



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship



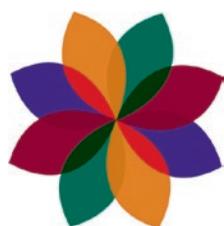
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Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship provides new resources to help preachers achieve the goal of connecting congregations to Scripture. This nine-volume series, which begins publishing in September 2018, offers creative commentary on each reading in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. It does so first by viewing each reading through the lens of its connections to the rest of Scripture and then by seeing the reading through the lenses of culture, film, fiction, ethics, science, or another aspect of contemporary life. Included as well are commentaries on the Psalm readings that connect the psalm both to the other readings for the day and to the congregation's experience of worship.

We hope you enjoy the enclosed samples of this new commentary.

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Rev. Dr. Joel B. Green is Provost, Dean of the School of Theology, and Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Fuller Theological Seminary. He has written and edited numerous books, including *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, *What about the Soul? Neuroscience and Christian Anthropology*, and *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (coauthor). He is ordained clergy in The United Methodist Church.

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Publication Schedule

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| Year C, Volume 1 | Advent through Epiphany | September 2018 |
| Year C, Volume 2 | Lent through Pentecost | December 2018 |
| Year C, Volume 3 | Season after Pentecost | April 2019 |

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| Year A, Volume 1 | Advent through Epiphany | September 2019 |
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| Year B, Volume 1 | Advent through Epiphany | September 2020 |
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proclamation.”

–Walter Brueggemann,
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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, and Cynthia L. Rigby. These four 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. Bo Adams has shown creativity and insight in exploring an array of sources to provide 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.

Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing *Connections*. President Theodore Wardlaw and Dean David 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 and 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
THOMAS G. LONG
LUKE A. POWERY
CYNTHIA L. RIGBY
GENERAL EDITORS

Christmas Eve/Nativity of the Lord, Proper I

Isaiah 9:2–7
Psalm 96

Titus 2:11–14
Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Isaiah 9:2–7

²The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
³You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
⁴For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
⁵For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The lectionary assigns these well-known words from Isaiah to Christmas Eve, reflecting the traditional and strong theological connection between Isaiah's joyous cry, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us" (9:6), and the birth of Jesus. This long-standing link between Isaiah and Christmas constitutes both an opportunity and a warning for the preacher. The warning is that Isaiah should not be allowed to become

merely background music for the Christmas story. Isaiah's words have their own context, their own history, and should be received as such. When the Isaiah passage is heard on its own ground—and this is the opportunity—it helps to interpret the Christmas story by shining light on the gritty political and social realities that are genuinely part of the Christmas narrative but that are sometimes sentimentalized and lost.

The original setting of this passage is the geopolitics of the ancient world in the eighth century BCE. To understand Isaiah 9:2–7, we need to pull back the camera and view this passage in its larger literary context. In Isaiah 7, we meet King Ahaz of Judah, who was between a rock and a hard place. The “rock,” in this case, was Assyria, a major Mesopotamian military power intent on dominating the region. The “hard place” was an anti-Assyrian coalition forged between King Rezin of Syria (Aram) and King Pekah of Israel (Ephraim), leaders of two small and weaker nations who considered that their only defense against the Assyrian powerhouse was to combine forces in a military alliance. Rezin and Pekah wanted Ahaz to join in, but when Ahaz hesitated, the two kings decided that a regime change was in order and attacked Judah, intending to depose Ahaz and to replace him with a compliant partner.

Ahaz now had two problems: the elephant of Assyria, who could roll over any moment and crush Judah, and the Syria-Israel coalition, which already had boots on the ground headed toward Jerusalem. What should Ahaz do? Snuggle up to Assyria, or roll the dice and join hands with Syria and Israel, thus rattling Assyria’s cage?

In this anxious moment of political calculation, God sent the prophet Isaiah to intercept Ahaz as he walked out on one of the local Jerusalem roads (7:3ff.). God put a message in Isaiah’s mouth for the king, essentially, “Do not be afraid, Ahaz. Sure, the soldiers of Rezin and Pekah are on their way to Jerusalem, but this is no threat. These two little ‘smoldering stumps’ aren’t in charge of Judah; I am. I have made promises to Jerusalem and to God’s people, and I will keep them. Stand firm in your faith.”

Then Isaiah added, “If you doubt God’s promise, ask God for a sign. Make it as big as you need. As high as heaven or as deep as the underworld. Just ask.” As if Ahaz did not already have enough problems, he now had one more: God. What if Ahaz asked for some really big sign, and God gave it? Then what? Ahaz would have to decide whether to trust God in the rough-and-tumble world of politics or to trust his own wits and finesse. Trusting God was perhaps all right for priests and prophets and little people, but kings had to stand on firmer realities; so Ahaz

tried to wriggle free by answering Isaiah with fake piety: “Oh no, I would never put God to the test.”

Isaiah responded sharply, “You tiresome idiot! OK, you won’t ask for a sign, but God will give you one anyway!” What was this sign that was higher than heaven and deeper than the deepest pit? A baby. “Look,” said the prophet, “a young woman is with child, shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” In a world bristling with power and armies on the march with swords at the ready, the sign of God’s promise of peace is that most fragile and vulnerable of human realities, a pregnant woman and her soon-to-be-born child.

Rolling forward to our passage, this promised child has now been born, and, as promised, the child is indeed Immanuel, “God with Us.” Historically, Isaiah 9:2–7, describing a newborn who would become the “prince of peace,” may have begun as a royal coronation hymn or, more likely, as a poetic birth announcement for a new prince; but here in Isaiah these words have already begun their migration into something broader, a joyous proclamation of God’s enduring intention to save God’s people in distress.

The passage opens with a contrast between darkness and light (9:2). At one level, this darkness is the gloom of a nation in turmoil. King Ahaz turned his back on the God of life and the hope that only God can give (God was “hiding his face” in 8:17). Panicked about security, food, and the economy, the people see only misery all around them (8:20–22). For wisdom, they desperately reach out to false prophets—to necromancers or, perhaps for us, to pollsters, blathering pundits, and talk-show hosts (8:19)—but the darkness descends all around them.

At another level, though, this darkness is larger than one moment in history. Darkness represents the power of death and the disease, destruction, and decay threatening God’s good creation. This power has shown up in the reign of Ahaz, but it keeps showing up—whenever military aggression is chosen over peace, whenever illness destroys hope, whenever fear overcomes faith, whenever death loudly boasts of another victim. The good news proclaimed by Isaiah is that God will not abandon God’s people to the darkness; God is at work to overcome

death and to bring wisdom, peace, justice, and righteousness, in ways as hidden and seemingly as weak as a newborn child. In the darkness, a light has shined.

Two images describe the newfound joy of the people (8:3). First, the people rejoice as they do at harvest time. Barren fields now burst forth with new life. Second, the people celebrate like victorious soldiers dividing plunder—a harsh, militaristic image, perhaps, but remember, the plundered enemy is death. Every child of God that death has claimed, every hope that death has dashed, is redeemed by the power of God.

Isaiah 9:4–5 is rhythmic, even dance-like (indeed, some commentators argue this is the

liturgy for a performed victory ritual). One by one, the symbols of oppression—the rods, the boots of the enemy, the bloody uniforms—are brought forward and tossed on a fire, burning up the tools of evil. Finally, the promised child is pictured as a grown-up and majestic king. The language is Davidic, but it transcends any earthly king, even David. The child will be strong and authoritative, bringing wisdom, power, and endless peace. He will rule with justice and righteousness because “the LORD of hosts” is zealous to uphold him (9:7).

When Isaiah 9:2–7 is read on Christmas Eve, we join with the Gospel witnesses to proclaim that God’s promise to send a child of hope, a

How Do We Hear

And so it is: the Christmas message, with its claim to be heard, demands a first decision from us. The Church does not really know herself unless she shows now that she is even more conscious of her human helplessness than “the children of this world,” and humbles herself with all the world and before all the world to hear the message anew.

No one can say how it is done, not even the most devout and learned theologians of all times have been able to give the slightest hint of how one comes to hear the Christmas message. All we can say about hearing this message, hinges on the fact that it speaks for itself. We cannot reach it ourselves and we cannot even prepare for it, for such preparing would really be conforming with it. A bright Advent-tide must therefore borrow its light from a Christmas that, obviously, follows it. To know the Saviour who is to come, we must first know the Saviour who has come already. And help which can be obtained by some device of our own, is not the real, ultimate help. If the hearing of the Christmas message depended on the help we give ourselves, what else would we hear but something we can suggest to ourselves, and this would not alter our state of helplessness. This can mean one thing only; that in the night of Christ’s Nativity the shepherds were told by the angel: “To you is born this day a saviour.” We cannot produce the angel, nor can we wait for him, as one waits for an inspiration or an experience. Inspirations and experiences are human possibilities. If we waited for them, we would look for something that we can tell ourselves. However, what we could tell ourselves, would not get us out of our helplessness. The angel is the *divine* possibility of human understanding, but one cannot ask if this possibility will occur one day, or hour. We must ask, however, if the angel is not already in our midst and is not speaking to us (in the manner in which angels do stand among men and talk to them) and if we are not being told before we have even begun to listen: “To you is born this day a Saviour.”

We cannot persuade ourselves or others that the angel stands in our midst and tells us that God has “prepared” us to listen. Perhaps we neither have had nor will have any spiritual experience or inspiration, and if we had, we might be rightly suspicious of it. But if God has prepared us to listen, then we do not need these things; for we are ordinary people, just as the shepherds were, and will listen with a sober mind. The Christmas story itself might pose the question for us: “Has not God Himself prepared us to listen and have we not already heard the message, while we are still asking if and how we can hear it?”

promise fulfilled over and over again in history, has most definitively and gloriously been fulfilled in the child of Bethlehem. Isaiah's voice on Christmas Eve reminds us that God's salvation is not merely a spiritual victory to be serenaded with a lullaby. The Christ child took on

the power of death, and this birth signals the time when the tools of war and injustice—the guns, the boots, the unjust laws, the oppressor's rod—will be consumed by the fire of God's great victory.

THOMAS G. LONG

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Some things cannot just be *said*; they must be *sung*. At times prose is insufficient; language must overflow into poetry. In seasons of sorrow or joy, in settings where we are mired in despair or swept up in hope, experience finds fullest voice not in sequences of words but in lines of melody. What seems too hard to endure or too good to be true can sometimes best make its way into understanding and acceptance through phrases that reverberate in cadence.

A celebration of Christmas shaped only (or primarily) in exposition and explanation is all but inconceivable. (Christmastide admonishment is more unthinkable still.) Of course we sing carols at Christmas! How can we keep from singing? Christmas sermons also need carol-like qualities, not simply as an accommodation to sensory and affective expectations of holiday churchgoers but because song and poetry are genres particularly appropriate for sharing incarnational theology. The joy and hope of “God with us”—enlightening, enlivening, liberating, and transposing our human condition—need to be danced in Christmas sermons rather than marched or plodded. This does not mean they should be composed in verse and sung as ballads or arias. This text from Isaiah 9 can be particularly helpful to preachers, not as a launching pad to conceptual sermon reflection but as an informing influence in the sermon's very “texture.”

What kind of “caroling” best befits a Christmas sermon? The default lyrical elements in Christmas services are usually a mixture of jubilation (“Joy to the World”) and tender awe (“Silent Night”). There is nothing wrong with those! But such sentiments, expected and well worn, can lose their edge. They can foster an environment of cocoon-like comfort and fond nostalgia. Such Christmas coziness is hardly consonant with the stark, confusing wonder of

shepherds who go “in haste” to Bethlehem when their predictably ordinary world is interdicted by angels crying “Glory!” On Christmas Eve Isaiah's song can be taken hostage by seasonal sentimentality. How can that poetry of exultation be heard, instead, as a dumbfounded “too good to be true!” from shepherds spontaneously responding to a world-upending announcement from on high? How, to cite Marcus Borg's phrase, can those who hear it in church do so “again for the first time”?¹

Probably the most recognized musical rendition of this passage is the chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, “For unto Us a Child Is Born.” Some years ago, distinguished choral conductor Robert Shaw took a yearlong break from concert touring with his chorale. He immersed himself in a study of Handel's well-known oratorio. The reigning musical performance interpretation at the time was distinctively Victorian: tempos slow and dignified, instrumentation massive and ponderous, vocal production and tonal color in soloists and choir heavy (almost Wagnerian)—in short, sounding seriously religious!

Researching the original musical text in the context of its composer's art and its immediate cultural setting, Shaw determined that *Messiah* had become gummed up in layers of sentiment at odds with what he discerned as Handel's intent. Shaw shaped a concert production releasing the music from the weight of its Victorian accretions. Tempos moved like the wind; instrumentation was spare and sparkling; vocal production was nimble, light, and spritely. Emotional intensity was achieved through a sense of musical spontaneity that left

1. Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995).

listeners (and quite possibly singers) gasping for breath. For the first few bars of “For unto Us a Child Is Born,” the leaping, skipping, tumbling sounds of the altos, tenors, sopranos, and basses chasing each other sounded almost sacrilegious! Then listeners began to feel hearts leaping, bodies pulsing, tears falling. Expected holiday cheer was engulfed in fierce, explosive joy.

For the preacher on this occasion, the question is, how, with the help of Isaiah, can a sermon for Christmas Eve (or Day) foster an analogous experience of awe and joy—not the joy of happy times remembered but of unexpected liberation from apparently hopeless bondage? How can preachers approach Isaiah (and, the sermon, more broadly conceived) as Robert Shaw does with George Frideric Handel? Here are some prompts for imaginative connections:

1. Listen to music, either prior to or in the process of sermon preparation: symphonies by Gustav Mahler or Carl Nielsen, folk songs by James Taylor or Joan Baez—any performing artist whose singing and playing is carried by a tension between despair and hope, in which surprise is always waiting to break in.

2. Peruse the texts of Christmas carols for theologically poetic articulations of liberation, understood not primarily as individual salvation but as communal liberation: familiar carols such as “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” and “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (verse 3), and carols less well known, such as “From East to West from Shore to Shore,” “And Every Stone Shall Cry,” and “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.”

3. Revisit songs of liberation from the African American tradition for the way they incorporate the eschatological energy of liberation: “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child,” “That Great Gettin’ Up Morning,” “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” “I’m Going to Ride in the Chariot in the Morning, Lord.”

4. Recall the liberation narratives and apocalyptic images in the biblical tradition—paying particular attention to how the dramatic sense of transformation is depicted and evoked. How might a sermon for Christmas take its place in the trajectory of that tradition?

5. Review recent historical events of protracted struggle against oppression that have

undergone sudden, surprising reversals. How is the experience of liberation expressed by those who have been most immediately and deeply affected (as distinct from those who observe and report, regardless of how sympathetically)?

In all these exercises, the intent is not primarily to reference sources or incorporate information but to foster, in the process of sermon shaping, a sense of resonance with the poetry and musicality of God’s “mighty acts” in “making a way when there was no way.” The question underlying all of these: How can a sermon for Christmas not just “tell the story” or “reflect on the meaning” but really *sing* of incarnation and redemption?

In light of this invitation for a sermon to explore the relationship between theology and poetry, two issues merit an additional dimension of reflection. First, tucked into Isaiah’s song of celebration is a twofold description of joys that are seen as analogous to the joy of liberation: “as with the joy at the harvest” and “as people exult when dividing plunder” (9:3). Both images express excitement at the gathering of “fruits” longed for and worked toward but ultimately “given.” These joys come, however, from being in very different fields—farming fields and battlefields. Wars intended for liberation so often generate further cycles of strife, destruction, and oppression (notwithstanding the Isaiah poet’s vision of “endless peace,” in a kingdom established and upheld “with justice and righteousness”). This raises a question for poets of liberation (including Christmas preacher poets): what rhetorical centering is required, and what lyrical limits need to be in play so that a hard-won peace is not misunderstood so as to grow into its very opposite? Especially in God’s name!

Second, in Handel’s *Messiah* the opening chorus powerfully reiterates the names by which the child of liberation “shall be called.” For Christians, these names have come to be, in both song and statement, a signature way of sounding forth names they attribute to a different child named Jesus. In Christmas sermons, how might exegetical responsibility and interfaith sensitivity suggest that such poetry be employed—or alternatively rendered?

DAVID J. SCHLAFER

Christmas Eve/Nativity of the Lord, Proper I

Psalm 96

- ¹O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
- ²Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- ³Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
- ⁴For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
- ⁵For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
- ⁶Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- ⁷Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ⁸Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
- ⁹Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.
- ¹⁰Say among the nations, “The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.”
- ¹¹Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
¹²let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Connecting the Psalm to Scripture and Worship

Most of us are familiar with the concept of “thin places”—sites where the membrane between this world and the next is less opaque. On the shining night of Christmas Eve, we enter what you might call a “thin *time*.” The waiting of Advent has brought us to this threshold of promise, awe, and joy. Psalm 96 ushers us in.

With opening and closing verses exhorting us to sing to God, this psalm describes God and suggests appropriate responses to the One who reigns over all. Because God creates everything,

response is due from everything: “all the earth,” “all the peoples,” “all gods,” “the nations,” “the heavens,” and the natural world (vv. 1, 3, 4, 9–12). It is a no-exceptions summons to praise.

All this leads to the doubled assertion that God “is coming” (v. 13) in judgment: God “will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth” (v. 13). But this is no threatening sort of judgment, no cause for dread. Although the earth has been urged to “tremble” (v. 9) before God, it is in awe, not in

fear. In fact, God's omnipotence brings reassurance, because our "world is firmly established; it shall never be moved" (v. 10). Furthermore, not only will God graciously judge "with equity" (v. 10), but the very first attribute we were instructed to celebrate about this judge is that God offers "salvation" (v. 2).

Christians understand salvation as coming through Jesus Christ. That's why Christmas Eve is such a holy night: it is when we welcome God's Son as the zenith of God's "marvelous works among all the peoples" (v. 3).

Both Psalm 96 and Isaiah 9:2–7 speak of what God has done, is doing, and will do yet. Isaiah mentions grim realities—"darkness . . . oppressor . . . all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood" (Isa. 9:2–5)—that have already been defeated, and the psalm tells us how to respond now that we "have seen a great light" (v. 2).

The final two verses of the Isaiah passage most closely complement the jubilant passion expressed in the psalm: the wondrous "child . . . given to us" will wield "authority" (v. 6) on behalf of "peace . . . justice and . . . righteousness . . . forevermore" (v. 7). Isaiah ascribes this to "the zeal of the LORD of hosts" (v. 7), celebrating that it is God who acts and reigns on our behalf. This is the God to whom the psalmist invites us, saying, "bring an offering, and come into his courts" (Ps. 96:8).

Christmas Eve is a prime time to issue that invitation anew. We whose labors bring us to church every week may be tempted to disparage strangers who show up only on holidays. Instead, welcome these folks, rejoicing that the irresistible tug of the Savior's birth has led them to your door. By offering a banquet of ancient texts and beloved carols, you help them know that, no matter how long they are absent from the pews, they always have a place in God's house.

Heard every Christmas, today's Gospel lesson is among the New Testament's best-known passages. Compared to today's Old Testament texts, its style feels almost journalistic. Yes, the angels are impressive and the shepherds are impressed, but a preacher seeking to share the glorious exhilaration of Christmas Eve may find that Psalm 96 provides more to work with.

Holiday congregations deserve that. Defying the well-documented secularization of Christmas and modern culture, these texts together offer an awestruck, countercultural alternative. These texts together assert that Christmas Eve is a big deal! Not because Santa is on his way but because—as noted by the psalmist, and by Isaiah, and by Luke—*God* is coming.

The psalm's full-blown focus on God provides sure guidance for the preacher. This "thin time" is brought to us by God's choice to draw near. Congregants may be overwhelmed by the trappings of this season, but Psalm 96 turns our attention to God. The psalm enables the preacher to insist that, beyond those fortunate few in Bethlehem, all of creation is called to praise God.

Another homiletical angle suggested by Psalm 96 is the unprecedented nature of Immanuel. In the psalm, God can be described only via abstract attributes that attend upon the Divine: "honor and majesty . . . strength and beauty" (v. 6). What a difference Christmas Eve makes! God is now with us.

A third option is to preach about what kind of judgment Mary's child will bring. By knowing us, Immanuel will judge us graciously.

Liturgically, the psalm stands ready to serve. It is structured as two calls to worship (vv. 1–3 and vv. 7–12), each leading to reasons for worshiping God (vv. 4–6 and v. 13, respectively). Additionally, notice—or, better yet, *feel*—the poetic surging of three passages: "Sing to the LORD. . . sing to the LORD . . . Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day" (vv. 1–2); "Ascribe to the LORD. . . ascribe to the LORD. . . Ascribe to the LORD . . . bring an offering, and come into his courts" (vv. 7–8); "Let the heavens . . . let the sea . . . let the field . . . Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy" (vv. 11–12). The triple repetition of each imperative builds an expression of praise with rhythm-like waves landing on a beach. Any of these segments could call your congregation to praise.

Also, heed the psalm's repeated instructions to "sing" (vv. 1–2). The psalmist asserts that even "trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD" (vv. 12–13). Especially if you will not be worshipping as a congregation on Christmas Day,

sing “Joy to the World.” The hymn was written to paraphrase Psalm 98, but it also beautifully reflects the essence of Psalm 96.

In this thin time, the eternal call and response between heaven and earth unite in

melody: angels and shepherds have done their part, star and magi are on their way, and God’s Holy Spirit has created Earth’s Holy Family. So, sing to the Lord a new song!

LEIGH CAMPBELL-TAYLOR

Titus 2:11–14

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Titus 1:5–15 reveals a pastor concerned about the spiritual health of his congregation. Presented by a senior minister to his protégé, the letter begins with a charge to establish elders, who will assist with teaching, preaching, and community governance. The elders must display two fundamental traits: a stable character (1:6–8) and a firm grounding in the tenets of the faith (1:9). The pastor also insists that Titus teach and nurture the congregants so that they will display these same traits. If they accept this teaching, they will withstand the teachers who are “upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach” (1:11).

The pastor offers Titus a two-pronged strategy. First, instruct them to show reverence for order and civility, so as not to alarm their neighbors (2:1–10; 3:1–3). Second, teach carefully the elemental beliefs handed on from the earliest communities (2:11–15; 3:4–7). This advice is so critical that, prior to his final greetings, the pastor repeats it again (in reverse order, 3:8b).

Titus 2:11–14, one sentence in Greek, concentrates on the second prong. Having presented civic instructions, the pastor now expresses the religious tenets undergirding them. The focus is on the “grace” that is “training” us (vv. 11, 12), which is explicated through the sentence’s remaining clauses. Similar instructions occur in 3:4–8a, so that “these verses, along with their counterparts in chapter 3, are the heart of the letter.”¹

1. I. H. Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 262.

The hortatory material concludes with a reminder to wear fidelity as an “ornament” that adorns the doctrine (“teaching,” *didaskalian*) of God our Savior (2:10). The use of “ungodliness” (*asebeian*) and “worldly desires” (*kosmikas epithymias*), in verse 12 creates an aural and visual wordplay with “ornament,” connecting verses 11–14 with the preceding moral exhortation. This is strengthened in verse 13, “great God and Savior” (*sōteros*), which echoes the phrasing in verse 11, “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation (*sōtērios*) to all.”

These verses are also connected by references to two epiphanies—one in the past (v. 11), and the other (v. 13) in the future. The first refers to the entry of Jesus Christ into human history (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16); the second to the return of Christ as cosmic judge. Together they frame the “present age/now time” as a time of anticipation, a typical Pauline idea (Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:16; 2 Cor. 4:4), but with atypical phrasing (cf. 1 Tim. 6:17; 2 Tim. 4:10).

Describing Jesus’ life and death as an expression of God’s “grace” focuses attention on God’s actions toward, in, and for the world (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18–21). This is highlighted through the coupling of “to all” with “salvation” (v. 11), not to determine who is and who is not “saved” but to show the universal scope of God’s graceful act. This sentiment foreshadows the liturgical language of 3:4: “God our Savior,” whose “loving kindness” (*philanthrōpia*) has “appeared” (*epephanē*).

Connecting grace with “bringing salvation” (*sōtērios*) is conceptually obvious (cf. 3:4–5),

but the word itself occurs only here in the NT.² The *sōtēr* stem occurs seven times in Titus, all emphasizing salvation as present “deliverance” and proper behavior as a sign of right comprehension. A similar dynamic appears in Exodus 19:3–6, where the delivery of the law is a result of the deliverance from Egypt. The author alludes to this episode in Titus 2:14 (“a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds”).

The “grace” of God is not only revelatory but also pedagogical (*paideuousa*) [“training us,” NRSV]. The use of *paideuō* is also rare in Paul (only 1 Cor. 11:32 and 2 Cor. 6:9) but is used three times in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25; and here), where it is connected to corrective teaching (influenced by Greco-Roman moral philosophy). “Grace,” that is, the death of Jesus, provides the template for measuring and fitting one’s behavior to God’s redemptive act, while waiting for God’s final revelation (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24–25).

In Galatians 3:23, Paul depicts Torah as a pedagogue until “faith would be revealed.” Now that “faith” has appeared, grace is the trainer that transforms God’s people. The rest of the sentence explains that spiritual training begins by renouncing (*arnēsamenoi*) “ungodliness” (*asebeian*, cf. *eusebeian* in 1:1) and earthly desires, that is, any activity that neglects the centrality of God. The verb “renounce,” absent from Paul’s major letters but frequent in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 5:8; 2 Tim. 2:12; 13; 3:5; Titus 1:16; and here), creates a stark contrast to the rebellious teachers, who “profess to know God, but they deny (*arnountai*) him by their actions” (1:16; see 3:9–11).

The obverse of renouncing impiety is embracing virtue. By referencing three of the four fundamental Greek/Roman virtues—self-control (*sōphronōs*), uprightness (*dikaiōs*), and godliness (*eusebōs*)—the earlier allusion to Hellenistic moral exhortation is reinforced. The virtuous life may appear to be the self-disciplined life recommended by Plato and others; however, here it is the result of deliverance by God through Christ. The virtues become hallmarks of the Christian in the “present time.” Verse 13 underscores this, by instructing believers to “wait” (*prosdexomenoi*) expectantly for

the object of “blessed hope,” the eschatological manifestation of “glory” (1 Tim. 6:14). This is a deliberate echo of Job 2:9a (LXX), “while I wait for the hope of my deliverance.”

Faithful waiting is almost a stock idea in the NT (Phil. 2:11; 1 Thess. 2:12; 1 Pet. 4:13; 5:1, 10), but “the great God and our savior Jesus Christ” is not. The phrasing is grammatically ambiguous, allowing for one or two objects of hope. The NRSV translates, “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” but also notes that “the great God and our Savior” is possible. Three factors suggest that the author intends one object, Jesus Christ: (1) the use of “the” (*toū*) and the possessive pronoun “our” (*hymōn*) link God and Christ, suggesting one rather than two persons; (2) the previous use of “epiphany” refers to Jesus, rather than God; (3) the author’s blurring use of “savior” in referring to both God and Christ elsewhere (Titus 1:3, 4; 3:4, 6) suggests he is unconcerned with a subtle shift toward the divinization of Jesus.³

Verse 14 provides support for this, as the relative pronoun “who” introduces a fragment of a traditional confession (see 3:4–7 and Mark 10:45; Gal. 1:4) that refers to the death of Jesus: “who gave himself for us that he might redeem us.” The term “redeem” (*lytrōsētai*) means “to set free,” pointing again to salvation as deliverance, this time from iniquity (see Ps. 130:8). Redemption is not simply release but re-creation. God creates a “people of his own” (*laos periousion*, “a treasured people”), an allusion to Exodus 19:5 and Deuteronomy 7:6, a people “purified” (*katharizō*, see Heb. 9:14; Eph. 5:26) and desirous of “good deeds” (*kalōn ergon*), a favorite term for our author (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1; 5:10, 25; 6:18; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14). Here the readers are reminded of their true identity and the relationship of belief to lifestyle, an ethic counter to the rebellious teachers (1:13–16). The author can now move directly to the next section (3:1–8a), where the pattern of faithful obedience is repeated.

STEVEN KRAFTCHICK

2. Cf. the use of *sōtērion* in Luke 2:30; 3:6; Acts 28:28 (reference to Isa. 40:5); and Eph. 6:17 (reference to Isa. 59:17).

3. For a full discussion of the possible translations, see Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, 276–83. For an alternative translation, see J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 246–47.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Titus appears only twice in the Revised Common Lectionary. This section, 2:11–14, is the Proper I reading for Christmas Eve. This is the case for all three lectionary year cycles (A, B, and C). Christmas is a pregnant moment—play on words intended—in which past, present, and future fill to the brim this one beautiful day. Some preachers try to avoid the cliché of a three-point sermon, but as hard as I tried, this passage from Titus stubbornly persisted in a three-point direction. This passage encourages the congregation to pause in wonder and to observe the salvation of God in (1) the past baby, (2) the present teaching, and (3) the future glory, thus capturing every element of Christmas Day. The preacher could discuss all three or could focus on the one aspect most helpful for the congregation.

First, Titus 2 calls us to remember the first Christmas as it proclaims the good news in words reminiscent of Luke’s angels, declaring the unveiling of grace that brings salvation for all. The liturgical setting of the Christmas service is so full, *literally*, with churches often bursting at the seams with families and guests, and *figuratively*, with the air charged with the arrival of the long-awaited celebration. Titus tells us that the celebration of remembrance has finally come. The little baby depicted in crèche or six-month-old wiggleness is the picture of God’s saving grace.

Titus 2 offers several different avenues for the congregation to declare what God has done in song. The appearing of the grace of God (v. 11) and also the future appearing of the glory of God (v. 13) evoke images of dawning and light. Charles Wesley’s hymn “Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies” calls congregants to proclaim the dawning of salvation on the eve of the dawning of a glorious day:

Christ, whose glory fills the skies;

 triumph o’er the shades of night.

It also recognizes the darkness of ungodliness of which the passage speaks, and it asks Christ

to bring his light internally as he brings it to the whole world:

Visit then this soul of mine;
 pierce the gloom of sin and grief.

Henry Ossawa Tanner’s painting *The Annunciation* portrays, as the title indicates, not the birth of Christ but its announcement. Nevertheless, this might be a fitting image to discuss, because he conveys the presence of the angel only with blinding light. The glory of God as conveyed by Gabriel foreshadows the glory revealed in Christ at his first (and also second) coming.

For many congregants, however, the Christmas service simply must have familiar Christmas hymns, and John Mason Neale’s translation of “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” meets that need as it also reiterates the message of Titus 2. Along with words about the manger, Neale’s hymn proclaims the salvation Christ has brought:

Jesus Christ was born for this!
 He has opened heaven’s door,
 and we are blest forevermore.

In its focus on the present, Titus also reminds us that we too have a role to play in the drama. In declaring the good news of Christmas and redemption, Titus declares that this rescue has transformed the believers into God’s special people (v. 14). Titus then describes this people, the church, in several ways. First, the church is bound together as a class, a group of fellow learners. We are all learning together the right way to live, ways in which to grow, as we shed the immaturity of impiety, worldliness, and lawlessness to embrace instead living wisely, righteously, and in a godly fashion.

This particular passage may be short on the specifics of what that wise, righteous, godly life looks like, but the rest of the letter gives indications. The wise life would surely include those qualities of balance urged for church leaders (1:5–9), for different age groups in the church (2:2–8), and for all (3:1–2, 9–11, 14).

The particular qualities are exemplary, but a dilemma arises with the realization that these exhortations are quite gendered and even urge submissiveness for slaves (2:9–10). Such texts may not be in this lectionary reading, but inquisitive parishioners will notice them, and the pastor can fully acknowledge the fallen reality in which these texts were written, even as both pastor and parishioner work to hear the calls to righteous living that shine in and through the first-century setting.

For contemporary readers of this text, this call “to do” rests in the reality of God’s doing. Because God appeared, saved, taught, gave, rescued, and purified, God’s people can slough off the former way of life and walk into the new. The hymn that most closely reflects Titus 2:11–14 is Isaac Watts’s “So Let Our Lips and Lives Express,” which specifically calls attention to the good works exhorted in the passage:

So let our walks and virtues shine,
To prove the doctrine all divine.

And again:

Our flesh and sense must be denied;
Passion and envy, lust and pride;
While justice, temp’rance, truth and love,
Our inward piety approve.

The temptation looms large here to let the call to holiness and the denial of “worldliness” recede into seclusion. Letting go of the ways of the world sometimes results in a retreat from the world in toto. The message from this passage must not forget its opening line. If God intends for salvation to come to all (v. 11), those good works must be lived out in such a way that those outside the walls of the church can hear the good news about the appearance of salvation and ultimately be folded into the patient instruction of God. The text will go on to say that members of

this community were once outsiders caught in destructive behaviors (3:3), but God redeemed them. They too should be merciful, showing every consideration for all people (v. 2), just as God showed mercy to them. Therefore, this text is a rich one for reflecting on the kingdom of God and its inbreaking justice. The call to righteousness, then, must be both a personal call to holiness and a communal invitation to redemption.

The celebration of the nativity is not just memorial, however; it is also living out, here and now in the present, the future hope of the gospel. We, Titus says, “wait for the blessed hope” (2:13), the second appearing of the divine presence when our Savior returns as Messiah and God. The church, then, is on the cusp of something great, looking forward with expectation to his glorious return. In “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice,” Neale too anticipates this great inclusion:

Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all
to gain his everlasting hall.

Titus 2 strikes a fitting chord for a Christmas service. It proclaims the ineffable good news that salvation has come, but, as is fitting for a true *Christian* celebration of Christmas, it is not sentimental. It recognizes the cost of that salvation for God, that the Savior Jesus Christ gave himself to rescue us. It also acknowledges the life of discipleship demanded of those who enjoy this salvation, which is to grow in the zeal for good works. It tells the gathered congregation: we know where we have come from, what we need to work on, and where we are going. This is a text for celebration for this great day, because it looks back to what God has done and looks forward to what God will do in his Son and through his special people.

AMY PEELER

Christmas Eve/Nativity of the Lord, Proper I

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

The lectionary appoints Luke 2:1–20 for both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. This essay discusses 2:1–7, and the following one treats 2:8–20, since those are the two basic scenes in the first part of chapter 2.

Virgil's *Aeneid*, written in the late first century BCE, is a model of the ancient epic, telling the story of Aeneas and his journeys, leading to the divinely willed birth of the Roman people. Marianne Palmer Bonz argues that Luke's two-volume work of the Gospel and Acts is self-consciously modeled after the *Aeneid*.¹ The

Aeneid is the epic performance of Rome's sacred history; Luke–Acts is an epic performance of God's sacred history. The *Aeneid* explores the theme of divine mission in the form of a journey, leading to the formation of a new people; Luke–Acts is a Christian version of this theme. The *Aeneid* includes stories of divine guidance and intervention, including instances of prophecy, visions, and oracles with divine messengers aiding or impeding the progress of the human agents; Luke–Acts also employs angels, theophanies, dreams, visions, and prophecies. The *Aeneid* employs ambiguous prophecies (prophecies that are open to misunderstanding or misinterpretation), and divinely imposed reversals are

1. Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke–Acts and Ancient Epic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000).

also a common feature; Luke–Acts frequently employs the motif of prophetic reversal, and its main character, Jesus, delivers ambiguous prophecies. Luke means to use the two volumes that are Luke and Acts, among other things, to set the empire of God in contrast with Rome’s empire.

The first sentence of the Gospel reading for Christmas Eve sets Jesus’ birth firmly within the context of Roman domination: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1). Although a broad scholarly consensus agrees that Quirinius’s census was conducted long after Herod’s death and thus after Jesus’ birth,² memory of the event allows Luke a mechanism to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born there.

Mary’s name suggests her family is among those in first-century Palestine who long for God to free them from Rome. A remarkable number of first-century Jews name their daughters Mary—after the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, and in defiant memory of Mariamne, murdered by her husband, Herod the Great. “The name Mary is unambiguously political, brave, and resistive. Jesus was born into such a family.”³

Although everybody in the early church knows that Jesus is from Nazareth in Galilee (the Gospels of Mark and John make no mention of Bethlehem and consistently name Nazareth as his hometown), both Luke and Matthew arrange in their stories to have him born in Bethlehem. Matthew says that is because his parents Mary and Joseph actually live in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1) and move to Nazareth after fleeing Herod into Egypt and returning from exile (2:13–23). Luke says Mary and Joseph are originally from Nazareth and their baby is born in Bethlehem because the emperor attempts to move people around like pieces on a chess board, despite the fact that God is really in control. Both evangelists are more concerned with what the Bible says about God’s shepherding of Israel than they are with journalistic reporting of Jesus’ nativity. Both Gospel stories about Bethlehem—and

they cannot be harmonized, despite the efforts of popular Christian imagination—represent theological reflections on Scripture rather than historical reminiscences. Preachers do well not to force Matthew’s and Luke’s nativity stories into contrived conformity and instead to let Luke and Matthew tell their own stories.

Bethlehem is already an ancient city in the first century, the traditional site of the matriarch Rachel’s tomb (Gen. 35:19), the home of a Levite the murder of whose concubine precipitates the move toward monarchy in Israel (Judg. 19), and the place Boaz and Ruth initiate the line that will result in the birth of King David. Their son Obed has a son named Jesse, whose son is David (Ruth 4:11–12; cf. Matt. 1:5–6). Much of the action surrounding David’s ascension to the throne in 1 and 2 Samuel takes place in and around Bethlehem, and although it is Zion—Jerusalem—that comes to be thought of as the “city of David” in Scripture (2 Sam. 5:7, 9; 6:10; and so on), Luke twice uses that phrase to describe David’s hometown of Bethlehem (Luke 2:4, 11). This is largely under the influence of Micah 5:2, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,” the beginning of the Old Testament reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Although Matthew has the chief priests and scribes quote the verse explicitly to Herod at 2:6, Luke simply assumes it and contrives to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem before Jesus is born.

The competition in the tradition between Nazareth and Bethlehem finds voice in the Fourth Gospel. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” asks a skeptical Nathaniel in John 1:46. “Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?” asks an equally skeptical crowd when the chief priests and scribes attempt to arrest Jesus the first time. “Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?” (7:40–41; see Mic. 5:2). For the Fourth Evangelist, though, it does not matter where Jesus comes from geographically, because he really comes from God (7:28–29; cf. 1:1–18). For Luke, it is important that Jesus confirm the prophecy of Micah 5:2.

In Luke, Joseph goes to Bethlehem for the census because he is “from the house and family

2. For an alternative view, see John H. Rhoads, “Josephus Misdated the Census of Quirinius,” *JETS* 54, no. 1 (2011): 65–87.

3. Marianne Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee: Architectures of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press Int., 2000), 172.

of David” (2:4). The emphasis on Joseph’s lineage is curious in view of the fact that he is so emphatically not Jesus’ biological father. Gabriel makes clear to Mary that it is the Holy Spirit, rather than a human man, who has caused her to conceive (1:35–37), and she is twice called Joseph’s betrothed rather than his wife (1:27; 2:5). At 3:23, when the evangelist introduces Jesus’ ministry, he says, “He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph.” It is as though, for Luke, Jesus becomes a Davidide by adoption rather than by birth. Not surprisingly, in later Christian tradition Joseph becomes the patron saint of adoptive parents.

The other texts for Christmas Eve include the oracle in Isaiah 9 about a new king: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore” (Isa. 9:6–7). Psalm 96 is also about enthronement, calling all creation to praise God, who is king, and to sing the praise of God’s glory and divine sovereignty. Titus 2:11–14 ties together the two impulses of Advent, our waiting for Jesus to be born and our anticipation of his return in glory: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all . . . while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ (vv. 11, 13).

ELIZABETH J. JOHNSON

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

No other occasion of worship seems more luminous than Christmas Eve. We gather in the night to a room lit with candles and lovely with familiar carols, all enveloped in an air of uncommon stillness—due partly to the fact that the stores have finally closed, and partly to the understanding that in the presence of the newborn holy child, a hush will fall over the room. Four weeks of expectation give way to wonder.

Not everyone will feel it this way. People in grief or other crisis may find the carols bittersweet. Memories and longings may disturb them, and the sight of apparently happy families may feel half-cruel. But whatever our emotional, relational, or spiritual differences, what most of us will hold in common is the feeling of *night*, and of the uniquely poignant fullness of this particular night.

The text will meet us there, but it does not begin there. Luke’s nativity account begins with a stark declaration of the kind of world into which Jesus is born: empire, Caesar, governor, registration, taxation. The mention of Augustus, Quirinius, and a particular imperial mandate serves to remind us first that the Messiah’s birth occurs within specific coordinates of historical time and space. The nativity story can feel gauzy and magical, but its opening verses warn us against reading it as a fairy tale. It happens in a prose world of

known politicians, institutions, economies, and places locatable on an actual map.

This opening also reminds us that Mary gives birth within the oppressive, grinding machinery of empire, the same machinery that in the end will kill her son. The empire commands a census, the better to extract wealth from an occupied people. Joseph and Mary of Nazareth, like other peasants across the empire, are directed to a designated site so as to be more efficiently impoverished. The Word becomes flesh in a context of organized imperial oppression, as it still does. To the extent that we are captive to, threatened by, or benefiting from the current American Empire, the Christmas story has a powerful and subversive relevance for us.

What the Roman Empire does not know is that its very machinations are put to use by the sovereign purposes of God. Caesar’s decree brings Joseph and Mary straight to Bethlehem, the little town of promise, and at just the right time. Even so, the conditions there are not welcoming. The teeming chaos that meets them offers no hospitality, “no room in the inn.”

The Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel depicted the scene perfectly. *The Census in Bethlehem* (1566) is set in a sixteenth-century Flemish village. The town is filled with people, some of them

working or playing in the snow, others walking with heavy burdens on their backs, and a crowd standing near a table outside an inn. One man behind the table holds out a big registration book, another writes in a ledger and takes the people's coins. Near the end of the line, a man carrying a saw is stepping forward. Behind him is a woman in blue, riding a donkey. We know who they are, but in the crowd they are mostly indistinguishable. Significantly, attached to the wall of the inn, above the table where people are paying taxes, is a plaque bearing the coat of arms of the Habsburg Empire, which ruled the Netherlands at that time in the person of Philip II of Spain, who was known for heavy taxation. Bruegel depicts the people's deprivation by placing broken wagons across the town and showing the small, local castle in ruins.

Perhaps we should do as Bruegel did and locate the story in our own time. The holy family is to be found among the systems of unfairness and indifference in which we live. Christ is born alongside the hard-pressed, the struggling, and the broken, some of whom are in church on Christmas Eve—and most of whom are not.

In such a place, "she gave birth to her first-born son" (Luke 2:7). After the lengthy description of context, it is striking how briefly and simply the birth is narrated. Nothing is said of her pain or of who attended her or of the first cry of the baby; even his name is withheld. Apparently, all that matters is that Mary has brought to completion what she has consented to do, and that God's Son is now alive in the world.

How resourceful of her to put him in a feed box! Mentioned three times (2:7, 12, 16), and even a "sign" for the shepherds, the manger is clearly important. What shall we make of it? That Christ is to be sought in lowly and unlikely places? That his sustaining gift is not just for humankind but for all of God's creation? Even that his birth prefigures his death? (Wrapping him in bands of cloth and laying him in a manger sounds oddly close to the actions of another Joseph, who "wrapped it [Jesus' body] in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb" [23:53]). The feed-box crib has much to say about lowliness, displacement, creation, sustenance, the sharing of our death, and more.

Some of the same themes are embodied in

the shepherds: they too are in the natural world among animals, and they are lowly and displaced. Considered dishonest and "unclean," they are not just outside the city but outside the zone of social acceptability. To *them*, and only to them, the news is given. Perhaps they hold something in common with the people at the Christmas Eve service who feel estranged from the celebration. The shepherds bear an even closer resemblance to the socially abandoned people who are not in our candlelit sanctuaries. The news is especially for these.

The news comes in the night. The light shines in darkness. Naturally, the first response of the shepherds is terror, and the angel's first command is to get over it. Then the ravishing words: *See! Good news! Great joy! All people! To you! A Savior! Glory! Peace! Favor!* The sky erupts with it. For Mary, one angel was required, and so too for Zechariah—but for the shepherds, a sky full! From the beginning of time, the heavens were telling the glory of God, yet never with words (Ps. 19:1–3); now the words can be heard at last. What the heavens have always been singing is, "Glory to God, and on earth peace!"

Christmas Eve may not be much of a night for preaching. It is a time for the reading of Scripture, the telling of the old story, the lifting of song, the celebration of Holy Communion. It seems certainly not the time for admonition or instruction, except perhaps to remember the poor and to love one another as God has so loved us all. What Luke's narrative offers most of all is an invitation to receive the story again, to hear it and imagine it once more—and to do so noticing again the realities of empire, of systemic oppression, of personal dislocation and estrangement. All of these together constitute the place into which Christ is born. The nativity story itself does not change, but circumstances in our own empires, nations, communities, and families do, and we ourselves do. If we are to do as the shepherds did and "see this thing that has taken place" (Luke 2:15), we would do well to contemplate the present world as it actually is, and ourselves as we actually are, and to know that the holy child is born precisely there—and to hear the angels sing, precisely there, "Glory and Peace."

PAUL SIMPSON DUKE

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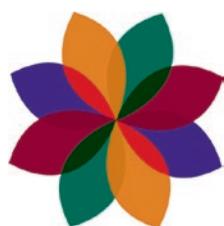
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