

# PREACHING GOD'S TRANSFORMING JUSTICE

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A Lectionary Commentary, Year B

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# Preface

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The editors are grateful to the members of our households—spouses and children—not only for love and understanding during the preparation of these volumes but also for conversation, child care, and running to the store for necessary supplies of chocolate, coffee, and other things important to editorial work. We recognize our Presidents, Deans, and colleagues for encouragement, questions, and suggestions. The editors particularly thank the ninety persons who wrote for this series. To their already overflowing lives as activists, ministers, and scholars, they added responsibility for preparing the articles for these volumes. We honor Jon Berquist for his formative role in this project and for multiple forms of support. We thank Amy-Jill Levine of the Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, who graciously read the manuscript with a discerning eye. The editors express appreciation to J. B. Blue and Song Bok Jon, graduate students at Boston University School of Theology, who sacrificed time from their own academic responsibilities to engage in research on the Holy Days for Justice. The editors and contributors are responsible for limitations that result from not following the suggestions of these learned colleagues.

We send this book forward with the prayer that God will use it to help re-create the world as a community of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, respect, security, and abundance. May it be a resource for preaching that, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, empowers social transformation.

# Introduction

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Many people today yearn to live in a world of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, respect, security, and abundance for all. The Bible calls this combination of qualities justice. The best of the Bible and Christian tradition envision the heart of God's own mission as re-creating the world as a realm of love and justice. Joining God in this mission is at the heart of the calling of the preacher and the congregation. The aim of this three-volume series is to empower sermons as active agents in God's mission.

Ninety preachers and scholars contribute to this work. These writers are known for their insight into social dimensions of the divine purposes as well as for their capacity to interpret the social vision boldly and sensitively. Approximately half of the writers are women and half are men; about 40 percent of them are African American, Hispanic, Asian American, or Native American.

## **Preaching for Justice: A World of Love, Peace, Freedom, Mutuality, Respect, Security, and Abundance**

This commentary is a resource for preaching for a world of justice from the deepest theological convictions of biblical texts. *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* is distinctive in two ways. First, while other aids for preaching from the lectionary sometimes discuss matters of social justice, this series is the first commentary on the Revised Common Lectionary to highlight God's

life-giving intentions for the social world from start to finish.<sup>1</sup> *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* is not simply a mirror of other lectionary commentaries (such as the impressive *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*) but concentrates on how the lectionary readings can help the preacher identify and reflect theologically and ethically on the social implications of the biblical readings. Second, this series introduces twenty-two Holy Days for Justice. Explained further below, these days are intended to enlarge the church's awareness of the depth and insistence of God's call for justice and of the many ways that call comes to the church and world today.

The comments on the biblical texts are intended to be more than notes on contemporary social issues. The comments are designed to help preachers and congregations develop a deep and broad theological vision out of which to interpret the social world. Furthermore, this book aims to provide practical guidance for living more justly as individuals and communities.

### Special Feature: Twenty-Two Holy Days for Justice

This commentary augments the traditional liturgical calendar by providing resources for twenty-two special Holy Days for Justice. The title for these noteworthy days, suggested by Professor Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University, requires explanation. God's mission for justice is holy. Consequently, the church's commitment to justice is holy. Some of the events, however, that call forth these special days are not holy. Indeed, some days—such as Yom haShoah (which remembers the murder of six million Jewish people by the Nazis)—are occasions for mourning. However, at the same time these days also call the church to take bold and powerful actions to join the holy work

1. The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) was developed by the Consultation on Common Texts, an ecumenical consultation of liturgical scholars and denominational representatives from the United States and Canada. The RCL provides a collection of readings from Scripture to be used during worship in a schedule that follows the seasons of the church year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany Day, Lent, Easter, Day of Pentecost, Ordinary Time. In addition, the RCL provides for a uniform set of readings to be used across denominations or other church bodies.

The RCL provides a reading from the Hebrew Bible, a Psalm response to that reading, a Gospel, and an Epistle for each preaching occasion of the year. It is presented in a three-year cycle, with each year centered around one of the Synoptic Gospels. Year A largely follows the Gospel of Matthew, Year B largely follows Mark, and Year C largely follows Luke. Selections from John are also read each year, especially during Advent, Lent, and Easter.

The RCL offers two tracks of Hebrew Bible texts for the Season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time: a semicontinuous track, which moves through stories and characters in the Hebrew Bible, and a complementary track, which ties the Hebrew Bible texts to the theme of the Gospel texts for that day. Both tracks are included in this volume.

For more information about the Revised Common Lectionary, visit the official RCL Web site at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/> or see *The Revised Common Lectionary: The Consultation on Common Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

of God in attempting to transform the circumstances that led to lamentation. We can never undo pain and suffering, but we can try to reshape the world to minimize the danger of such things recurring, and to encourage possibilities for people and nature to live together in justice.

Each Holy Day for Justice derives from either a person or an event that helps the contemporary community become aware of arenas in the world that cry for justice. These Holy Days bridge significant phenomena in our history and present culture that do not receive adequate attention in the church's liturgical calendar or may not otherwise be noted in the congregation. They draw our attention to circumstances in need of social transformation.

Each Holy Day for Justice has a different focus. In *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* these days are placed close to the Sunday on which they occur in the Christian year and the ordinary calendar. When reaching a Holy Day for Justice in the lectionary, the preacher can choose whether to follow the readings from the Revised Common Lectionary or to work instead with the readings and themes of the Holy Day for Justice.<sup>2</sup> The concerns highlighted in these special days may also inspire preachers to bring those concerns to the fore in sermons prepared in conversation with the traditional lectionary readings.

In the list of Holy Days for Justice below, the editors place in parentheses a date or season when the congregation might naturally observe a Holy Day for Justice. The dates for many of the Holy Days for Justice are already widely accepted, such as the dates for World AIDS Day, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Salt March, Earth Day, Yom haShoah, and the Fourth of July. The editors assigned the dates for other Holy Days for Justice in conversation with scholars who work closely with the concerns of those days and with communities closely related to the origin of the person or concern at the center of the day. Of course, preachers and worship planners are free to observe the Holy Days for Justice on other dates that fit more naturally into the congregation's local calendar.

The Holy Days for Justice are:

1. World AIDS Day (December 1)
2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10)
3. Martin Luther King Jr. Day (January 15)
4. Asian American Heritage Day (February 19)
5. International Women's Day (March 8)

2. In addition, the Revised Common Lectionary already sets aside possible readings for All Saints' Day and Thanksgiving. The specific dates of some of the Holy Days for Justice change from year to year. These days are placed in the commentary in the season of the lectionary year when they typically occur.

6. Salt March Day: Marching with the Poor (March 12)
7. Oscar Romero of the Americas Day (March 24)
8. César Chávez Day (March 31)
9. Earth Day (April 22)
10. Holocaust Remembrance Day: Yom haShoah (27th of Nisan, usually from early April to early May)
11. Peace in the Home (second Sunday in May)
12. Juneteenth: Let Freedom Ring (June 19)
13. Gifts of Sexuality and Gender (June 29)
14. Fourth of July: Seeking Liberty and Justice for All
15. Sojourner Truth Day (August 18)
16. Simchat Torah: Joy of the Torah (mid-September to early October)
17. International Day of Prayer and Witness for Peace (September 21)
18. Peoples Native to the Americas Day (fourth Friday in September)
19. World Communion Sunday (first Sunday in October)
20. Night of Power (27th Night of Ramadan: From 2011 through 2020 the date moves from September to August, July, June, May, and April)
21. World Food Day (October 16)
22. Children's Sabbath (third weekend in October or another date that works for the congregation)

The discussions of these days in the commentary are distinctive in three ways. (1) In the case of almost every special day (with the exception of Simchat Torah: The Joy of the Torah), the editors selected four biblical texts that relate to these special emphases, including a reading from the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, a reading from a Psalm, a reading from a Gospel, and another from an Epistle. The editors chose the texts for each day in the hope that the passages can become good conversation partners in helping the congregation reflect on how the day enlarges the congregation's vision and practice of justice. Most of the texts were chosen because they support potential emphases in the day, but some were chosen because they give the preacher the opportunity to enter into critical dialogue with the text or with the way the biblical text has been used in the church or the culture. While a few of the biblical texts for the Holy Days for Justice duplicate passages in the Revised Common Lectionary, most of the texts for the Holy Days for Justice are not found in the lectionary. (2) Each day is introduced by a brief paragraph offering a perspective on why that day is included. We repeat the same introductory paragraph in all three volumes. (3) Each day also includes a quote from a figure or document in the past or the present that voices a provocative perspective on the concerns represented by that day. For example, in Year A on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the preacher is presented with an excerpt from the "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

Some readers may initially be put off by some of these selections, especially days that also appear in the civic calendar in the United States, such as Fourth of July: Seeking Liberty and Justice for All. These days are not intended to promote uncritical celebration of present culture. On the contrary, the appearance of these days can become the occasion for the preacher to reflect critically with the congregation on the themes of those days. Some of the motifs associated in popular culture with Fourth of July, for instance, run against the grain of God's best hopes for the human family. In the name of being faithful, some preachers studiously avoid speaking about days suggested by the civic calendar. However, the congregation may too easily construe such silence as the preacher's consent to the culture's prevailing mind-set. The sermon can attempt to redress the prevailing cultural mind-set that either neglects attention to questions of justice or actively promotes injustice.

The Holy Days for Justice address the criticism that the Revised Common Lectionary does not adequately represent biblical texts that deal with matters of justice as fully as those texts are represented in the Bible. Such special days might also enlarge the vision of the preacher and the congregation while offering preachers a venue for addressing matters that are sometimes hard to reach when following the lectionary. For the congregation that may be hesitant to consider such matters, the appearance of these emphases in a formal lectionary commentary might add to the preacher's authority for speaking about them.

### **God's Vision for the Social World**

The purposes of this commentary series are rooted in the core of God's vision for the social world. To be sure, the Bible is a diverse document in the sense that its parts were written at different times and places, in different cultural settings, and from different theological and ethical points of view—for example, Priestly, Deuteronomic, Wisdom, and apocalyptic. Nevertheless, the different materials in the Bible share the common perspective that God intends for all individuals and communities (including the world of nature) to live together in justice.

The Priestly theologians begin the Bible with the vision in Genesis 1 by picturing God creating a world in which each and every entity has a particular place and purpose and in which all entities—the ecosphere, animals, and human beings—live together in covenantal community. The role of the human being is to help the different entities live together in the mutual support that God envisions. The aim of the Ten Commandments and Israel's other laws is to create a social community that embodies how God wants

people to live together in blessing. The Priestly theologians show special concern for ensuring that the poor and marginalized experience providence through care practiced by the community. Israel is to model how God wants all peoples to live together in blessing (Gen. 12:1–3). Israel is to be a light to the nations in these regards (Isa. 42:6). The church later understands its message to be grafted onto that of Israel (e.g., the church shares in the mission of being a light to the world, Matt. 5:13–14).

The Deuteronomic thinkers envisioned Israel not only as a community in covenant with God, but also as a community whose members were in covenant with one another so that all could live in love, peace, and security. Deuteronomy 15:7–8 epitomizes this attitude. “If there is among you anyone in need . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.” The Deuteronomic monarch is to rule with a copy of the Torah present at all times and is not to be “above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment” (Deut. 17:19–20). The monarch is responsible to God and to the community for seeing that justice is enacted in all aspects of Jewish life. The covenant includes nature such that when the people are faithful, nature blesses them, but when they are unfaithful, nature itself curses them (Deut. 28:1–45).

The Wisdom literature encourages practices that not only provide for individual and household prosperity but build up the community. The wise life shows respect for the poor as full members of the community (Sir. 4:1–10). The Wisdom literature cautions the prosperous not to become self-absorbed by their possessions but to use their resources to strengthen the community. Indeed, the wise are to “speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute . . . [to] defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8–9). Moreover, the sages thought that God charged the natural order with wisdom so that by paying attention to the way in which the elements of nature work together, human beings can learn how God wants human beings to live as individuals and in community, as we can see in the case of the ant modeling wisdom (Prov. 6:6).

The apocalyptic theologians believed that the present world—both the social sphere and nature—is so broken, unjust, and violent that God must replace it with a new world, often called the realm of God. The apocalyptic book of 4 Ezra (2 Esdras) vividly expresses this hope:

It is for you that Paradise is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is revealed, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established and wisdom perfected beforehand. The root of evil is sealed up from you, illness is banished from you, and death is hidden; hell has fled and corruption has been forgotten; sorrows

have passed away, and in the end the treasure of immortality is made manifest.<sup>3</sup> (4 Ezra 8:52–56)

In this new world all relationships and situations manifest God's purpose. Those who defy God's desires through idolatry, exploitation of the poor, and violence are condemned.

Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and most other early Christian writers share this general viewpoint (e.g., Rom. 8:18–25; Mark 13:24–27). These first-century theologians believed that the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus signaled that the final and complete manifestation of the realm of God had begun in a limited way in the ministry of Jesus and would come in its fullness with the return of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus both points to that realm and embodies it. Jesus' disciples are to alert others to the presence and coming of the realm and to live in the present as if the realm is fully here. The church is to embody the transformed world.

From the perspective of the Bible, God's vision for the interrelated communities of humankind and nature is, through and through, a social vision. It involves the intertwining relationships of God with humankind and nature, of human communities with one another, and of human communities with nature. Marjorie Suchocki, a major contemporary theologian, uses the evocative phrase "inclusive well-being" to sum up God's desire for every created entity to live in love, peace, justice, dignity, freedom, and abundance in a framework of mutually supportive community.<sup>4</sup> Anything that threatens the well-being of any entity in the created world goes against the purposes of God.

### **Individual Bible Readings and Implications for Social Justice and Transformation**

Every passage in the Bible has social implications. In connection with each text in the lectionary, the commentators in this series help the congregation envision God's purposes for human community. Some texts are quite direct in this way. For example, Amos exhorts, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The prophet wants the people to practice justice. Other texts are less direct but are still potent in their implications. According to the book of Acts, Priscilla was a teacher of the gospel alongside her spouse Aquila (Acts 18:24–28). From this and

3. "The Fourth Book of Ezra," trans. Bruce M. Metzger, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1983), 1:544. Fourth Ezra was written in the late first century CE and is sometimes known as 2 Esdras.

4. Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 66.

many other texts, we glimpse the vital role of women in the leadership of the earliest churches (e.g., Mark 16:1–8; Luke 8:1–3; Acts 9:36–42; 16:11–15; Rom. 16:1–3, 6, 7, 12; 1 Cor. 1:11; Phil. 4:2–4).

The contributors to these volumes articulate what the biblical writers hoped would happen in the social world of those who heard these texts in their original settings and point to ways in which interaction with the biblical texts helps today's congregations more fully embrace and enact God's intent for all to experience inclusive well-being. The following are among the questions the writers consider:

- What are God's life-giving intentions in each text?
- What does a particular text (in the context of its larger theological world) envision as a community that embodies God's social vision, a vision in which all live in inclusive well-being?
- What are the benefits of that vision for humankind and (as appropriate) nature?
- How do human beings and nature fall short of God's possibilities when they do not follow or sustain that vision?
- Do individuals or communities get hurt in the world of the text or in the way that text has been interpreted?
- What needs to happen for justice, healing, re-creation, and inclusive well-being?

At the same time, writers sometimes criticize aspects of the occasional biblical text whose social vision does not measure up to the fullness of God's intentions. For example, according to Ezekiel, God ordered marks placed on faithful people who lamented abominations that took place in Israel. God then commanded some of the faithful to murder the unfaithful: "Pass through the city . . . and kill; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. Cut down old men, young men and young women, little children and women, but touch no one who has the mark" (Ezek. 9:5–6). This passage invites the reader to believe that God commanded murder. The first letter of Peter asserts, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly" (1 Pet. 2:18–19). This passage assumes the validity of slavery and encourages recipients to accept being abused.

Texts such as these do not measure up to the Bible's highest vision of God's desire for a just world; hence, many preachers cannot commend such barbed texts as positive guidance for today's community. Instead, such a preacher critiques the passage. However, even when the preacher cannot fully endorse what a text invites the congregation to believe and do, the appearance of theologically and ethically problematic texts in the lectionary can open an

important door for a conversation among preacher and congregation regarding what they most truly believe concerning God's social vision. The text may not be directly instructive, but the congregation's encounter with the text can be an important occasion of theological and ethical reflection.

### **Naming and Confronting Systems That Frustrate God's Purposes**

Individuals acting alone and with others can defy God's purposes for humankind and nature. But beyond individual and small-group actions, a key insight to emerge in recent generations is that systemic forces distort God's purposes for humankind and the larger created world. Ethicists often refer to such phenomena as systemic evil.

A system is a transpersonal network of attitudes, values, and behaviors that shape the lives of individuals and communities. Systemic evil creates force fields that push individuals and communities to distort God's purposes in the social world. Systems can affect communities as small as the Wednesday-night prayer group and as large as nations and transnational associations. Examples of systemic evils that subvert God's life-giving purposes are racism, sexism, neocolonialism, ageism, nationalism, classism, heterosexism, and ecological destruction.

Preachers need to recognize and name systemic distortions of God's purposes for the social community. While this analysis is important, it sometimes leaves individuals and congregations feeling impotent in the face of massive structural forces. When possible, the writers in this series urge preachers to give these concerns a human face and to offer specific insights and stories that help congregations envision practical steps that they can take to join God in seeking to transform the social world. What attitudes and actions can individuals and congregations take to become agents of transformation? These writers want congregations to feel empowered to make a difference. We hope that each comment will offer a horizon of hope for the preacher and the congregation.

### **The Preacher Speaks from, to, and beyond the Local Context**

The importance of taking account of the context of the congregation is a permeating emphasis in preaching—and more broadly in theological scholarship—today. The preacher is called to understand the congregation as a culture in its own right. The preacher should conduct an exegesis of the congregation that reveals the events, memories, values, practices, attitudes, feelings, patterns of

relationship (especially power relationships), physical spaces, and larger systems that combine to make the congregation a distinct culture.

This commentary does not intend to provide the minister with prepackaged ideas for sermons but urges ministers to begin their approach to preaching on matters of justice from inside the culture of the congregation. The local pastor who has a thick understanding of the local community knows much better than a scholar in a far-off city how the life of that congregation needs to develop in order to witness more fully to God's purposes.

The preacher should typically speak *from* and *to* the local context. Rather than impose a social vision that the preacher has found in a book of theological ethics, on the Internet, or at the latest clergy network for peace and justice, the preacher can approach matters of social justice from inside the worldview of the congregation. Hence, one can usually identify points of contact between the world of the congregation and the need for transformation. The preacher can then use the base of identification and trust between the pulpit and the pew to speak *to* the congregation. To help the congregation participate more fully in God's transformative movement, the preacher will typically need to help the congregation think beyond itself.

From this point of view, the contributors to *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* intend to be conversation partners in helping preachers identify particular areas in which the congregation might reinforce patterns of thought and behavior that manifest their deepest theological convictions. We hope the book will help congregations to grow in the direction of God's social vision and to find steps they can take to become agents of justice.

Recent literature in preaching leads preachers to think of the congregation not just as a collection of individuals but as a *community*, the *body* of Christ. While sermons should help individuals imagine their particular social witnesses, sermons should also be addressed to the congregation as community and its corporate social witness.

Moreover, the congregation is itself a social world. While the larger goal of the book is to help preachers move the congregation toward reflection and mission in the larger social arena, some texts may lead the preacher to help the listeners reflect on how the internal life of the congregation can more fully witness to God's life-giving purposes.

### **Prophetic Preaching with a Pastoral Goal**

In the broad sense this book calls for prophetic preaching. We think of prophetic preaching in contrast to two common notions. From one common perspective, prophetic preaching predicts specific future events, especially those

that point to the return of Jesus. This way of thinking does not catch the fullness of prophetic preaching in the Bible itself. A second common viewpoint associates prophetic preaching with condemnation. In this view, the prophetic preacher identifies what the text is against and what is wrong in the social world, sometimes denouncing the congregation and others. These sermons can chastise the congregation without providing a word of grace and empowerment. This perspective is also incomplete.

The editors of *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* regard the purpose of all preaching as helping the congregation and others interpret the world from the standpoint of God's life-giving purposes. Preaching seeks to build up the congregation as a community of witness and to help the world embody the divine realm. The goal of all preaching is pastoral in the root sense of building up the flock so that the congregation can fulfill God's purposes. The word "pastoral" derives from the world of flocks and shepherds, in which the shepherd (the pastor) did whatever was necessary to maintain the health of the flock.

From the perspective of the Bible, the prophet is a kind of ombudsperson who compares the actual behavior of the community with God's purposes of inclusive blessing. The special call of the prophet is to help the community recognize where it falls short of those purposes and what the community needs to do to return to them. On the one hand, a prophet such as Amos concentrated on how the community had departed from God's purposes by exploiting the poor and, consequently, faced judgment. On the other hand, a prophet such as Second Isaiah called attention to the fact that the community in exile did not trust in the promise of God to return them to their homeland. In both cases, the community was not living up to the fullness of God's purposes. While the prophet may need to confront the congregation, the prophet's goal is to prompt the congregation to take steps toward restoration. Prophetic preaching ultimately aims at helping the congregation name *for* what they can be.

### **Representative Social Phenomena**

*Preaching God's Transforming Justice* urges preachers and communities toward conscious and critical theological reflection on things that are happening in the contemporary social world from the perspective of God's purpose to recreate the world as a realm of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, abundance, and respect for all. Nevertheless, some preachers refer to a limited number of social phenomena in their sermons. A preacher's hermeneutical imagination is sometimes enlarged by pondering a panorama of representative social phenomena that call for theological and ethical interpretation, such as the following:

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

This catalog is not suggested as a checklist of social issues that a preacher should cover in a given preaching cycle. Returning to an earlier theme, the minister who is in touch with the local culture can have a sense of where God's vision for justice interacts with particular social phenomena. Nonetheless, such a list may help some ministers think more broadly about possible points of contact between the core theological convictions of the church and the social world.<sup>5</sup>

5. A preacher might find it useful to review regularly the social forces that are current in the sphere of the congregation and in the larger world. Preachers can easily slip into thinking about social perspectives from limited and dated points of view. Preachers may find it helpful

## Index of Passages in the Order of Books of the Bible

For preachers who do not regularly preach from the lectionary, and for preachers who want to look up a particular passage but do not know where it is located in the lectionary, an index of passages discussed in the commentary is located at the end of the volume. This index lists biblical texts in the order in which they are found in the Bible.

The contributors typically discuss the biblical texts in the following order: first lesson(s) from the Torah, Prophets, and Writings; the Psalm(s); the Epistle; and the Gospel. However, a writer will occasionally take up the texts in a different sequence as a part of his or her interpretive strategy for the day.

### Inclusive Language, Expansive Language

This series uses inclusive language when referring to humankind. In other words, when contributors refer to people in general, they use language that includes all of their intended audience (e.g., humankind, humanity, people). When a writer refers to a particular gender (female or male), the gender-specific referent is used.

We seek to use expansive language when referring to God. In other words, the contributors draw on various names, attributes, and images of God known to us in Scripture and in our individual and corporate encounter of God in worship. We avoid using exclusively masculine references to God. When a Scripture passage repeatedly uses language for God that is male, we have sought more gender-inclusive emendations that are consistent with the intent of the original. Readers searching for an entire inclusive-language translation might try *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible and Christian tradition use the term “Lord” to speak of both God and Jesus. The word “lord” is masculine. The English word “Lord” derives from a time when much of the European social world was hierarchical with the lord and lady at the top and with human beings arranged in a pyramid of descending social power with the upper classes at the top and other classes below, and with males having authority over women. People in the upper reaches of the pyramid are authorized to dominate those below them. While we try to minimize the occurrence of the title “Lord,” occasional writers in this book use the term

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to interview members of the congregation regarding the social phenomena that are most in the consciousness of the congregation.

6. Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

“Lord” for God to call attention to God’s absolute sovereignty; these writers do not intend for the use of the expression “Lord” to authorize masculine superiority or the detailed social pyramid implied in the history of the word. Indeed, this book sees the purposes of God pointing toward a human community in which hierarchical domination is dismantled and power is shared.

Although the historical Jesus was a male, he announced the coming of the realm of God, a social world that is egalitarian with respect to gender and social power. In the hope of evoking these latter associations (and minimizing the pyramidal associations with “Lord”) we have shifted the designations of some historic days in the Christian Year that highlight aspects of the ministry of Jesus from lordship language to the language of “Jesus” and “Christ”: Nativity of Jesus, Baptism of Jesus, Resurrection of Jesus, and Reign of Christ (in place of Nativity of the Lord, Baptism of the Lord, Resurrection of the Lord, and Christ the King).

We have also tried to speak expansively of the realm of God (NRSV: kingdom of God) by using terms such as realm, reign, rule, dominion, kin-dom, and holy commonwealth. The word “kingdom” appears where the author has specifically requested it.

### **Language for the Parts of the Bible**

The contemporary world is a time of critical reflection and experimentation regarding how to refer to the parts of the Bible that many Christian generations have referred to as the Old and New Testaments. The discussion arises because in much contemporary usage the word “old” suggests worn out and outdated, while “new” often implies “better” and “improved.” Many Christians believe that the unexplained use of the phrases Old Testament and New Testament can contribute to supersessionism: the conviction that new and improved Christianity has taken the place of old and outdated Judaism. The old covenant is no longer in force, but has been replaced by the new covenant. When used without interpretation, this way of speaking contributes to injustice by supporting anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. In an attempt to use language that is more just, many people today are exploring several ways forward.

As a part of the contemporary exploration, the writers in this series use a variety of expressions for these parts of the Bible. There is no fully satisfactory way of speaking. We note now the most common expressions in this series and invite the reader to remember the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Some leaders think that today’s community can use the expressions Old and New Testaments if the church explains what that language does and does

not mean.<sup>7</sup> In antiquity old things were often valued and honored. Moreover, the words “old” and “new” can imply nothing more than chronology: The literature of the Old Testament is older than that of the new. The church would then use the terms Old and New Testaments without casting aspersion on Judaism and without suggesting that God has made Christianity a much purer and truer religion. Occasional writers in the series use the phrases Old and New Testaments in this way. However, a growing number of speakers and writers think that the words Old Testament and New Testament are so deeply associated with negative pictures of Jewish people, writings, institutions, and practices that, even when carefully defined, the language feeds negative perceptions.

The words “Hebrew Bible” and “Hebrew Scriptures” are a popular way of referring to the first part of the Bible. These titles came about because English versions are not based primarily on the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek in the third and second centuries BCE) but are translated from Hebrew (and Aramaic) manuscripts in consultation with the Septuagint. However, the designation “Hebrew Bible” raises the question of what to call the twenty-seven books that make up the other part of the Bible. We cannot call the other books the “Greek Scriptures” or the “Greek Bible” because the Septuagint is also in Greek. We cannot call them the “Christian Scriptures” or the “Christian Bible” since the church honors the entire Bible.

Occasional Christians refer to the Old Testament as the “Jewish Bible.” This nomenclature is unsatisfactory because people could understand it to mean that the first part of the Bible belongs only to the Jewish community and is not constitutive for the church. Furthermore, the Christian version differs from the Jewish Tanakh in the way that some of the books are ordered, named, and divided.

The designations “First and Second Testaments” are increasingly popular because many people see them as setting out a chronological relationship between the two bodies of literature—the First Testament came prior to the Second. However, in competitive North American culture, especially in the United States, “first” can imply first in value, while “second” can imply something not as good as the first. The winner receives first place; second place is often a disappointment. Moreover, “second” can imply second best or secondhand.

Seeking a way of referring to the Bible that respects its diversity but suggests its continuities, and that promotes respect for Judaism, writers in this

7. On this discussion, see further Ronald J. Allen, “Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters: A New Name for the Old Book,” *Encounter* 68 (2007): 53–63.

series sometimes refer to the parts of the Bible as Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, and Letters. This latter practice adapts a Jewish way of speaking of the Scriptures as TANAKH, an acronym derived from the Hebrew words for Torah, Prophets, and Writings (*torah, neviim, ketuvim*), and adds the categories of Gospels and Letters.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the books in TANAKH are divided and arranged differently than in the Christian Bible. Furthermore, while some may object that the books of Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation do not fall into these categories, we note that Acts is less a separate genre and more a continuation of the Gospel of Luke. In the strict sense, Revelation has the form of letter. Although scholars today recognize that Hebrews is an early Christian sermon, it likely circulated much like a letter.

All designations for the parts of the Bible are vexed by the fact that different churches include different books. We should really speak of a Roman Catholic canon, several Orthodox canons, and a Protestant canon. As a concession to our inability to distinguish every permutation, we ask the reader to receive these designations with a generous but critical elasticity of mind and usage.

The designation “son of man” is challenging in a different way, especially when it is used of or by Jesus. Interpreters disagree as to whether the phrase “son of man” is simply a way of saying “child of a human being” or “son of humanity” (or, more colloquially, simply “human being”), or whether it has a specialized theological content, such as “apocalyptic redeemer” (as in Dan. 7:13–14). Since individual contributors interpret this phrase in different ways, we sometimes leave the expression “son of man” in the text of the commentary, with individual contributors explaining how they use it.

### **Diverse Points of View in the Commentary**

The many writers in this commentary series are diverse not only in gender, race, and ethnicity, but also in exegetical, theological, and ethical viewpoints. Turning the page from one entry to the next, the reader may encounter a liberation theologian, a neo-orthodox thinker, an ethnic theologian, a process thinker, a socialist, or a postliberal. Moreover, the writers are often individually creative in the ways in which they see the forward movement of their texts in calling for social transformation today. While all authors share the deep conviction that God is even now seeking to lead the world toward more inclusive, just community, the nuances with which they approach the biblical material and even the social world can be quite different.

8. For further discussion, see Allen, “Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters.”

Rather than enforce a party line with respect to matters of exegesis, theology, and ethical vision, the individual writers bring their own voices to clear expression. The editors' hope is that each week the preacher can have a significant conversation with a writer who is an other and that the preacher's social vision will be broadened and deepened by such exposure.

Diversity also characterizes the process by which this book came into being. The editorial team itself is diverse, as it includes an African American man from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; a woman of European origin from the Church of the Brethren, a historic peace church; and a man of European origin from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). While the editors share many common convictions, their vision has been impacted deeply by insights from preachers and scholars from many other churches, movements, communities, and cultures. Dawn took the lead in editing Year A, Ron for Year B, and Dale for Year C. While the editors regarded one of their core tasks as helping the individual writers bring out their own voices forcefully, each has inevitably edited in light of her or his theological and ethical commitments.

Ultimately the goal of *Preaching God's Transforming Justice* is not simply to give preachers resources for talking about social issues, but to empower congregations to develop a theological life perspective that issues in practices of justice and to participate with God in working toward a time when all created entities—every human being and every animal and plant and element of nature—can live together as a community of love through mutual support with abundance for all.

# First Sunday of Advent

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*Leonora Tubbs Tisdale*

ISAIAH 64:1–9

PSALM 80:1–7, 17–19

1 CORINTHIANS 1:3–9

MARK 13:24–37

The lections from the Hebrew Scriptures begin not on a note of joyous expectation, but in despair and longing for a world shaped by the presence and values of God. Both Isaiah and the psalmist give voice to Israel's existential yearning for a God who once seemed so close but now seems distant and silent. The Gospel and Letter point toward the hope that is ours as sinful believers in Christ (1 Cor. 1:3–9), and to our call to live in the time between Christ's first and second comings in watchful faithfulness (Mark 13:24–37).

## **Isaiah 64:1–9**

This passage begins with a plea for God to rip open the heavens, to come down to earth, and to make God's presence known among the nations (vv. 1–2). The prophet makes this cry on behalf of the Israelites because they are (a) beleaguered by their enemies (and longing for God's vindication of them) and (b) aware that their own sinfulness that has landed them in this mess. They have broken covenant with God, and have not dealt justly or lived in harmonious community with one another. Consequently, the God who once drew near now seems distant and remote.

As a result, the people are miserable. They know that without God, their lives are not only precarious and vulnerable; they are also devoid of meaning and purpose and goodness. So they draw on their memories of God in the past—God as their creator/potter (v. 8b) and God as their compassionate parent (v. 8a)—as they urge God to intervene in their future.

One of the challenges this text poses for contemporary hearers is that often we do not see ourselves as being sinful and cut off from God. Furthermore,

even when we do acknowledge our sinfulness, the focus is often more on personal and individual sins than on the corporate sins of church or community or nation.

In his book *The Road to Daybreak*, Henri Nouwen writes of returning to his homeland of Holland one Christmas season, and marveling that in one short generation the country had changed from being a very pious nation to becoming a very secular one. He writes:

Many reasons can be given. But it seems to me, from just looking around and meeting and speaking to people, that their captivating prosperity is one of the more obvious reasons. People are just very busy—eating, drinking, and going places. . . . The Dutch have become a distracted people—very good, kind, and good-natured but caught in too much of everything.<sup>1</sup>

I suspect the same could be said of many prosperous nations today, including the United States. We are an affluent and self-sufficient people. Our lives are busy and distracted. As a result, many in our culture have lost a deep sense of connection with God and with one another. We are afraid to slow down for fear that all we will find inside is emptiness and a chasm of unfulfilled longing.

Robert Putnam uses the haunting phrase “bowling alone” to describe our culture. In earlier generations, we bowled together in leagues, but now we bowl alone, that is, we live in affluence but in isolation.<sup>2</sup> Bowling alone is a symbol for the loss of responsibility for one another, similar to the loss of responsibility for one another that characterized Isaiah’s day.

The prophet voices the deep yearnings of a people who are “bowling alone,” a people who know that their only hope for individual and communal restoration rests in the God who first formed and fashioned them. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,” the prophet cries (v. 1). Israel experienced an answer to this prayer when God came down (so to speak) and liberated the community from exile. The church glimpses an answer to that prayer in the birth of the Incarnate One, the child who in his very being bridges the great chasm between heaven and earth.

### **Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19**

Psalm 80 is a communal lament. But unlike Isaiah, the psalmist does not claim that the suffering of God’s people is the result of their own sin. Indeed, the

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 108.

2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2000), 414.

theological source of suffering here is a mystery. We know only that Israel is oppressed by the hands of their enemies (v. 6). While they are befuddled as to why God—the one whom they know to be both Shepherd and sovereign ruler—is silent in the face of their suffering, they are confident that God will restore their life. Indeed, the fact that the community can raise the question of God’s relationship to oppression is itself a sign of theological health.

As if giving God a pep talk, the psalmist urges God to be true to whom the Israelites know God to be. “Stir up your might!” (v. 2b) the psalmist says to the ruler of the universe. “Restore us!” (v. 3a) the psalmist says to the Shepherd of Israel. “Let your face shine, that we may be saved” (vv. 3b, 19b), pleads the psalmist—calling to mind both the shining face of Moses after encountering God on Sinai (Exod. 34:29–35) and the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24–26).

This psalm gives a voice especially to those who suffer injustice at the hands of others: who know oppression and persecution at the hands of ruthless enemies, who experience economic exploitation and unfair treatment in the workplace, who know the indignity of systems that do not treat them equitably, and who are ravaged by the atrocities of war. The sermon can bring these voices into the worshipping community.

Beyond voicing frustration and pain, the psalmist points to a practical means by which God can act to restore and to let God’s face shine: God can work through “the one at [God’s] right hand,” that is, the monarch (v. 17). The monarchy in Israel was to promote policies and ways of living together that would bring peace, justice, and abundance to all (Ps. 72). The psalm thus implicitly invites those who have the power to shape life systems to cooperate with God in bringing wholeness to the whole broken fabric of the current social order.

The psalm implies that, for renewal to take place, our communities need leaders who are genuinely committed to the good of all. And members of the community are important here. Robert Putnam notes that “if decision makers expect citizens to hold them politically accountable, they are more inclined to temper their worst impulses rather than face public protests.”<sup>3</sup> In Advent, a preacher can encourage the congregation to make public officials accountable for policies and behaviors that are truly just.

### 1 Corinthians 1:3–9

It is both astonishing and puzzling that the apostle Paul begins the letter to the Corinthians with thanksgiving for “the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus” (v. 4b), with affirmation for their many spiritual gifts

3. Ibid., 346.

(v. 7) and with confidence that Christ will “strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 8).

The Corinthians? Full of the grace of God and the gifts of the Spirit? Blameless on the day that Christ returns?

At Corinth the church fought so bitterly over whose spiritual gifts are the greatest that Paul reminded them that love is the greatest gift (1 Cor. 13). This church was so fractious that Paul reminded them they were to work harmoniously together like parts of the body (1 Cor. 12). In this church the rich gobbled up the best food when they gathered for their potluck celebrations of the Lord's Supper, so that nothing was left for the poor (1 Cor. 11). Why would Paul begin this letter with such uplifting words about them?

Perhaps the real question is, why does God care so much for them? Indeed, Paul is not simply expressing his own sentiments about the Corinthians but emphasizes what God is doing. *God* gave this church grace through Jesus Christ. *God* equipped them with every spiritual gift. *God* strengthens them to the end, so that they may be blameless when Christ returns. Indeed, Paul's last line brings this theme to a climax by stressing God's absolute faithfulness (v. 9).

Paul's uplifting tone in this passage reminds us of a temptation in preaching social justice: to leave people with a clear vision of how far short we have fallen in doing what God requires (hence, with a lot of guilt), but without much encouragement or grace to move toward God's vision. The encouragement and grace in this text is a theological antidote. Yes, we fall short. Yes, we fail. Yes, we are afraid. Yes, we worry more about what the congregation will think than about what God needs for us to say. Yes, we get more entangled in our own internal church fights than in the quest to bring God's justice to a hurting world. Yes, we are paralyzed by fear. But that is not the last word.

God is faithful! The One who has called us and has equipped us with all the gifts needful for our ministries, will also strengthen us to the end, so that we too may be found in faithful witness on the day of Christ's return.

In the rest of 1 Corinthians, Paul points the congregation to ways they can more fully respond and live out this grace. In so doing, Paul writes to the Corinthians as a community. For Paul, the church is a corporate body intended to demonstrate the life of the coming realm in the present, through the way members relate with one another. Preaching in Advent often focuses on personal, individual preparation for the coming of Christ, but Paul reminds us to prepare as community.

### Mark 13:24–37

This text can strike terror in the heart of the most seasoned preacher. The distance between our contemporary world and that of the early Christians,

who expected Jesus' imminent return, is nowhere more evident than here. What do we do with this apocalyptic language: the sun being darkened, the moon not giving light, the stars falling, and the Son of Man coming? How do we bring a word from this text that makes sense to people today—many of whom have ceased expecting Christ to come again in glory? The closing verses (vv. 32–37) set out the goal of this baffling language. According to Mark, the purpose of this text is motivate us to be watchful. What does it mean to be watchful in the sense that Mark intends?

Since no one knows the day or hour when Christ will return (not even the angels!), we are not to spend our time trying to figure out when or how it will happen. That is not our concern. Rather, our charge is to “keep alert” (v. 33) and “keep awake” (v. 37), lest Christ return and find us napping. In the apocalyptic worldview, to be alert and awake is to engage in faithful witness. In the Gospel of Mark, this means to continue doing what Jesus said: to grow in discipleship, to announce the coming of the realm of God, to cast out demons (3:13–15), and to carry this ministry to the Gentiles (nations) (13:10). The congregation is to continue these activities even when suffering (13:7–13).

In Mark's world, these acts of witness all point toward social justice, for they point toward the realm of God as a social world in which all circumstances and relationships fully manifest God's purposes of love, justice, peace, mutual support, and abundance. The preacher can help the congregation identify how it can carry out similar missions today.

This text, then, is not so much about what will happen in the end time as it is about how to live between Christ's first and second coming. Christ has given us a mission. At the same time, this text is a warning. Some of us—individuals and congregations—have become complacent, and lackadaisical, thinking we have all the time in the world to do what Christ asks of us. Not so, says the Gospel writer. We are dealing with an urgent situation here. Life is short. So live in a way that makes a difference. Keep awake!

# Universal Declaration of Human Rights (December 10)

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*Christine Marie Smith*

DEUTERONOMY 16:18–22

PSALM 10:10–18

REVELATION 18:1–8

LUKE 18:1–8

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In the shadow of World War II, the United Nations set forth the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. This document asserts that all human beings are free, equal, and entitled to dignity, safety, peace, and security regardless of nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, or religion. It prohibits actions that deny these values (such as slavery, torture, or discrimination). Commemorating it in Advent, the preacher could help the congregation to repent of violations of these rights and to recognize that living by them can be an important component in preparing for the Advent of Christ.

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The peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, and in the equal rights of men and women.

*Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization . . . of the economic, social, and cultural rights indispensable . . . for dignity and the free development of . . . personality.

*Article 22, Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

In the aftermath of World War II, with the realization of the violence of which human beings are capable and the horror of the Shoah, the visionary creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a crucial historical act. In our time, in which human rights violations continue at an inhumane level

and genocide takes place with impunity, the global community (including the church) desperately needs to remember the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration, now available in 360 languages, is one of the most translated documents in the world. Although it originated as a hope-filled document, the human community today is far from realizing it (except for the privileged elite). Indeed, before preachers move too quickly to the biblical texts for today, it would be good to print the whole document, to read slowly the preamble and the thirty articles, and then to reread the entire document through the eyes of the most poor and oppressed.<sup>1</sup>

When reading the declaration through the lens of the poor and oppressed, the preacher is confronted with the privileged assumptions that gave rise to it, privileges that many preachers of Eurocentric background enjoy: that everyone has the right to own property; that everyone has the right to rest and leisure and periodic holidays with pay; that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile; that everyone has the right to education, and to a standard of living adequate for their health and well-being; that everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions; and that everyone has the right to seek asylum from persecution.<sup>2</sup>

If the most oppressed were to write a Declaration of Human Rights today, it would likely be no less visionary, but shocking for many middle- and upper-class preachers. I imagine they would write articles like this: the right to have enough to eat to sustain one's self and one's family; the right to potable water; the right to a plot of land to farm; the right to health care that keeps members of one's community from dying of things that are easily preventable; the right not to be forced to fight against one's own family members in wars that serve international corporations and the elite in one's country; the right to maintain and express one's indigenous culture and religious beliefs; the right to vote; the right to be treated as a human being who has inalienable rights.

Christians who take Advent seriously do not only await the incarnation of God among us in Christ; we also long for the coming of the realm of God's justice on earth. Many preachers need to reclaim the eschatological nature of Advent as a season in which we remember that we are God's hope for even a taste of that reign of God to be realized for most of the world's people. Because of this truth, a major element of this holy day might be to deepen and broaden our understanding of Advent in ways that connect us to the whole of God's creation and to all those who still suffer dehumanization and poverty and live under circumstances in which universal human rights

1. United Nations Web Services section, Department of Public Information, United Nations, 2007, <http://www.un.org/events/humanrights/2007> (accessed July 5, 2010).

2. These occurrences of the words "right" and "rights" actually appear in the declaration itself.

can be assumed by only a very few. The creators of this visionary document would surely expect the world community, and particularly the privileged who enjoy these rights, to work tirelessly until the rights become reality for all God's people.

### Revelation 18:1–8

The Roman Empire (likened to Babylon, the destroyer of the temple in 586 BCE) is falling, for God's judgment is imminent. Christians, no matter where they live, are to "come out of" (v. 5) the kind of oppressive luxury and power the Roman merchants and elites have accumulated. John calls all Christians to "come out of" all forms of idolatry that have replaced the ultimate power and goodness of God and of living in covenant with one another. Judgment is coming and they/we still have a chance to "not take part in [the] sins" (v. 4) of oppressive powers. John is saying, turn now, and say no to all forms of injustice and death. John calls for what Latin American liberation theologians describe as denouncement.<sup>3</sup> You must say no to every kind of injustice and disengage in every way possible from further wrongdoing.

In the absence of so many basic human rights for so many people, why is so little denouncing heard in our Christian churches? Isn't it time to denounce the fact that the vast majority of God's people live in abject poverty and suffering? Isn't it time to denounce the exploitation of the poor by the rich?

In allowing this text to inform what we say about universal human rights, it would be easy to linger on the injustices of the Roman Empire, rather than turn our sights to the injustices perpetrated by the United States Empire. Maybe it is time for a little judgment closer to home. In our wealthy nation, there are people who actually starve and freeze to death. In our wealthy nation, there are thousands of people who have no health care. In our wealthy nation, some people act like demons in the way that they keep robbing others of basic human rights.

A sensitized preacher must face the fact that once again evil is equated with a *woman*. Here, fornication is the act that has polluted all who are associated with *her*, and for *her* sins *she* will be tormented, plagued, burned, and judged by the God of justice. To preach that God will ultimately overthrow injustice, a preacher does not have to perpetuate the metaphor of Rome as a woman. Rather, a truthful preacher, concerned to not undermine the dignity of women, will properly name the Roman officials, the Roman officers, the

3. Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 39. Boff writes about the two primary tasks of any prophet: to denounce and to proclaim. The theme of denouncement is a primary one in Latin American liberation theology and is a challenging concept to most preachers of privilege.

Roman elite, and the emperor as the perpetrators of injustice, and properly name the powerful and elite of our day, as well as the primary perpetrators of injustice, even when we are they.

### **Luke 18:1–8**

A simple reading of this parable delights and supports our human sensibilities: Those treated unjustly will triumph if they are persistent. If you are suffering some kind of injustice, the right strategies and constant prayer can actually persuade the powerful to grant you justice. While Luke in this parable dramatizes for the disciples and us the conviction that God never delays in helping those who are treated unjustly, we are left in our contemporary world with the truth that many powerful “judges” have dealt with so many people unjustly. If we look and do not turn away, we can see an entire world full of persistent widows who have the human courage to keep struggling for justice for their families and communities but who have yet to experience justice. A radical parabolic turn comes when we, the privileged, realize that we are the judge, not the widow. It is painful to admit that many in our world “bother” us or are reduced to “begging us” for the justice they deserve. The Declaration of Human Rights, when truly realized, will release people from having to beg for the basic resources that sustain life, and it will guide the privileged to share in mutual, not exploitive, existence.

### **Psalms 10:10–18**

The Declaration of Human Rights was created so “that those from earth may strike terror no more” (v. 18). The preacher listens to the psalmist to be reminded to proclaim God’s comfort as well as God’s ultimate justice. The psalmist reminds people who continue to experience injustice and suffering that God only “seems” to be silent and distant. The psalmist rehearses for the oppressed that God has always judged the unjust and heard the cries of the grieving and orphaned. While other texts today urge human beings to denounce injustice and to seek justice, this psalm leaves us wondering how, in the face of so much injustice, we can proclaim that God is close and that there are universal human rights. Indeed, are we willing to admit that the arms of the wicked and evildoers have not been broken, that the nations who inflict suffering have not been held accountable?

If proclaiming that God is not far away is to be more than a pious, empty reassurance, then we must take action to alleviate all forms of suffering. How does God come near for those who are starving, except through the work of those who provide food? How does God keep so many innocent people in our

world from falling to the might of the powerful, except through those who stand in solidarity with the innocent? How does God draw near to a community massacred while praying for peace, except through those who say no to the continued use of violence?<sup>4</sup> If we are not the face and hands of God's abiding love, expressed in solidarity and some level of accompaniment with people who are oppressed, then these words will ring empty.

### **Deuteronomy 16:18–22**

In a world filled with endless partiality, bribes across national and international lines, and the distortions of justice serving the elite, this text is good news in its unwavering clarity. This short passage points immediately to what it will take to realize a Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Justice must be the one and only standard of human life together. No one will have the resources to bribe another person, community, or country at the expense of those who are without those resources. No one can show partiality (whether for self, community, or country), and no one can distort justice. However, until God's people become a massive force to organize human life for justice, we will keep planting trees of greed, and setting up stones of disparity that will never become a true altar to God. The original Universal Declaration of Human Rights can help us create a new set of rights closer to what most of God's people need, not just those rights that protect the privileged. We might thus come closer to erecting the one true altar of justice to our God and on behalf of all God's created family.

4. Teresa Ortiz, *Never Again a World without Us: Voices Of Mayan Women in Chiapas, Mexico* (Washington, DC: EPICA, 2001), 167–95. This section of the book describes the massacre of Las Abejas of Acteal, Chiapas, who were killed while praying for peace in their own chapel.