23; 2:6–22; 3:13–15; 5:1–7) and the impending crisis (e.g., 3:1–12; 4:1–6; 5:24–30; 29:1–4), and promises of restoration and the central place of Jerusalem in God’s plans for all nations (e.g., 2:1–5; 26:1–2; 30:19–26). Isaiah 40:1–11 is a profound expression of the promise of restoration that dominates the second major part of the book of Isaiah (Isa. 40–55).

Isaiah 40:3–5 shares with Isaiah 35 a vision of a highway through the wilderness. In both passages the purpose of the highway is the return of God’s people to Judah. Wilderness areas were not ideal for travel. The lack of natural resources, along with dangers associated with isolation, caused many to avoid travel in such places. The miracle in Isaiah 35 and 40:1–11 is that the wilderness becomes a fertile and safe place, ideal for travel, because God transforms it. In Isaiah 35 the highway is for God’s people to travel in safety, presumably to return from exile, whereas in Isaiah 40:3–5 the highway is a royal road prepared for the divine king to retrieve the exiles and shepherd them home.

One of the most interesting connections within Isaiah concerns the voices that speak in verses 6–8. The extent of the connection,

1. See Christopher R. Seitz, *Zion’s Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah, A Reassessment of Isaiah 36–39* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

however, depends on the interpretation of the voice. The verb that the NRSV translates “I said” has three Hebrew consonants (Hebrew was written originally without vowels) that could indeed be a first-person verb form. The scribes who passed the Hebrew on to us, however, included vowels that suggest a third-person form, which is also possible (thus “he said” or “one said”). Most Christian interpreters have opted for the first-person form. It suggests that a prophet speaks in response to the imperative “Cry out!” If this is the right interpretation, it makes a strong connection with the call vision of Isaiah in chapter 6. There Isaiah sees a vision of God’s heavenly council; when he hears members of the council speaking, he responds in first-person speech and offers to be the messenger of God (Isa. 6:5, 8).

Verses 9–11 complete the unit with a familiar image of God as shepherd. The shepherd, however, is also a warrior. The road through the wilderness perhaps has a military campaign in mind, as kings built roads for that purpose.

Isaiah 40:1–11 has its most important connection with the New Testament in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth and early ministry. All four Gospels quote portions of verses 3–5. Each Gospel identifies John the Baptist with Isaiah 40:3–5. In Matthew 3:1–3, Mark 1:1–3, and Luke 3:1–6 he is “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness” to announce the coming of the Messiah. Readers of both testaments will notice, however, that the Gospel references to the voice crying out are different from Isaiah 40:3. The Hebrew tradition has a major accent

at the expression “cries out” that approximates our colon. Thus it reads “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.’” The Gospel writers, however, quote from the Greek version, which reads “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness . . .” The Greek version thus made for an easy application to John the Baptist, who appeared in the wilderness and voiced the call to prepare.

The passage also has an important thematic connection to passages that speak of human weakness in relation to the reliability of God. Verses 6–8 declare that humans “are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.” This speaks to the brevity of human life in general, but more importantly it refers to the unreliability of humans and human leaders. Isaiah 40:1–11 gives hope for restoration in the wake of a trauma that included the end of Davidic kingship. It promises restoration for Jerusalem, but not for Israel’s monarchy.

This theological dilemma stands behind Psalm 90, which shares the same image of the grass that withers and flower that fades (see Ps. 90:5–6). The language of Isaiah 40:6–8 appears also almost verbatim in Psalm 103:15–18. Isaiah 40–55 and Psalms 90–106, more than any other part of the canon, hone in on this problem with the promise that God is reliable, even though human rulers fail.² The preacher would do well to highlight the passage’s contrast of human and divine leadership and the assurance that “the word of our God will stand forever.”

JEROME F. D. CREACH

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Isaiah 40:1–11 is like a cool drink on a sweltering day, a lover’s embrace after a long separation, a powerful promise that transforms our perspective. Amid the dangers and tragedies of our lives, the divine vow in verses 1–2 announces the life-changing experience of God’s tenderness and comfort. This grand promise—so great as to be almost beyond the reach of hope and trust—will revolutionize our identity and vocation.

Culturally the force and anticipation of these verses come to life in the stark depiction of great contrasts. As we experience daily the demonization of strangers and immigrants, the urge to build ever-higher walls around nations and neighborhoods, the fiery rhetoric in legislatures and even neighborhood meetings, we come to expect less and less of God and one another. We understand each other in ways all too superficial

2. See Jerome Creach, “The Shape of Book Four of the Psalter and the Shape of Second Isaiah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 80 (1998): 63–76.

and settled, captured and warped by the brokenness of our lives. Yet in the face of vehemence and pessimism, this Scripture pugnaciously announces a fierce and firm hope. There *is* divine presence in the wilderness. God *will* comfort and carry those abandoned through the rough places.

Sermons faithful to this great promise will point clearly to the preeminent danger facing us, but not the one hearers first expect. The danger is not an openness that leaves us vulnerable to our neighbors, nor the perils of genuine community. The greatest hazard is the loss of soul and spirit as we close ourselves off from one another, as we cut away any risks that might lead to joy, as we refuse to believe that God could care enough to comfort us and others in distress.

God upends all our expectations as the Holy One breaks into our world. God appears in places of radical surprise, comforting those in trouble, smoothing the rough places, declaring a hope beyond the limits of our days, gathering and carrying all of us wounded and broken. The preaching of this text will be grounded in these divine aspirations for us all.

Socially we have made ourselves far too much at home with our emaciated experiences of communal life. Each day reveals our alienation from neighbors. Without hope and trust, we no longer envision life together. We think we are at an end as we witness wildfires run amok and earthquakes destroying the landscape in the blink of an eye. We have become convinced that the personal tragedies of cancer and divorce and bankruptcy somehow mirror the natural disasters of our world.

In this moment, the preacher has the opportunity to point to divine redemption, to opportunities for the church to share and declare God's goodness. Hope and trust spring from the seemingly smallest acts, in a friendly wave, a heartfelt greeting, a simple hallway prayer. They grow through a hospital visit or a lengthy conversation or a neighbor's willingness to help when desert and wilderness seem to surround us. God enables us to discover the bedrock of the circle of community, not give ourselves over to the walls of division. We are all in this together.

Ethically, the preaching of this text invites the hearers to join in God's good work, vivifying and fulfilling the sometimes-withered dreams of human life. Sermons will open possibilities of

genuine connections with students at Title 1 schools, immigrants making their way in a new country, people of color who labor under the history of five hundred years of oppression in America, members of the LGBTQ community who wonder if God's promises include them. This text announces salvation for the condemned, comfort for the distressed, healing for the broken, sustenance for the weary, all with tenderness and comfort. The preaching of this Scripture will enable us to stand alongside our neighbors, not stand above them as the privileged "people of God."

Liturgically, these verses invite us to open our eyes and ears to the mystery and wonder of the divine presence. In ways we do not recognize, God is among us and our neighbors in the harsh valleys of depression and despair and the overwhelming mountains of addiction or debt. The radical good news is the Holy One who is with us and for us, even if we believe that God simply could not care enough to show up.

Ecclesially, the preaching of this text will point to the conviction of verse 5, "The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together." Glory is not reserved for us. God's beauty will become evident in the wilderness, through the desert, on a journey that is rough and uneven. This is no pristine glory that comes only in a beautiful sanctuary among God's perfect people. No. God's glory comes through the chiaroscuro of our experience, the contrast of ups and downs that forms our days. The depth of God's goodness is made real to all people, all who yearn for grace and goodness. The preaching of this text will invite hearers to open themselves to everyone around them, both within and far beyond the walls of the church, to look and listen for the ways God is revealing the divine self.

Personally, this text becomes the opportunity for all who hear the proclamation of this prophecy to find themselves renewed and see themselves whole. The divine voice renounces any misguided attempt by us to start from scratch, to wipe our slate clean. Instead, our wilderness places, our betrayals and disappointments, our pains of loss and regret are caught up in the glory of God's appearing. No past burden or suffering can delay God's deliverance.

In the words of Felix Mendelssohn's great oratorio *St. Paul*, "Happy and blest are they

All for the Sake of God

The “voice of the Word that cries out” is each person’s conscious awareness of his offenses, crying out, as it were, from the hidden place of the heart: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” To be sure, a clear and obvious “preparation” of the divine way is the transformation and correction of one’s manner of life and thought to what is better, along with the purification of former defilements. The good and glorious “way” is the life of virtue, on which, as if on a way, the Word unfolds the course of salvation in each person through faith, indwelling and walking about by means of the various ordinances and doctrines consistent with virtue and knowledge. The “paths” of the Word are the different modes of the virtues and the different modes of living according to God, that is, behaviors consistent with God. These paths are made straight by those who give no thought to pursuing the ascetic life or the study of the divine words for the sake of glory or as a cloak for personal advantage, or from love of flattery and popularity, or to engage in self-display—but all that they do and say and think is for the sake of God. For the divine Word is not of a nature to enjoy frequenting roads that are not straight, even if among some men He should find the way prepared. I mean something like this. If someone fasts and avoids a mode of life that excites the passions, and does all the other things that are able to contribute to his deliverance from evil, he has “prepared” what is called “the way.” But if someone else undertakes these practices out of self-esteem, love of flattery, the desire to please men, or for another reason other than to please God, he did not “make straight the paths” of God, and whereas he endured the labor of preparing the way, he did not have God walking on his paths. This is to say the “way” of the Lord is virtue, and the “straight path” is the upright and guileless manner of virtue.

Maximus the Confessor, *On the Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 259–60.

who have endured, for though the body dies, the soul shall live forever.” God honors us, not by erasing our mistakes and flaws, but instead *through* these very experiences. Endurance and persistence, through the coarsening forces and consuming fires of human existence, become the key threads uniting the tapestry of our lives. They are the precursors to God’s tender and untamed advent.

The preaching moment and the expression of these verses can never be the pristine, set-apart vision of a painter, transferred in intricate detail onto canvas, but instead will reflect the rough-and-tumble of genuine human life, lives experienced by congregants. This text leads us to an open stance, embracing every aspect of our existence, living it all in God’s presence. This honesty prepares us for the revelation of God’s glory, caught up in the context of our personal journey. The sermon becomes an opportunity for an unusual depth of reflection. What are the

ways we discover comfort? How have we experienced tenderness? What do comfort and tenderness mean in a world in which we so rarely encounter them? The preaching of this text will invite us to reflect on those queries with persistence and determination, as we move toward the coming of Christ.

Perhaps this is the most pressing demand of the preaching of these verses, that we are willing and able to have our expectations completely upended, especially at Advent. The Advent setting of these verses speaks with power, proclaiming that God will be found right when all hope seems loss. The Holy One declares that we will encounter mercy and goodness beyond any human expectation. Because of God’s promise, we have a future as we look ahead in this season of expectation. We find comfort in the wilderness, tenderness in the rough places, glory even as we acknowledge our fading presence.

GLEN BELL

Second Sunday of Advent

Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13

- ¹LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
- ²You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.
-
- ⁸Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
- ⁹Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- ¹⁰Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
- ¹¹Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.
- ¹²The LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.
- ¹³Righteousness will go before him,
and will make a path for his steps.

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

As was the case with the first reading and the Psalter lection for the First Sunday of Advent, the readings for today come from Isaiah and Book III of the Psalter. Again, both texts seem to derive from and/or relate closely to the exile and its aftermath. Isaiah 40:1–11 marks a major turning point in Isaiah. The book moves suddenly from an eighth-century-BCE setting to a mid-sixth-century setting, as so-called Second Isaiah proclaims an end to the Babylonian exile. Even if the people had deserved to be exiled in Babylon, they have served their time. According to the prophet, their “penalty is paid” (Isa. 40:2), and they can now return home to Jerusalem (vv. 3–5). Psalm 85 begins with the words, “you restored the fortunes” (Ps. 85:1), a phrase that is regularly used to describe the end of the exile. Although the exile is over, there is still the need for further deliverance, as the petitions in verses 4–7 suggest, beginning with “Restore us again” (v. 4). In this regard, Psalm 85 replicates the situations of Psalm 80 and Isaiah 64:1–9 from last

week: deliverance has occurred in the past, but further divine action is needed and requested.

Given the similarities between the texts for the First and Second Sundays of Advent, we might want to consider that these texts portray the perennial situation of the people of God: we always find ourselves between the times. We can always recall and celebrate past deliverances; at the same time, we will always need to pray, “Restore us again.” Advent is a time to remind ourselves that while Christ has come and is with us, we and the church and the world are not as God would have us be. The need for restoration and renewal is perennial.

The traditional response is that Christ will return to set us and the world right (see Mark 13:24–37 from last week and 2 Pet. 3:8–15a for this week). To be sure, not everyone views the second coming of Christ as a literal event, but even those who view it symbolically must take the future, as well as the present, into account. Isaiah can help. In the midst of circumstances

in which some people concluded that God was absent or on leave (see Isa. 40:27), the prophet dared to proclaim the good news that God was present: “Here is your God!” (Isa. 40:9). He goes on to say that this good news offers “peace” and “salvation” (Isa. 52:7; see the same words in Ps. 85:8–10).

As Edgar Conrad points out, the book of Isaiah proclaims deliverance from the Assyrian threat, and it narrates such deliverance (see Isa. 10:12–19; 36:1–39:8). It also proclaims, as in Isaiah 40:1–11, deliverance from the Babylonian exile, but it does *not* explicitly narrate such deliverance. Thus, Conrad concludes that the book of Isaiah in its final form invites the people of God in every generation to live toward a future that is entrusted to God, that is genuinely open, and that will be shaped by our participation in response to the promise of God’s presence with us.¹

Where does that leave us this Advent? As 2 Peter 3:8–15a suggests, we are waiting, but not passively. As the author puts it, “while you are waiting, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish” (2 Pet. 3:14). This is active waiting, energized by the conviction that, as Isaiah 40:9 affirms, God is present among us. The New Testament affirms that through the presence of the Holy Spirit, Christ is already and always present among us; this is why some Christians consider the second coming a symbol rather than an event; that is, Jesus is not coming back, because he is already here! In any case, whether expecting a literal return of Jesus or living toward a future entrusted to God in the presence of the living Christ, we live amid ongoing chaos, along with its destructive effects, toward a future that God wills and promises.

Psalm 85:8–13 shows us what that future looks like and, indeed, what our present will be if we are faithful and if we recognize that God is here. For people, then and now, who are ready to listen, “the LORD will speak” (Ps. 85:8). “For those who fear him” (v. 9), that is, who trust God and entrust their lives and futures to God, there will be the experience of life as God intends, which is what the Bible means by “salvation” (see Isa. 52:7; Ps. 85:4, 9).

What will the God-willed life look like? In a beautiful poetic description, the psalmist personifies the major aspects of God’s character and will: steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace. They meet and embrace (Ps. 85:10); they pervade the earth, above and below (v. 11). We can be even more concrete. Amid the lovely poetry, there is one much more prosaic line. It is verse 12: “The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.” Very tangible evidence of God’s presence is food! The Advent and Christmas seasons are times when we share food with the needy, and we should. That we have enough food is reason to celebrate God’s presence. That we share what we have is to live toward the future that God intends for all.

It would be helpful on this Sunday to view the colorful print by John August Swanson titled *Psalm 85*. It depicts a scene of people growing and sharing food, and the words of Psalm 85:8–13 are inscribed in the earth and sky. Swanson’s visual art conveys what the psalmist’s literary art conveys: in a real sense, the peace, the life that God intends, begins with sharing food. We do so as part of our mission, and we do so as part of our liturgy: “Take, eat. . . . Do this in remembrance of me.”

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

1. Edgar Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 52–82, 154–62.

Second Sunday of Advent

2 Peter 3:8–15a

⁸But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? ¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ^{15a}and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The brief epistle known as 2 Peter appears only twice in the three-year lectionary cycle. The first is in Year A, as 2 Peter 1:16–21 claims personal recollection of the events of Transfiguration Sunday. The second is here in Year B, on the Second Sunday of Advent, as exhortations to preparation line the pathway toward the incarnation. In both cases 2 Peter rests in the lectionary shadow of dramatic Gospel readings—Matthew’s take on the transfiguration, Mark’s take on John the Baptist’s call to preparation—and it may therefore be the case that 2 Peter only rarely makes its way into the center of the congregational preaching moment. Something is lost, however, in this exclusion, because 2 Peter offers a perspective on Advent preparation, and Advent waiting, that might provide a degree of honesty and conviction necessary for modern ears.

Hearers may need some reminder of the context in which this document appears. Second Peter begins with an authorial claim: “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith as precious as ours” (2 Pet. 1:1). Nevertheless, despite the author’s pretense of personal witness to the

transfiguration (1:16–18), modern scholarship exhibits widespread skepticism regarding whether Peter himself penned this letter. Of particular note is that the author references “our beloved brother Paul” and “all his letters” (3:15–16), the corpus that may not have been formed and circulated until well toward the end of the first century. In addition, the structure and form of the Greek in 2 Peter suggests an author of relatively educated and privileged station, some degree removed from the disciple’s more humble roots. Therefore, it seems likely that the editors of the canon saw value in 2 Peter, not because of its authorship but, rather, because of the theological claims embedded in the text, particularly for a church emerging from the first century of its witness.

The late dating of this letter is critical to understanding the tone of our lectionary selection. More than a few Advent Sundays come with readings from the Pauline epistles about the work of waiting for the imminent coming of Jesus Christ: Paul tells the Romans that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day

is near” (Rom. 13:11–12, Year A, Advent 1). In these and similar verses Paul is reassuring communities who had begun to grow impatient with God’s timetable that the second coming was nonetheless just around the corner. Some decades later, however, 2 Peter’s audience exhibits even less patience. Just prior to today’s verses, “scoffers” have appeared—close relatives of the “false prophets” that so regularly show up in the epistles—and they have run out of patience entirely: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” (2 Pet. 3:3–4).

Second Peter’s response to this skepticism seems marked by the years that have passed since Paul’s confident words in Romans. Instead of preaching imminence, 2 Peter responds with philosophical inquiry into the nature of time itself. The response begins with an appeal to the words of Psalm 90, that “with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day” (2 Pet. 3:8, remembering Ps. 90:4). The urgency of Paul’s watchfulness has dissipated. In its place, 2 Peter cautions its readership not to hold God too closely to regular human calendars and seasons. God operates in God’s time. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Pet. 3:10), unexpectedly and without warning.

In fact the schedule of God’s coming is so opaque that 2 Peter omits the familiar exhortations to human patience and watchfulness. The focus instead is on in what condition its readers might wish to be discovered at whatever time God does in fact appear: “Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation” (3:14).

What 2 Peter’s readers might perceive as God’s delay is actually something like grace: “The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (3:9). Patience, of course, is a familiar biblical virtue, one of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, one of the “clothes” of “God’s chosen ones” in Colossians 3:12.

It is rare, however, that the New Testament speaks of *God’s* patience. First Peter remembers

God waiting patiently during the building of Noah’s ark (1 Pet. 3:20). However, this invocation is meant more as a model for appropriate human behavior, the origin story for all the other patience-as-virtue arguments. Romans 2 perhaps finds the most striking parallel with our lectionary selection, as Paul invokes God’s patience as a similar opportunity for discipleship: “Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).

Second Peter has therefore turned the delay of God’s coming into good news for an audience that had otherwise grown tired of waiting. This marks a striking contrast with the other lectionary texts for Advent 2, which find good news precisely in the immediacy of this divine action. The familiar words of Isaiah 40, of course, proclaim comfort to the Israelites in exile, the promise of imminent liberation to people who have been in captivity. Mark’s Gospel finds these words again on the lips of John the Baptist, offering what must have surely sounded like messianic promise to Jews living under Roman occupation: “The one who is more powerful than I is coming. . . . I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:7–8). Even the psalm for the day finds signs of imminent divine activity at work among the people of God: “Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him” (Ps. 85:9). Each of these texts in its own way pleads urgently for God’s intervention into human affairs, particularly for people who need liberation, salvation, and rescue. Not so much for 2 Peter, which imagines an audience that might benefit from having a bit more time to get its act together before God shows up.

There is something honest therefore for contemporary ears about 2 Peter’s placement in the Advent lectionary—and not only because it imagines an audience, much like most contemporary Christians, that has largely abandoned the expectation that Jesus Christ will return within our measurable generation. For modern Christians of privilege and means, 2 Peter offers an even more convicting degree of familiarity, because it imagines an audience without the urgent need for liberation, but rather with the

urgent need to get their house in order lest the Day of the Lord actually arrive.

The striking perspective of this text should remind us that divine judgment has always been much better news for those on the bottom than it is for those who live lives of relative comfort and convenience. There is some irony to the ritual practice of wealthy and privileged Christians gathering for Advent worship,

hearing Scriptures originally written to people in bondage, and praying “Come, Lord Jesus,” as if the coming of Lord Jesus would not immediately bring judgment upon that very wealth and privilege. Perhaps the words of 2 Peter deserve the better opportunity to beckon us toward an incarnation that brings to the comfortable not comfort, but rather the call to transformation.

MATT GAVENTA

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Because of Christ’s reconciling work, Peter invites Christians to change their erroneous perceptions from a vengeful god to the God who is patient, wanting no one to perish. Out of this goal, Christian spiritual practices should result in being imaginative, overcoming provincial thinking about the givenness of a broken world. Peter’s perception of God takes us ultimately into what Christians offer the world: God’s life where we all may stay alive and flourish through creative practices and habits of reconciliation.

This is why the church wisely set up the apostolic succession, to remind us all that God will resurrect the dead, that God will release our limits. The women at Jesus’ tomb were the first such apostles with this proclamation. Christians today have the same message, to remind the world that God’s redemption is relentless. There is a problem, however: we have an impossible “job” proclaiming such good news. There are important connections for sermons in this text that will help preachers in their job of proclaiming this good news.

It may be tempting to assume and live out a pessimistic anthropology of depraved humanity, unable to change itself. Although there are tendencies in all of us toward destruction, we are all capable of inhabiting goodness and flourishing. We ought not to take lightly the gravity of current politics or the dwindling institutional church, both of which are impacted by various degrees of human depravity. Rather, Christian

responsibility is to live in God’s intentions for us. Anyone not practicing an intentional spiritual life can easily become like the person saying those things that one did not intend to say and, more importantly, becoming the person that one did not intend to become.

Peter’s coaching here for all of us is that we need intentional spiritual practices that help us see God differently from the caricature we would like to see. Practices like keeping up with the current events through responsible news services and praying intentionally every day increase our vision to see past caricatures and stereotypes. Practices like travel provide a better frame of reference to see how our own context is not the only one God indwells. Because of such practices I define reconciliation as the wholehearted process of yielding negative conflict in exchange for God’s positive outcome.¹

Those who practice this yielding process envision a new heaven and a new earth. Peter puts it this way: we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. This is not an enterprise of standing around passively. Rather, waiting for God is more a perspective that sees beyond what seems inevitably violent and dystopian. I have written on this theme of working cooperatively with God to change a broken and violent world.² Such work must not be mistaken for making matters worse in the surreptitious support of dysfunctional religious worldviews and oppressive governments.

1. I am indebted here to the Jewish theologian David Blumenthal and his definition of reconciliation. Blumenthal offers us additional insight into interreligious reconciliation by first understanding what the other religion understands the process of reconciliation to be. See David Blumenthal, “Repentance and Forgiveness,” *Cross Currents* 48, no. 1 (1998): 75–82.

2. For example, see Michael Battle, *Practicing Reconciliation in a Violent World* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005).

How do we overcome the angst and fear that make our work as current-day apostles so impossible, to remind people that even the dead can be resurrected? We need more examples of those who work for reconciliation by yielding the negative to gain the positive, not just for our current contentious issues, but for our constant crises that arise in the church and the world. The existence of Christians should guard against the despair that seeks to define existence.

Herein is the blessing and curse of religion; namely, without a religious worldview there is little recourse to understanding hope in a naturally violent world. The curse of religion is in the totalitarian and overcompensating worldviews seeking to alleviate any room for doubt and healthy skepticism. Nevertheless, we need the vision of new heavens and a new earth that reconciliation provides for seeing the larger picture. Although human life assumes the limitation of creation, the good news is that such life envisioned in Christ also assumes the infinite Creator, whose ways may not be our ways but who made it a point to invite us into them nonetheless. What exactly about reconciliation are we being invited into?

The process of reconciliation invites constructive ways of facing the truth. For example, in Bill Moyers's research on Archbishop Desmond Tutu's work in South Africa, we are invited to commit ourselves again and again to the communal dimensions of what truth and reconciliation can do for us.³ In South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africans practiced the capacity of recognizing truth and reconciliation, although painful and still controversial. South Africans practiced how erroneous thoughts and actions in oneself are more than careless mistakes. In short, they practiced contrition, which is the ability to see a harmful pattern emerging in self and community. Before there can be constructive confession of the truth, there must be contrition, the healthy formation of human conscience from which to declare or confess the truth about harmful behaviors.

In South Africa, protest poems, contemporary praise-songs, township dramas, and prison

memoirs became major ways of articulating sins, injustices, and oppression that prove to be important in light of those who are highly skeptical of reconciliation. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation hearings of the 1990s produced confessional literature and carved out a new national identity, based no longer on race but on geography. Such a move was a stroke of genius and God's grace. This illustrates deeper ways of knowing that miracles can occur and that seemingly impossible tasks can be completed.

We hear again Peter's question, "What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?" (2 Pet. 3:11–12). The answer: the kind of people who believe in God rather than idols and impossibilities. We owe a great debt to Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others who acknowledged that with God all things are possible and who acknowledged that the institutional church and politics are not goods in and of themselves. In other words, our churches are also rife in such discourse of conflict and inability to face the truth of cyclical sin and violence—as in the cases of sexual violence against children by clergy.

Confession, however, that understands and acknowledges a debt, enables persons to construct notions of a self (even a new nation) through a different narrative that is wary of those who make destructive claims on the truth. In other words, most Christian churches practice such confession regularly, but we can improve upon such practice through humility and partnerships with others who can better hold us accountable. Peter concludes, "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation" (vv. 14–15a). Ultimately, seeing that God wants no one abandoned provides the articulation for how to perform actions that facilitate human flourishing, rather than the oppression and destruction of others. This insight is crucial today, because we need to remember that we are not bad people if we do not forgive easily, and that we are not necessarily saints if we do.

MICHAEL BATTLE

3. Bill Moyers, *Facing the Truth*, see <https://billmoyers.com/series/facing-truth/>.

Second Sunday of Advent

Mark 1:1–8

¹The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Mark’s Gospel hits the floor running in a rapid-paced narrative conveying the urgent journey of Jesus the Christ. The race is on to restore an alienated, broken world. There is no time to waste: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). God’s critical rescue mission in Christ must begin “immediately,” a favorite term Mark uses more than forty times.

At the starting line, Mark hoists a banner charting the course of the ensuing story: Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Son of God (1:1). The good news focuses on Jesus, who runs the gospel race to the finish (cf. Heb. 12:1–2).

Jesus runs as a human being with a common Jewish name: Yeshua/Joshua (“Yahweh saves”) in Hebrew. He is no ordinary Josh or even the extraordinary biblical Joshua, but the consummate *Christ* or *Messiah* of God. “Christ” is not Jesus’ surname, but rather a Greek title matching the Hebrew “Messiah,” meaning “anointed” or “christened,” one anointed by God’s Spirit to deliver God’s people from woe and waywardness and to direct them in following God’s way. Although judges, prophets, and kings, including

foreign rulers like Cyrus of Persia (Isa. 45:1–7), could be so “anointed,” Jesus Messiah fulfills—fills full—the vocations of these forerunners.

Jesus also stands out as *Son of God*, a status soon certified by God’s voice at Jesus’ baptism (1:11). As God anoints other figures for “messianic” service, so God adopts other children into the divine family. Israel is imaged as God’s “firstborn son” (Exod. 4:22–23), and those “led by the Spirit of God are children of God . . . heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:14, 17). Identities of God’s “anointed” and “son” most notably merge in Israel’s Davidic king, God’s ruling representative on earth (Ps. 2:1–7; 2 Sam. 7:13–14; *Pss. Sol.* 17:4, 21–46). Mark believes that Jesus plays out (runs out) this role of Messiah/Son of God more fulsomely and finally than David or anyone else.

The Gospel heading’s very first word, “Beginning,” leading into Jesus’ august titles, also merits attention. The other three Gospels “begin” in similar fashion. Matthew opens, “An account of the *genealogy* [genesis] of Jesus Christ” (Matt. 1:1). Luke introduces his “orderly account of the events . . . handed on to us by those who

from the *beginning* were eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:1–2). John’s first words read, “In the *beginning* was the Word” (John 1:1). Such “beginning” notes link to earlier roots: creation of the world (John); covenant with Abraham and David (Matthew); testimony of Jesus’ first followers (Luke). The Gospel accounts begin in medias res, continuing God’s scriptural story of creation and redemption beginning with Genesis.

Mark’s narrative bursts out of the starting blocks with a quintet of Jesus’ prophetic fore-runners: Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Malachi, and John the Baptizer. While Mark 1:2–3 cites “the prophet Isaiah,” the passage in fact conflates texts from Exodus (traditionally ascribed to Moses) and Malachi with Isaiah.¹

And look, I am sending my angel [messenger] in front of you in order to guard you on the way in order to bring you into the land that I prepared for you. (Exod. 23:20)

Behold, I am sending my messenger, and he will oversee the way before me. (Mal. 3:1)

A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight the paths of our God.” (Isa. 40:3)

Each passage’s context marks out the *way of God* momentarily blazed in Israel’s experiences of exodus and exile. The Exodus reference charts the Moses-led way out of Egyptian slavery through the waters of the Red Sea and wilderness of Sinai en route to the promised land, while the Malachi and Isaiah references envision a way home from Babylonian exile through a blossoming desert highway (cf. Isa. 35:1–8; 41:18–19; 51:3). By evoking these historic journeys, Mark sets Jesus’ messianic way in a similar period of enslavement and displacement, now under Roman rule, moving toward liberation and restoration through rough wilderness terrain.

Malachi’s portrait of the preparatory “messenger” depicts a reforming, “purifying” figure (Mal. 3:1–3) ultimately identified as *Elijah* returning

to earth (4:5–6). The Jewish tradition of saving an empty seat for Elijah at Passover meals reflects this hope of his advent “to restore all things” in advance of the Messiah (see Mark 9:11–13).

Of course, for Mark, the Messiah Jesus has already come. Accordingly, Jesus’ immediate advance man was a prophet named *John* cast in the *mold of Elijah*. John dressed the part and operated in the general location of Elijah’s final feats.

Like Elijah, John wore “a leather belt around his waist” (Mark 1:6; 2 Kgs. 1:8); he also donned a cloak of “camel’s hair,” reminiscent of Elijah’s characterization as a “hairy man” (2 Kgs. 1:8). Far from fancy, such dress, like John’s diet of “locusts and wild honey,” befitted living hand to mouth off the desert land.

Elijah’s last moments on earth occurred at the Jordan River near where it flows into the Dead Sea. Here he struck and parted the waters with his rolled-up mantle, enabling him and protégé Elisha to cross over. When they reached the other side, a whirlwind whisked Elijah away in a fiery chariot and blew off his mantle, which Elisha recovered and then used to repeat the river-rending operation in “the spirit of Elijah” (2 Kgs. 2:4–15). This dramatic action also recalls the historic water-partings of Moses and Joshua at the Red Sea and Jordan River respectively (Exod. 14:15–31; Josh. 3:1–17).

It is clearly no accident that leads John to prepare the way of the Lord by calling people to be “baptized by him in the river Jordan” (Mark 1:4–5), but he modifies the prophetic script somewhat. Rather than miraculously dividing the wilderness waters for transport, John enters the Jordan with individuals, dipping and raising each one in a ritual “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). He splits the river, so to speak, with the submerged bodies of the baptismal candidates and then guides them up and out, with renewed heart and mind, on a new course of reentry into the land and recommitment to follow God’s way.

As decisive and popular as John’s baptismal mission is, however, it is not definitive or

1. To demonstrate the connection with Mark’s Greek text, I quote from Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* [NETS] (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

self-promotional. As God's servant-messenger, John publicizes the advent of "one . . . more powerful," the "stronger one," before whom John cannot tie a sandal (or light a candle) (1:7). Many oppressed people in first-century Roman Palestine longed for a Messiah strongman, a mighty savior, but what kind? No clear-cut Messiah profile predominated. Yet John highlights a key qualification: "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (1:8). The Stronger One will run in the same baptismal stream, even as he infuses it with a fresh flood of Holy Spirit energy. In his own way, the way of God, he will also be

a reformatory "baptist," operating, however, via *Spirit* more than water. Of course, Spirit and water have flowed together since creation to bring new life/order from death/chaos (Gen. 1:1–2; cf. John 3:5–8; 7:37–39).

As the *Spirit-led Strongman* imbued with divine power and authority, Jesus represents a charismatic political figure set at diametric odds to the current powers that be. The desert highway prepared by John marks a decisive detour from the Roman road, along which the Spirit Strongman will march and challenge Caesar's oppressive rule at every turn.

F. SCOTT SPENCER

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

"This is the beginning of the gospel" (Mark 1:1). Scholars point out that in first-century Rome, this Gospel was one among many in the empire. An initial sermon connection could invite hearers to consider other "gospels" that are present in our time: the prosperity gospel that promises material blessings as a sign of God's faithfulness; the consumer gospel that promises healing and wholeness through shopping, consumption, and the accumulation of things; the feel-good gospel that promises escape from the pressures of the contemporary world through drugs, alcohol, sports, or media and entertainment. Then there is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which promises salvation through a human being who was also the Son of God. What gospel is most popular or prevalent in the congregation that is hearing this Gospel message in this time?

Mark also emphasizes the *beginning* of this Gospel, which connotes not simply the earliest part of a story's chronology but also its foundation. This Gospel's beginning is marked in two distinct ways: with an appeal to the earlier prophecy from Isaiah and with baptism.

Mark looks back to Isaiah for confirmation that the future God promises is about to be made present. There is no shortage of examples of the ways in which human beings look to the past for confidence in the future. Economics looks back to previous trends in order

to predict possibilities for the future. Psychotherapy invites people to reexamine the stories they have experienced in the past to see if the stories they have accepted about those happenings have constrained what is possible for one's future. Scientific experimentation seeks to repeat processes completed in the past to confirm the way object or chemical interactions will impact the physical world in the future. In fact, brain research has discovered significant overlaps between the regions that help a person remember the past and those that enable one to imagine the future. "Past is prologue," Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*. The beginning of Mark's Gospel echoes this conviction: the gospel is rooted deeply in God's promises made in the past. Those promises are trustworthy. They are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Yet those promises veer from expectations.

John the Baptist is himself a mixture of past and present, according to Luke's Gospel. His mother and father are both descendants from the priestly line of Aaron, yet he himself does not fit the mold of the priests of his time. He ministers in the countryside, not in the temple in Jerusalem. His diet and clothing reflect those of a mystic rather than a member of the cultic elite. The Gospel according to Luke thus begins with an appeal to the past for its confirmation, while also making clear that God's

arrival confounds expectations. Can we see our confounded expectations for the present-day church as a gift from God that shakes us up for ministry, rather than a deviation to be rejected?

Mark's Gospel also begins with baptism, with what will become the sacramental foundation of and entry point into the church community. Where spaces and furnishings allow, a community could move its font closest to the front doors of the church, allowing the preacher to reflect on baptism as our entry point into this story, just as it is the entry point into the community. All communities have founding stories that shape their lives. Every congregation has a founding story. How might the founding story of a particular congregation compare with Mark's Gospel? Nations have founding stories. The story of American independence establishes America as a nation freeing itself from tyranny, a story that highly values ethics of freedom. Comparing and contrasting these stories to this story, which begins with repentance, might demonstrate how the Gospel story shapes a people in directions that are similar to and different from these competing narratives.

While John's baptism of repentance does not reflect the fullness of baptism now understood in Spirit-led church, nonetheless it irrevocably connects baptism to repentance, a turning toward Jesus Christ and away from anything or anyone else that claims our allegiance. Like the fullness of Mark's Gospel, baptism marks faith as good news that provokes choices in us, a choice, first, to turn from sin and toward Jesus Christ. Repentance is often treated as a dreary act, a resistance to temptations that we might otherwise enjoy. Yet Mark's story makes clear that "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to [John]" (Mark 1:5). The gospel attracts people who are willing to travel some distance from their routines in order to experience the promises of good news that it announces.

A preacher could invite hearers to dream about the things they most long for: connection with God and each other, the end of loneliness, peace and security in families and communities, meaning and purpose, to love and be loved, and so forth. Is proclamation that emanates

from the church addressing these things? Why or why not? A provocative approach might be to examine the ways in which a congregation "advertises" itself to the community where it is located, either in print or in person. Are people invited to participate in programs, or are they invited into a relationship that promises to change their lives? Where has our proclamation been reduced to a list of activities that pales in comparison to the promise of a life that is transformed in ways that match what we long for as human beings? How might the good news of the gospel be proclaimed in ways so odd and attractional that people seek it out?

Another possibility for the popularity of John the Baptist's proclamation is that the people coming out to John might not have felt welcomed, addressed, or included by other messengers, leaders, or prophets. Perhaps John's proclamation resonated especially with those who longed for forgiveness, for renewed possibilities with God. A preacher might scour her community for individuals or groups of people who long for renewed possibilities and are willing to endure difficulties to secure it.

I know of a young mother who walked from Honduras to the US border with her severely disabled child in order to seek a chance for her child to live. I have a friend who grew up on the streets, was shot in three separate incidents, and served fifteen years in prison. He longed so deeply for a new life that when he finally made a decision to forsake his past and claim God's promises, nothing would stand in his way. Perhaps the gospel news speaks most deeply to those who have longed for blessing so deeply that repentance is an easy choice when the promise of true blessing is on the other side.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, a sermon could examine the common understanding of "peace," often the theme lifted up on banners or Advent candle liturgies on this Second Sunday, in light of John the Baptist's person and proclamation. The kind of peace that Jesus will bring seems far from the absence of discomfort. It is, rather, the promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit, the anointing of the believer with the power of God. Baptism gives believers agency to act with God's power in the world. Peace, then,

is not a state of bliss, relaxation, or the absence of conflict. It is a state of wholeness marked by the gift of God's power. It is power given to enact God's promises in the world. In this way, the beginning of Mark's Gospel signals not only

the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also the beginning of the church's vocation and agency in the world.

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