

Feasting on the Word

Preaching the
Revised Common Lectionary

Year A, Volume 2

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General Editors

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Contents

vii *Publisher's Note*

viii *Series Introduction*

ix *A Note about the Lectionary*

ASH WEDNESDAY

- 2 Isaiah 58:1–12
- 8 Psalm 51:1–17
- 14 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
- 20 Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

- 26 Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7
- 32 Psalm 32
- 38 Romans 5:12–19
- 44 Matthew 4:1–11

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

- 50 Genesis 12:1–4a
- 56 Psalm 121
- 62 Romans 4:1–5, 13–17
- 68 John 3:1–17

THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

- 74 Exodus 17:1–7
- 80 Psalm 95
- 86 Romans 5:1–11
- 92 John 4:5–42

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

- 98 1 Samuel 16:1–13
- 104 Psalm 23
- 110 Ephesians 5:8–14
- 116 John 9:1–41

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

- 122 Ezekiel 37:1–14
- 128 Psalm 130
- 134 Romans 8:6–11
- 140 John 11:1–45

SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT (LITURGY OF THE PALMS)

- 146 Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
- 152 Matthew 21:1–11

SIXTH SUNDAY IN LENT (LITURGY OF THE PASSION)

- 158 Isaiah 50:4–9a
- 164 Psalm 31:9–16
- 170 Philippians 2:5–11
- 176 Matthew 27:11–54

MONDAY OF HOLY WEEK

- 182 Isaiah 42:1–9
- 188 Psalm 36:5–11
- 194 Hebrews 9:11–15
- 200 John 12:1–11

TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

- 206 Isaiah 49:1–7
- 212 Psalm 71:1–14
- 218 1 Corinthians 1:18–31
- 224 John 12:20–36

WEDNESDAY OF HOLY WEEK

- 230 Isaiah 50:4–9a
- 236 Psalm 70
- 242 Hebrews 12:1–3
- 248 John 13:21–32

HOLY THURSDAY

- 254 Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10), 11–14
- 260 Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19
- 266 1 Corinthians 11:23–26
- 272 John 13:1–17, 31b–35

GOOD FRIDAY

- 278 Isaiah 52:13–53:12
- 284 Psalm 22
- 290 Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9
- 296 John 18:1–19:42

HOLY SATURDAY

- 304 Lamentations 3:1–9, 19–24
310 Psalm 31:1–4, 15–16
316 1 Peter 4:1–8
322 John 19:38–42

EASTER VIGIL

- 328 Exodus 14:10–31; 15:20–21
334 Psalm 114
340 Romans 6:3–11
346 Matthew 28:1–10

EASTER DAY

- 352 Jeremiah 31:1–6
358 Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
364 Colossians 3:1–4
370 John 20:1–18

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

- 376 Acts 2:14a, 22–32
382 Psalm 16
388 1 Peter 1:3–9
394 John 20:19–31

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

- 400 Acts 2:14a, 36–41
406 Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19
412 1 Peter 1:17–23
418 Luke 24:13–35

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

- 424 Acts 2:42–47
430 Psalm 23
436 1 Peter 2:19–25
442 John 10:1–10

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

- 448 Acts 7:55–60
454 Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16
460 1 Peter 2:2–10
466 John 14:1–14

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

- 472 Acts 17:22–31
478 Psalm 66:8–20
484 1 Peter 3:13–22
490 John 14:15–21

ASCENSION OF THE LORD

- 496 Acts 1:1–11
502 Psalm 93
508 Ephesians 1:15–23
514 Luke 24:44–53

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

- 520 Acts 1:6–14
526 Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35
532 1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11
538 John 17:1–11

545 *Contributors*

549 *Scripture Index*

551 *Author Index*

Publisher's Note

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary is an ambitious project that is offered to the Christian church as a resource for preaching and teaching.

The uniqueness of this approach in providing four perspectives on each preaching occasion from the Revised Common Lectionary sets this work apart from other lectionary materials. The theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical dimensions of each biblical passage are explored with the hope that preachers will find much to inform and stimulate their preparations for preaching from this rich “feast” of materials.

This work could not have been undertaken without the deep commitments of those who have devoted countless hours to working on these tasks. Westminster John Knox Press would like to acknowledge the magnificent work of our general editors, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. They are both gifted preachers with passionate concerns for the quality of preaching. They are also wonderful colleagues who embraced this huge task with vigor, excellence, and unfailing good humor. Our debt of gratitude to Barbara and David is great.

The fine support staff, project manager Joan Murchison and compiler Mary Lynn Darden, enabled all the thousands of “pieces” of the project to come together and form this impressive series. Without their strong competence and abiding persistence, these volumes could not have emerged.

The volume editors for this series are to be thanked as well. They used their superb skills as

pastors and professors and ministers to work with writers and help craft their valuable insights into the highly useful entries that comprise this work.

The hundreds of writers who shared their expertise and insights to make this series possible are ones who deserve deep thanks indeed. They come from wide varieties of ministries. They have given their labors to provide a gift to benefit the whole church and to enrich preaching in our time.

Westminster John Knox would also like to express our appreciation to Columbia Theological Seminary for strong cooperation in enabling this work to begin and proceed. Dean of Faculty and Executive Vice President D. Cameron Murchison welcomed the project from the start and drew together everything we needed. His continuing efforts have been very valuable. Former President Laura S. Mendenhall provided splendid help as well. She made seminary resources and personnel available and encouraged us in this partnership with enthusiasm and all good grace. We thank her, and look forward to working with Columbia's new president, Stephen Hayner.

It is a joy for Westminster John Knox Press to present *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* to the church, its preachers, and its teachers. We believe rich resources can assist the church's ministries as the Word is proclaimed. We believe the varieties of insights found in these pages will nourish preachers who will “feast on the Word” and who will share its blessings with those who hear.

Westminster John Knox Press

Series Introduction

A preacher's work is never done. Teaching, offering pastoral care, leading worship, and administering congregational life are only a few of the responsibilities that can turn preaching into just one more task of pastoral ministry. Yet the Sunday sermon is how the preacher ministers to most of the people most of the time. The majority of those who listen are not in crisis. They live such busy lives that few take part in the church's educational programs. They wish they had more time to reflect on their faith, but they do not. Whether the sermon is five minutes long or forty-five, it is the congregation's one opportunity to hear directly from their pastor about what life in Christ means and why it matters.

Feasting on the Word offers pastors focused resources for sermon preparation, written by companions on the way. With four different essays on each of the four biblical texts assigned by the Revised Common Lectionary, this series offers preachers sixteen different ways into the proclamation of God's Word on any given occasion. For each reading, preachers will find brief essays on the exegetical, theological, homiletical, and pastoral challenges of the text. The page layout is unusual. By setting the biblical passage at the top of the page and placing the essays beneath it, we mean to suggest the interdependence of the four approaches without granting priority to any one of them. Some readers may decide to focus on the Gospel passage, for instance, by reading all four essays provided for that text. Others may decide to look for connections between the Hebrew Bible, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle texts by reading the theological essays on each one.

Wherever they begin, preachers will find what they need in a single volume produced by writers from a wide variety of disciplines and religious traditions. These authors teach in colleges and seminaries. They lead congregations. They write scholarly books as well as columns for the local newspaper. They oversee denominations. In all of these capacities and more, they serve God's Word, joining the preacher in the ongoing challenge of bringing that Word to life.

We offer this print resource for the mainline church in full recognition that we do so in the digital

age of the emerging church. Like our page layout, this decision honors the authority of the biblical text, which thrives on the page as well as in the ear. While the twelve volumes of this series follow the pattern of the Revised Common Lectionary, each volume contains an index of biblical passages so that all preachers may make full use of its contents.

We also recognize that this new series appears in a post-9/11, post-Katrina world. For this reason, we provide no shortcuts for those committed to the proclamation of God's Word. Among preachers, there are books known as "Monday books" because they need to be read thoughtfully at least a week ahead of time. There are also "Saturday books," so called because they supply sermon ideas on short notice. The books in this series are not Saturday books. Our aim is to help preachers go deeper, not faster, in a world that is in need of saving words.

A series of this scope calls forth the gifts of a great many people. We are grateful first of all to the staff of Westminster John Knox Press: Don McKim, Jon Berquist, and Jack Keller, who conceived this project; David Dobson, who worked diligently to bring the project to completion, with publisher Marc Lewis's strong support; and Julie Tonini, who has painstakingly guided each volume through the production process. We thank former President Laura Mendenhall and former Dean Cameron Murchison of Columbia Theological Seminary, who made our participation in this work possible. We thank President Steve Hayner and Dean Deborah Mullen for their continuing encouragement and support. Our editorial board is a hardworking board, without whose patient labor and good humor this series would not exist. From the start, Joan Murchison has been the brains of the operation, managing details of epic proportions with great human kindness. Mary Lynn Darden, Dilu Nicholas, Megan Hackler Denton, and John Shillingburg have supported both her and us with their administrative skills.

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

David L. Bartlett
Barbara Brown Taylor

A Note about the Lectionary

Feasting on the Word follows the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) as 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. In addition, it provides for a uniform set of readings to be used across denominations or other church bodies.

The RCL provides a reading from the Old Testament, 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 is the year of Matthew, Year B is the year of Mark, and Year C is the year of Luke. John is read each year, especially during Advent, Lent, and Easter.

The RCL offers two tracks of Old Testament texts for the Season after Pentecost or Ordinary Time: a semicontinuous track, which moves through stories

and characters in the Old Testament, and a complementary track, which ties the Old Testament texts to the theme of the Gospel texts for that day. Some denominational traditions favor one over the other. For instance, Presbyterians and Methodists generally follow the semicontinuous track, while Lutherans and Episcopalians generally follow the complementary track.

The print volumes of *Feasting on the Word* follow the complementary track for Year A, are split between the complementary and semicontinuous tracks for Year B, and cover the semicontinuous stream for Year C. Essays for Pentecost and the Season after Pentecost that are not covered in the print volumes are available on the *Feasting on the Word* Web site, www.feastingontheword.net.

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).

ASH WEDNESDAY

Isaiah 58:1-12

- ¹Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
- ²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
- ³“Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
- ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
- ⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?
- ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,

Theological Perspective

This passage is one of the highlights of Third Isaiah (Isa. 56–66), and it serves as a poetic re-presentation of the redemptive theology that runs throughout the book.¹ Whereas the social location for most of Isaiah has been of a community in exile, in this passage it is of a community in conflict. The passage finds the root of this conflict in a hypocritical gap between the conduct of the community and the community’s worship.

The community’s fasting is ineffectual, because its purpose is to cloak lives that are selfish, unjust, and violent. “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist” (vv. 3b–4a). The true purpose of fasting is to instill the virtue of humility and the commitment to justice: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of

1. For more on the historical and theological issues present in this passage, see Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 164–95; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 440–81; Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 204–7.

Pastoral Perspective

Ash Wednesday is not merely a time to meditate on our mortality (“Dust you are, and to dust you shall return”) or to confess our individual sins and failings. The words of Isaiah 58 save us from wallowing in introspection by forcing us to acknowledge our *social sins*. Especially for those in the North American church, this is not easy.

Because the words of Isaiah are so powerful and applicable to life in our society, the pastor is well advised to stay close to the text itself and let its words sound “like a trumpet” in the ears of the congregation. An “in-your-face” overpreaching of the text will likely result more in resistance than in faithful response. Here is an opportunity to engage the text in a way that invites the congregation to overhear its “word of the Lord” to them.

On Ash Wednesday it is particularly appropriate we be reminded that the Lenten discipline God desires has nothing to do with “giving up” things of little consequence and has everything to do with taking on a more disciplined concern for meeting

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

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

Exegetical Perspective

The postexilic Judean community, living under the rule of the newly empowered Persian Empire, provides the societal context for today's passage and the surrounding chapters of Isaiah 56–66. For this vulnerable, disoriented population, it is a time of political and religious restoration, as both the exiles who are returning from Babylon and the people who never left the region of Judah stake out their claims on the land and important theological issues.

The biggest question, perhaps, is this: What does the future hold after such great destruction and displacement? This inquiry quickly engenders more specific ponderings: How does the nascent Jewish community rethink the status of the Jerusalem temple and Davidic monarchy in light of their recent dissolution? What are the religious priorities to consider when rebuilding and starting afresh? Where is God in this process?

The prophetic literature of this time period testifies to the sustained role of prophetic figures in answering these seminal questions. Third Isaiah, as scholars often call Isaiah 56–66, addresses especially

Homiletical Perspective

This passage from Isaiah's postexilic prophecies begins with a sense of excitement. God commands the prophet to shout without reservation, as if using a battle trumpet to call the people to action; but the call is not a joyous one. The people think that they have been seeking God, but they need to face the reality that they have been chasing other things instead. We mislabel our sins as attempts to reach out to God.

Human Distance from God. Isaiah's audience thinks that they are seeking God (v. 2). They may honestly believe that they want to be in God's paths and presence, but they have deluded themselves. These people think that acts of worship such as fasting and humility will draw God's attention and admiration. God tells them that such fasting will not impress God (v. 4). Instead, God is present in acts of righteousness. To seek God truly means to look where God is—in the midst of work for justice.

The problem with the people's actions is that they are fasting while at the same time engaging in acts of

Isaiah 58:1-12

Theological Perspective

the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (v. 6). True fasting involves not just solitary abstinence, but the deliberate choice to give to those in need: "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (v. 7). Those who fast in this way will encounter God's abundance, an overflowing of light and life.

Early Christian commentators tended to spiritualize the connection between abstinence and justice. In his commentary, Jerome (ca. 347–420) read the imperative to attend to earthly needs as a typological anticipation of the greater imperative to attend to spiritual needs: "When you see people freezing outside the church in the frigidity of unbelief, without the warmth of faith, impoverished and homeless, lead them home to the church and clothe them with the work of incorruption, so that, wrapped in the mantle of Christ, they will not remain in the grave."

It would be wrong to read Jerome's typological interpretation as counsel to ignore those who suffer from material poverty. Clearly, early commentators also recognized the call for justice in this passage. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) asked, "Will your fast be approved of when you fail to acknowledge your brother?"² It is clear, however, that such readings eroded the connection between abstinence and justice in the church's liturgical life, particularly those practices connected to Ash Wednesday.

On Ash Wednesday, in addition to reading this passage, it is customary to impose ashes on the forehead with the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19) or "Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel" (Mark 1:15). This observance signals the beginning of Lent, when many Christians fast or abstain from certain foods in order to focus on the things that need to be set aside, or taken on, in the course of Lent—things that stand in the way of a living, vibrant, and whole-hearted relationship with God.

Given this setting, today's reading from Isaiah is particularly appropriate, because it addresses the role fasting and similar penitential practices play in the spiritual life of both individuals and communities. At the root of these practices is a relationship with God from which flow personal piety and social justice. Getting back in touch with that relationship is the

²Jerome, Commentary on Isaiah 16.8, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament XI, Isaiah 40–66*, ed. Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 211. Augustine, Sermon 400.7, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Sermons III/10*, ed. and trans. Edmund Hill, OP (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 476.

Pastoral Perspective

concretely the "needs of the afflicted." In any good bookstore you will find shelves marked "Self-help." Some may even be labeled, ironically enough, "Christian Self-help." Is it not clear to every thoughtful pastor that our programs of self-help offer precious little help? We vainly seek self-fulfillment through what we think will build up our self-esteem, instead of through the giving of ourselves to concerns larger than ourselves. The words of Isaiah 58 call us to the larger purposes of God's own mission among us.

Before we announce to God's people "their sins," we first must deal honestly with our own complicity in the sins unmasked by Isaiah. To what degree are we more concerned with the aesthetics of worship than with the "fast acceptable to the Lord"—the worship that requires personal participation in God's own passion for the hungry, the poor, and the naked?

If worship in our churches seems tame and boring, could it be that it has too little to do with the worship God desires? Instead of attending to God's agenda, we take matters into our own hands. We seek to jazz up our worship by hiring a band, getting the pastor to take guitar lessons, and projecting the banal words of a "praise chorus" on a big screen. However entertaining it may be, it is not the worship God desires and demands—at least not if we leave worship unchallenged and unchanged in the ways we treat the weak and vulnerable among us.

Isaiah makes it clear that the worship God desires is both inescapably social and compellingly personal. It calls us "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. . . . to share [our] bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into [our] house . . . to cover [the naked] and not to hide [ourselves] from [our] own kin" (vv. 6–7). Authentic worship is not a matter of elegant ritual or self-congratulating piety. It is a matter of both social justice and costly personal concern for the bruised and battered of the world.

Seeking to "satisfy the needs of the afflicted" is not merely an obligation that is laid on the covenant community. It is a way of life that makes for the fullness of life, both for the individual and for the whole community. In attending socially and personally to the needs of the afflicted, "[our] light shall break forth like the dawn, and [our] healing shall spring up quickly. . . . Then [we] shall call, and the LORD will answer; [we] shall cry for help, and [God] will say, Here I am" (vv. 8–9). Just as earlier in the presence of the awesome holiness of God in the temple, Isaiah had responded to the call of God, "Here I am, send

Exegetical Perspective

relevant topics such as the function of rituals and temple practices, the place of Zion in the restoration, and the role of foreigners within the community, while also maintaining some of the classic themes of the preexilic prophets, for example, judgments against idolatry (Isa. 57) and corrupt leaders (Isa. 56:9–12).

Chapter 58 stands near the beginning of Third Isaiah and comments on one of the common religious tensions found within the prophetic literature: the function of ritual exercises and cultic practices vis-à-vis the obvious need for social justice. The great prophetic figures such as Amos are often perceived as emphasizing the lack of social justice within Israelite society, while downplaying the need for pious, more ritualistic actions such as sacrifice.

This sharp dichotomy between “prophetic justice-oriented thought” and “priestly minutiae-minded thought” probably reflects modern Protestant sentiments more than ancient religious ones, since the need for both streams (along with others!) is clearly maintained throughout the biblical corpus. Isaiah 58 comments on the true nature and purpose of fasting, while maintaining the relevance and significance of the practice.

The somewhat disjointed, rambling passage does not create a clear, linear argument building upon itself point by point, but the general message is not obscured, and a rough outline is discernible. First, a divine command is given to the prophet to announce the people’s rebellion. Then, the people voice succinctly their complaint, and three divine answers are given.¹

Prophetic Call: Announce Rebellion (vv. 1–2). The divine command to the prophet in verse 1 captures one of the quintessential tasks of the biblical prophet: to warn the people about their social wrongdoings. This verse presents two sets of parallel lines, with the first couplet highlighting the loud volume needed by the prophet (“Shout out,” “like a trumpet”) and the second couplet proclaiming both the addressee (“my people,” “house of Jacob”) and the problem (“rebellion,” “sins”).

Complaint: Our Actions Go Unseen (v. 3a). In this section, two brief questions give voice to the people’s complaint. They desire to know why their perfectly laudable action of fasting does not receive a response from God. Fasting is, after all, associated with personal, pious activity (along with mourning and penitence). In the context of this passage, it is apparent

1. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66*, Anchor Bible 19B (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 176.

Homiletical Perspective

unrighteousness. Is God condemning all fasting here—or only the fasting by those who avoid righteousness? Is God critical of their worship because they think that good worship can substitute or make up for the unrighteousness they do? In our context, would God be critical of any of our favorite worship practices?

When Isaiah’s audience leave their worship, they oppress workers, and then they quarrel and fight (vv. 3–4). God most pointedly rebukes the people for one thing: they pay more attention to their own interests than to the welfare of others. When people distract themselves with their own affairs, they miss the opportunities for righteousness that could lead them into God’s presence. By walking in righteousness, we come to God (Ps. 85:13). Righteousness is not a test, a prerequisite, or a barrier to life with God; righteousness is the day-by-day, step-by-step process of life with God. Right worship correctly diagnoses our problems: we are too distant from God, and we have wandered from God’s path.

What would God’s righteous judgment be upon our worship practices today? In what ways do we serve ourselves in worship? When we leave worship, do our relationships with the other lead us to where God is, or do our actions increase the distance we keep? How can our worship point us back to God’s path?

Social Justice. Isaiah urges us to get back on track, to rejoin God’s path. We must undo and break the yoke (vv. 6–7). Isaiah uses the “yoke” as a symbol for the bonds of oppression in the world, or any of the ways that we tie others to ourselves in order to bend their actions to our benefit. The yoke means selfishness, using others to gain for ourselves and to achieve our own purposes. To loose the yoke means to offer freedom and release for people who have been used for someone else’s gain; such release is a consistent theme of Isaiah (61:1) and a cornerstone of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 4:18).

Here Isaiah goes a step further, by calling for us to *break* the yoke, as in Isaiah 9:4. Not only do we need to cease our own acts of oppression and offer liberty to those whom we have used and abused, but we must also destroy the yoke. This will prevent us and everyone else from using this kind of exploitation in the future. Social justice requires not only actions of liberation, but structural change to remove the possibility of future injustice. We should think of Isaiah 2:4 in this regard: not only do we lay down our weapons of battle, but we turn our swords into plows, so that we lose the capacity for war and transform the weapons into implements of provision for others.

Isaiah 58:1-12

Theological Perspective

very meaning of repentance, the deliberate work of repairing a relationship that has been broken or thwarted by our own sin and selfishness. So the passage ends with a promise: “you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (v. 12b).

What does it mean live into this relationship more deeply? If early Christian commentators tended to emphasize personal piety to the detriment of social justice, contemporary readers have tended to identify the imperative to do justice and their own favored policies for social renewal and change. It would be misleading to draw from this passage specific imperatives to increase international aid or to oppose globalization, as worthy as these may be.

Rather, the connection in the passage between worship, fasting, justice, and reconciliation creates space for the renewal of a faithful imagination that prayerfully tries to develop a way forward. Consequently, the purpose of this passage is to bring the personal and political together and to renew a particular community that seeks to practice God’s redemptive politics in its own location. For this reason, T. S. Eliot in his poem “Ash Wednesday” ends with the following prayer that resonates with the imagery in this passage and speaks to the personal and political at once:

Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
Even among these rocks,
Our peace in His will
And even among these rocks
Sister, mother
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.³

If, as contemporary commentators believe, communal conflict lies behind the text’s origin, then the reparative actions promoted in the passage prompt contemporary churches to imagine practices that bear witness to the peaceful politics of the kingdom in their immediate community. Ash Wednesday provides not only the opportunity for individual Christians to mark the beginning of Lent, but for churches to renew their corporate life, in order to learn, as if for the first time, what it means to be a “spring” of “waters” that “never fail” (v. 11b).

WILLIAM JOSEPH DANAHER JR.

³ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1963), 105.

Pastoral Perspective

me” (Isa. 6:8), so now the Lord responds and becomes available to our cries: “Here I am.” I will send you.

The result is more than we might have expected. The “gloom,” which pastors know painfully well, “will be like the noonday” (v. 10b), and the Lord, guiding us in ways of life abundant, will make our lives flourish “like a watered garden” (v. 11b). The true fulfillment of self comes through the giving and investing of self in God’s own passion for the poor.

Not only will our own lives flourish; so will the life of our whole society: “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt” (v. 12a). What a precious promise that would be to a people returning from exile to the ruins of what once had been their homes and temple. “You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (v. 12). In the gathering ruins of our society—which for too long has neglected the foundations of common life by allowing its essential infrastructure to collapse in order to continue cutting taxes on the wealthiest of our citizens, by neglecting public education, and turning its back on the neediest and most vulnerable among us—the promise of Isaiah can give hope and energy for the struggles ahead.

Youth and young adults often seem to understand this better than their elders. Youth return from mission trips with a new sense of what it means to experience the presence of God in the faces of the truly poor. College students volunteer their time to tutor children and build Habitat houses, not just to “do good,” but to find meaning and purpose for their lives exactly where God promised. People of all ages come to their pastors asking for more of life than they have yet experienced. Do we offer them second-rate entertainment? Do we set before them God’s own promise that the fullness of life is to be found in the giving of life to the larger purposes of God’s liberating love in the world, and call them to live into that promise?

ALLEN C. MCSWEEN JR.

Exegetical Perspective

that God should see this activity; yet it remains unclear exactly how the people wish for God to acknowledge their fasting. Interestingly for the answers that immediately follow, the people do not highlight other religious practices, such as charity to the disadvantaged, only this single ritual.

First Answer: *Selfish, Violent Fasting Will Not Be Heard* (vv. 3b–4). The textual voice switches back to the prophet in these verses and critiques their fasting by stating that it is accompanied by self-interest, coercion, squabbling, and even physical violence. If a specific situation is intended here by the prophet, it is most likely related to improper business/financial affairs. The text uses the repetition of “look” to divide the section in half. Participation in the fast day does not affect their actions toward other people; therefore, their fasting is in vain.

Second Answer: *The Correct Way to Fast* (vv. 5–9a). The second divine response constitutes a list of rhetorical questions. Verse 5 presents a satirical triad of questions that mocks the type of fasting described directly above. The bodily manipulations that typically accompany fasting are trivialized. Then verses 6–7 transform the whole notion of fasting into specific actions concerned with liberation and societal welfare. In the end, God’s preferred style of fasting has more to do with helping other people than with bowing down or lying in ashes. Verses 8–9a follow with the reward or repercussions of doing this new type of fasting: in summary, God will hear and answer.

Third Answer: *The Benefits of Helping Others* (vv. 9b–12). The third divine response is an expansion of the theme in the second answer with a reversal of the literary form. Instead of a long section of rhetorical questions resulting in a short set of *then*-clauses, as in verses 5–9a, verses 9b–12 has a short set of *if*-clauses resulting in a long, single *then*-clause. The emphasis here is on the positive consequences of instituting a new type of fasting practice. The promises involve light, as in verse 8, as well as God’s guidance and provision. Given the recent desolation of Jerusalem, verse 12 is especially poignant in its promise of rebuilt ruins and raised foundations.

TYLER MAYFIELD

Homiletical Perspective

A passage such as this tempts us to discuss politics, and to ask what the world would be like if our nations gave up the capacity for war and invested instead in feeding the hungry people of the world. We should not forget that Isaiah has a religious agenda in mind as well. We need to ask how our congregations and our church can give up our capacity to defend and to attack, and instead pour all of our energies into helping others.

Isaiah also offers positive direction for us to follow God in the right path. We need to offer food for the hungry (v. 10). This social justice is directed to the most basic of human needs and addresses those who need it most. Moreover, we are called to satisfy the needs of the afflicted. This allows suffering people to identify what they need, so that we can then meet their needs, rather than our perceptions of what might be best for them. Our own perception of God and God’s activity begins to clear when we focus on the needs of others.

Here, the preacher has the opportunity to move from Isaiah’s world to our own context. Who are the suffering people to whom our church should listen? What acts of social justice would they have us do on their behalf? What are the basic human needs in our own communities? What can we do about those needs? How would those actions sharpen our focus on God’s work in the world?

A Vision for the Future. The end of Isaiah’s vision gives us hope for the future. When we are following God’s path through worship and justice, light breaks forth into the world (v. 8), bringing dawn and healing to us and to all around us. Justice does not bring a mere temporary improvement, but leads to God’s abundance that provides enough for everyone. With rebuilt foundations (v. 12) for all society, God’s justice lasts forever. The barriers of separation are removed (cf. Eph. 2:14), and God builds a new world, full of streets where we all can live (cf. Zech. 8:1–6). Receiving our heritage from God, we reside with God as we were always meant to live.

JON L. BERQUIST

Psalm 51:1-17

- ¹Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁶You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Theological Perspective

As the church enters the Lenten season, we are anointed with ash to signify our finitude and frailty: “Remember, O human, that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” It is equally a sign of repentance, a messy memorial to our more fundamental problem: not our creaturely state, but our fallen state, our enmeshment in sin’s power. It is this reality of which, and from which, the guilt-ridden King David cries so poignantly in this psalm.

Our temptation is to psychologize this psalm, to read it simply as the anguished self-loathing of David—not, as it turns out, immediately after his adultery with Bathsheba nor even his arranged murder of Uriah her husband, but only after the prophet forces the king to acknowledge his transgressions. In this reading, David cries to God from a heart shredded by the guilt of having been found out, wallowing in the depth of a shame that most of us have never plumbed. We might even suspect David of a kind of guilt neurosis that hopes for atonement by way of self-inflicted psychic pain, a catharsis purchased at the heavy price of practically disowning himself. “Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me” (v. 5). We may be tempted to suspect that David got carried away by his guilt feelings, and

Pastoral Perspective

It is no coincidence that Psalm 51 is appointed for Ash Wednesday, the day that marks the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent. The psalmist’s words encapsulate the depth of the meaning of the forty days leading up to Easter. Lent is a time of self-reflection and penitence, a time to acknowledge our sinfulness and need for God’s mercy.

Psalm 51 is a plea to God, a prayer for forgiveness. The psalmist displays a painful awareness of his sins: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). Not only has he committed evil; he also laments that he has been a sinner since he was born (vv. 4–5).

In addition to lamenting his sins, the psalmist is clear that deliverance from them comes from God alone. He wastes no time getting to his point; he begins, “Have mercy on me, O God” (v. 1). Then the psalmist invokes powerful images of being cleansed. He implores God, using descriptive verbs like “blot out,” “wash,” and “purge.”

This psalm reflects our own reality as Christians. We are sinners. We do things, whether big or small, that draw us away from God, and we do things that hurt others. Christians in many churches regularly say a confession, asking God for forgiveness for the

⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Exegetical Perspective

Theologically rich and poetically powerful, Psalm 51 is an earnest prayer of contrition in the form of an individual lament. As one of the seven Penitential Psalms of the Christian tradition (Pss. 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), it is most appropriate for Ash Wednesday. This elegant poem utilizes expressive imagery and vocabulary for both human sinfulness and divine grace. It portrays sincere penitence for deliberate sin and rebellion against God. Perhaps for this reason the editors of the Psalter attribute its composition to Nathan's confrontation of David over his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12). Historically, the text more likely dates to the seventh or sixth century BCE, but the Davidic setting provides a useful context for this cry of a "broken and contrite heart" (v. 17).

The text's structure moves from an appeal to divine mercy (1–2), through confession of sins (3–5) and pleas for cleansing and renewal (6–12), to a vow with thanksgiving and further petitions (13–17).

This confessional psalm applies traditional terms for "transgression" (*peša*), "iniquity" (*awon*), and "evil" (*ra*). The appeal for divine forgiveness is contingent upon God's gracious nature, and the psalmist begs God to "have mercy" or "be gracious" (*hnn*, v. 1). The penitent invokes God's "steadfast love"

Homiletical Perspective

In many Catholic and Protestant churches, an Ash Wednesday worship service marks the beginning of the Lenten season. It is a solemn, penitential liturgy that launches worshipers on a reflective journey toward the climactic events of Holy Week. Several traditional rituals frame the meaning of the service; the most visible and widespread of these rituals is the marking of the forehead with ash, in the sign of a cross. Usually applied with some variation of the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," the ashes suggest a posture of penitence, and they remind us of our mortality and our humble place before God.

Perhaps the second most familiar practice of a typical Ash Wednesday service is the communal recitation of Psalm 51. This Penitential Psalm provides the poetic language to accompany the stark visible symbol of a marked forehead. The words of the psalm are heartrending. Expressing clear humility and contrition, the psalmist acknowledges his transgressions and pleads for God's mercy (vv. 1–3). Indeed, the writer's sins seem to haunt him (v. 3), and he allows that he deserves whatever consequences come his way (v. 4). His urgent prayer is for God's forgiveness and salvation, that God might

Psalm 51:1-17

Theological Perspective

that in the interests of psychological health we need not follow him in his prayer of wallowing self-hatred.

The church's traditional reading of this psalm, thankfully, does not encourage us to embrace such a dismissive interpretation of the text. Granted, the text's own heading (not printed above) recalls for us that this is David's plea. The prayer arises from a specific narrative and relational context, but it is more than solely David's anguished prayer, more than hyperbole born of shame-drenched desperation. It is the prayer of us all as we kneel in the name of Jesus Christ, marked by ash, in the presence of the One "before [whom] no creature is hidden," before whose eyes "all are naked and laid bare" and "to whom we must render an account" (Heb. 4:13). Our sin *is* ever before us.

Early in his *Confessions*, Augustine wondered to God about his life in Monica's womb and later at her breast. "I do not like to think of that period as part of the same life I now lead," Augustine confessed, "because it is dim and forgotten."¹ Nevertheless, the bishop of Hippo submitted the self-narrative of his earliest days to this very psalm, adding, "But if *I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me*, where, I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant, ever innocent?"²

Of course, Augustine himself would be instrumental in the development of the Christian teaching on original sin. In the light of this doctrine, the reply to Augustine's own query about his innocence is "Never." If that is indeed the correct reply, it is not because a little child is already personally guilty, nor is it because the act of sexual intercourse is sinful *per se* (as Augustine unfortunately surmised on occasion). Rather, we are never innocent because the reality and power of sin—alienation from God, from one another, and from the more-than-human world—is pervasively present throughout all the webs of our interconnected lives. Like a corrosive acid, the power of sin eats away at us all in all of our relations—relations that indeed make us who we are becoming—such that none of us is a stranger to abuse, shame, fear, suspicion, and pain. This is our world. Scripture—and this psalm in particular—helps us to name it rightly.

Psalm 51 also leads us to hope in the God of Israel, who acts toward us "according to steadfast love" and "abundant mercy" (v. 1). We can hope because we confess and believe that this God of Israel is indeed the Creator of all things. Only the Creator

Pastoral Perspective

times that they have sinned against God and against others. The season of Lent is, in part, a more deliberate time of reflection and penitence. Like the psalmist who acknowledges his sins, we are called to confess the ways that "we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves."¹ Part of the process of repentance is recognizing our utter dependence on God. Just as the psalmist pleads to God for deliverance (v. 14), we must realize our own need for God's mercy.

There is a great church camp skit that reflects this Christian reality. Peter is seated at the pearly gates, and a woman approaches. "Tell me why I should let you in," Peter says. "I have gone to church my whole life," the woman says. Then Peter reminds her that she had been unkind to some of the members of the church. "Well," she says defensively, "I brought groceries every week to my elderly neighbor."

Peter points out that she often used the neighbor's money to buy a few things for herself as well. The conversation continues like this, and the woman becomes more and more defensive and distraught, clearly beginning to panic at the thought that she might not be allowed in to heaven. Finally, she falls to her knees in tears and desperation and says, "Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned." Immediately, the pearly gates swing wide open and Peter says, "Welcome home, my child."

This simple skit illustrates that we are sinners who are utterly dependent upon God for forgiveness and salvation. This is not the end of the story, however. There is a promise inherent in the psalm, one of recreation and redemption, recognizing that God not only saves us from our sins, but also gives us new life. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me," the psalmist prays. "Restore me to the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit" (vv. 10a, 12).

The intentionality of focus on our sins and our dependence on God during Lent allows us to recommit ourselves to living as the people we were created to be. The Christian writer Frederick Buechner writes: "After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves."²

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 28.

2. *Ibid.*

1. All liturgical references are from *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 267, 268, 265.

2. Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, ed. George Connor (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 56.

Exegetical Perspective

(*hesed*), using an important relational or covenant term, and “abundant mercy” or “compassion” (*rahmyk*) (v. 1). Psalm 51 shares much of its vocabulary with God’s self-revelation in Exodus 34:6–7, which describes the Lord as “merciful and gracious” (*rahûm wehannûn*), “abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness [*’emet*],” and “forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

Psalm 51 employs five images for the remission of sin while avoiding the common verb “to forgive” (*ns’*). The penitent urges God to “blot out [*mhh*] my transgressions” (vv. 1, 9), as though they were written in a book of guilt (cf. Isa. 43:25; 44:22; Ps. 109:14; Num. 5:23). The verb *kbs* in “wash me” (vv. 2, 7) means “to wash by treading,” usually applied to stained clothing (Exod. 19:10, 14; 2 Sam. 19:24). Jeremiah (2:22) artfully applies this verb: “Though you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your guilt is still before me.”

The third verb, “cleanse” (*thr*, vv. 2, 7, 10), is a priestly term used in the ritual purification of uncleanness (e.g., Lev. 13:13–17; 16:30). Using the *hiphil* stem of *ht’*, verse 7 eloquently prays, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash [*kbs*] me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (cf. Isa. 1:18). Hyssop (*’ezôb*) is used in priestly rituals of purification (Lev. 14; Num. 19) and to mark the doorposts with blood during the first Passover (Exod. 12:22). Finally, verse 9 turns the negative image of God’s hidden face (e.g., Pss. 88:14; 102:2; 143:7) into a positive metaphor: “Hide [*hstr*] your face from my sins.”

Although extensive exegetical comments are not possible here, a few textual issues should be noted. The NRSV translation of verse 4, “Against you, you alone, have I sinned,” correctly reflects the grammatical emphasis in Hebrew. Ethical sins against other humans are also sins against God in the Hebrew Bible, as David confesses in 2 Samuel 12:13 (cf. Gen. 39:9). This rhetoric highlights the importance of the individual’s personal relationship with God in this psalm. The author of Romans 3:4 aptly quotes verse 4b to justify the judgments of God against sinful humans. “Indeed I was born guilty” (v. 5) refers not to the Christian concept of original sin but to the impure nature of humanity before God (cf. Gen. 8:21; Jer. 17:9; Job 4:17–19; 15:14–16).

Although the nuance of verse 6b is uncertain, the NJPS rendition, “teach me wisdom about secret things,” is better than NRSV’s “teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” Regardless, the psalmist realizes the need for wisdom as well as piety. The metaphor of crushed bones in verse 8b is odd, but “bones” can

Homiletical Perspective

withhold punishment and instead wash him clean and purify his soul (v. 2 and vv. 7–12). For his part, the writer knows that simple platitudes are not sufficient as he petitions for mercy; he offers God the sacrifice of a broken heart (v. 17) and promises to praise God continuously and to teach others the ways of God (vv. 13–15).

In short, the psalmist begs for a new start, a second chance, and he knows that he cannot begin again without God’s mercy and grace. In the climactic verse 10, the writer prays: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” This beautiful verse is echoed by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek. 36:25–27), who envisions God restoring the divine/human covenant by transplanting new hearts into the wayward people of Israel—an image that captures both the corrupting power of sin and the abundance of God’s mercy.

The stories of Scripture and the realities of human experience attest to the fact that sin is not a surface wound; rather, it is a penetrating sickness that like a cancer eats away at the core of our being. Overcoming such an invasive disease requires a dramatic, divine intervention—a heart transplant, nothing less. This is the path to healing and wholeness, the psalmist concludes. It is the only way for him to achieve a restored relationship with God, to share again and always in the life of the Holy Spirit and in the joy of God’s salvation (vv. 10–12).

Clearly Psalm 51 offers fruitful ground for preaching, particularly in the context of an Ash Wednesday service. Broad themes include the nature of sin, the practice of confession and repentance, and the assurance of God’s forgiveness and mercy. Each of these themes connects well with the journey of Lent. Thinking more specifically, a preacher may choose to focus on this image of a transplanted heart, an image that resonates throughout the Old and New Testaments as a way of describing God’s faithfulness to the divine/human covenant.

Another avenue for homiletical exploration, however, lies in what the psalmist does not say. Speaking personally, I have forever heard this psalm differently after listening to a friend’s sermon during my second year of seminary. My friend, Natalie Wigg Stevenson, began by noting the ascription that precedes the psalm, which identifies David as the author, writing soon after he had slept with Bathsheba and ordered the murder of her husband, Uriah (2 Sam. 11–12). This is the social context for these penitential words, Natalie emphasized, and she then drew our attention to verse 4: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned,” the

Psalm 51:1-17

Theological Perspective

of all things, Athanasius and other early theologians insisted, is the Power able to “create in [us] a clean heart,” to “put a new and right spirit within [us]” (v. 10). Any lesser power is not sufficient against the destructive acids of sin that are corroding creation.

Our faith further proclaims that the Creator has undertaken our collective healing and restoration not by fiat, nor from a safe distance. Rather, the God to whom David prays has answered this prayer for mercy and healing, ultimately, in and through Jesus Christ. Surely this is already implied in the genealogy of Matthew 1, in which the Messiah’s line is traced through David, “the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah” (v. 6). David’s plea for forgiveness of his transgressions, and even deliverance from the very power of sin, finds its reply in the slow, painstaking labor of God from within the course of human history and human blood—and even, in the case of David’s complicating sins, human bloodshed. Divine mercy is mediated through a Messiah who emerges from within the very midst of our sinful world of betrayal and violence, of mistrust and brokenness, and assumes it as his own.

Perhaps it is significant that this same Gospel of Matthew shares with Psalm 51 at least a mild denigration of ritual sacrifice. David offers “a broken and contrite heart” as “the sacrifice acceptable to God” (v. 17). Twice in Matthew (uniquely among the Gospels) Jesus cites the prophet Hosea (Hos. 6:6), “I [God] desire mercy, not sacrifice” (9:13; 12:7). Granted, Christian tradition has not been particularly hesitant to embrace the language of ritual sacrifice to interpret Jesus’ own death, and Lenten liturgies and sermons often are laced with sacrificial imagery. While that language surely has a legitimate place, Psalm 51 should warn us against interpreting Jesus’ ministry and crucifixion only in that way.

MICHAEL LODAHL

Pastoral Perspective

The basic questions and truths of the Christian experience that are expressed by the psalmist in Psalm 51 are enacted in the Ash Wednesday liturgy. In many traditions, the liturgy includes the recitation of Psalm 51, as well as a Litany of Penitence. The litany leads worshipers through an explicit confession of ways we have separated ourselves from God and one another, including petitions about “our self-indulgent appetites and ways,” “our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts,” and “our blindness to human need and suffering.”

One of the most moving parts of the Ash Wednesday liturgy is the imposition of ashes when the presiding minister makes the sign of the cross with ashes on worshipers’ foreheads, saying, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This ritual is not intended to be morbid. Rather, it is a visible sign of what the psalmist was so aware of: we are wholly dependent on God. The prayer over the ashes says, “Grant that these ashes may be a sign to us . . . that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life.”

The person who wrote Psalm 51 was, of course, writing long before the life, birth, and death of Jesus Christ, yet his lament of his sins and his awareness of his need for God’s deliverance make this psalm so appropriate for Ash Wednesday. As we begin the season of self-examination and repentance, we follow the psalmist’s example by focusing on how we are failing to live as God calls us to live and how we are in need of the salvation and redemption that comes from God alone. As Frederick Buechner says, “It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”³

ANDREA WIGODSKY

3. *Ibid.*, 58.

Exegetical Perspective

refer to the whole person (Ps. 35:10) or one's inmost being. A heart is similarly "crushed" (*ndkh*, "contribute" in NRSV) in verse 17. These are spiritual metaphors rather than physical ailments (cf. Ps. 38). Body imagery throughout this psalm, referring to the poet's heart, spirit, bones, lips, tongue, and mouth, contributes to the prayer's intimate character.

The beautiful prayer for God to create (*br'*) a "clean heart" and a "new and right spirit" in verse 10 is related to Ezekiel 36:25–27. Reference to God's "holy spirit" (v. 10) appears only here and Isaiah 63:10–11 in the Hebrew Bible. The psalmist further requests a "willing spirit" (v. 12). Verse 11 begs God not to abandon the sinner, but actively to "restore" (v. 12), "sustain" (v. 12), and "deliver" (v. 14) one who seeks God. Divine initiative is necessary for human salvation in this psalm beloved by Reformation Christianity. In response, the repentant psalmist promises to teach others the ways of God for their renewal (vv. 13–14).

God does not "delight" in cultic sacrifices in verse 16 (cf. Isa. 1:11–17; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8). This apparently antitemple rhetoric is probably not meant as a wholesale rejection of the Jewish sacrificial system. Here a "broken spirit" (*rwḥ nšbrh*) substitutes for formal sacrifices (v. 17) as either poetic hyperbole or perhaps an exilic reference to the absence of temple rites. Compare Psalm 50:14, where thanksgiving constitutes a sacrifice, and Psalm 69:30–31, in which praise is superior to bloody offerings. Sincere repentance is more efficacious than rituals to remove sin in this psalm's poetic vision.

Our passage appropriately ends with the declaration that "a broken and contrite heart [*lb-nšbr wndkh*], O God, you will not despise." While God delivers the broken-hearted (*nšbry-lb*) in Psalm 34:18 and Isaiah 61:1, this description of a repentant sinner turns the usually negative image of a broken heart into a positive spiritual attribute. The lectionary reading excludes the canonical psalm's last two verses (vv. 18–19), a Persian-period addition that offers an intercession for Jerusalem and the rebuilding of Zion's walls. This passage's image of God "delighting" in animal sacrifices upon the temple altar seems inconsistent with verses 16–17.

NEAL H. WALLS

Homiletical Perspective

writer cries to God. "Really?!" Natalie asked. "Was God the only victim of that story? How would those words have sounded to Bathsheba or Uriah? How would they sound today to the countless people caught in similar webs of violence and betrayal?"

Natalie's point was that David could not honestly conclude that God was the only victim of his sin. David's sin surely harmed Bathsheba and Uriah as much as or more than it harmed God. In truth, this is almost always the case. Our sins bear real consequences for our relationships with others. Praying for God's mercy is perhaps a good starting point, but it is not enough. Our goal should not be simple repentance, but reconciliation—a restored relationship with God and with our neighbors. Confessing our sins to God is often the easiest part, because we can count on God's promise of unconditional love and mercy. The more difficult step is seeking forgiveness from the people we hurt, and committing ourselves to the hard, often painful work of reconciliation.

Several sermon illustrations come to mind to further highlight this process of reconciliation. For example, a preacher might use the backdrop of David's story to consider the current realities and consequences of domestic violence, infidelity, and other forms of interpersonal conflict. What might reconciliation look like in those contexts? A preacher may choose to focus on reconciliation at the communal level. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in postapartheid South Africa offers a powerful and well-documented contemporary example. Indeed, many communities around the world have tried to adapt that model to their own struggles with racial and ethnic conflict.

These illustrations give the preacher an opportunity to emphasize that true reconciliation requires not only repentance, but also truth and justice and a commitment to changed behavior. This deeper understanding not only aids in the restoration of human relationships; it also may help us more faithfully to respond to God's love and mercy in our lives.

JOHN D. ROHRS

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

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

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

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

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

Theological Perspective

This passage from the heart of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians provides a helpful meditation on the goal of the Christian life as the church begins the season of Lent.

Reconciliation with God. Verse 20b gives a basic summary of the gospel that Paul has preached to the various churches: “Be reconciled to God.” The gospel of reconciliation is more challenging than we might think (much as it was for the Corinthians), in two respects. First, it shows us that, left to our own devices, we and indeed the whole world are at enmity with God. Each of us, and human society at large, is profoundly incapable of being the people that God has created us to be, despite the goodness with which God has created us and God’s generous covenant with Israel (Rom. 3:20; 9:30–31). In the intentions of our hearts and the destructiveness of our actions, we are in dire need of reconciliation with God.

Second, the gospel of reconciliation may be even more shocking because of the unimaginable goodness of God’s plans for us. God intends to do nothing short of restoring the most wayward and broken elements of creation—the greatest of which lie in the hearts of people like us. God does not respond to the sin and evil of our lives by throwing out the bad and starting over with something new; God means to

Pastoral Perspective

Most of us can remember (especially if we had children of our own) the process of being taught to speak politely, to know when to say “please” or “thank you.” We teach and are taught to speak courteously as part of our growing up and fitting in. However, at a deeper level, the language of respect is meant to usher us into more meaningful relationships. There is more than an artificial relationship between etiquette and ethics.

That is a clue to understanding the importance of Paul’s choice of words in our text and thus the rhetoric with which he proffers the gospel. For instance, in verses 6 and 7 he lists some of the “weapons of righteousness”: “patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.” None of these can contradict any of the others. All are called for by the inherent, sovereign patience of God that is at the heart of the gospel and the life of Jesus. So Paul invites, entreats, and urges; he does not demand, threaten, or order. His rhetoric lives and works because he believes in the power of God. This is even more noteworthy given Paul’s description of himself prior to his encounter with Christ.

Attending to Paul’s rhetoric, we listen to this text from both a time and a culture in which the church must learn again the language of God’s sovereign patience. Today’s passage is both a continuation of

Exegetical Perspective

This passage concludes a long section in which Paul defends the integrity of his ministry as God's apostle (2 Cor. 5:11–6:13). Critics felt that his failure to exhibit the domineering traits of a "great man" discredited Paul's claim to speak God's saving word. He lacked the skills of a powerful public orator (2 Cor. 10:10), suffered some form of chronic illness (2 Cor. 12:7–10), worked at a trade rather than demand the support of wealthy patrons (1 Cor. 9:3–18), and adopted a posture of humility in the community rather than acting as a strict disciplinarian (2 Cor. 10:1–2; 13:9–10). During a recent visit to Corinth a member of the church had humiliated Paul in public. Assured that the church now regrets the incident, Paul encourages mutual reconciliation, even a warm embrace of the person responsible (2 Cor. 2:5–11; 6:11–13).

Paul reprimands his critics for focusing on outward appearances, not the heart. His apostolic way of life reflects the gospel that he preaches to others, the Christ who sacrificed his life out of love so that humanity would have eternal life (2 Cor. 5:11–15). Paul describes his own activity as "God's ambassador" extending the gospel of reconciliation throughout the world (2 Cor. 5:16–21). Our reading opens with the concluding verses of that treatment of reconciliation (vv. 20b–21). The final section creates dramatic images of Paul's apostleship (6:1–10).

Homiletical Perspective

When many of us turn to Ash Wednesday and the Lenten lectionary themes of repentance and renewal, there are already audio files playing in our heads: thin, tinny voices murmuring mantras of confession and contrition. Many an Ash Wednesday sermon has slipped Paul's second exchange with the Corinthians in alongside the prophet Joel's "Return to me . . . with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12), giving the impression that when Paul talks about reconciliation, he is pushing for conversion that is primarily about being sorry and professing belief.

There is certainly a sense in which this passage is part of Paul's attempt to have a "come to Jesus" with certain individuals in the Corinthian community, and maybe the church as a whole. Still, for Paul, reconciliation with God is intimately connected with community and vocation. This insight can draw the Ash Wednesday message out of the cramped, dimly lit rooms of our pre-Easter penitence (Matt. 6:6) and onto a path that is so much less about ourselves and more about rejoicing.

If you are preaching in a congregation where Paul is generally accepted as a great hero of the faith, then this passage can be useful in challenging baseline Christians—which probably includes most of us—to take our faith to another level. A useful sermonic twist can be found in the fact that when Paul says,

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Theological Perspective

heal and transform *us*, and this is perhaps the most arresting thing of all.

Reconciliation through Christ. Because of the mess that we have created for ourselves and each other, only God can reconcile us to himself, which is just what he has done in Jesus Christ. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God has reconciled the world to himself, forgiving all our sins and offences (5:18–19; Rom. 5:10). The New Testament and the early church fathers do not specify the exact nature of Christ's defeat of sin and death on the cross. Paul himself employs several traditional ideas, including at least three different notions of Old Testament sacrifice. Here we read that although Jesus was sinless, he was "made sin" for us so that we might "become the righteousness of God" (v. 21).

Some interpreters, including Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, and most of the Western medievals, take this to mean that Christ on the cross became an offering for sin, a view that also agrees with the language of sacrifice in the Greek Old Testament. Others, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, believed that Christ was merely treated as a sinner.

However we may understand it, Christ has definitively dealt with sin and death on the cross, which was the chief purpose of his becoming human in the first place. Through Christ God gives us his own life so that we may be truly and completely reconciled with God. As Paul writes to the Romans, "Since we have been made righteous on the basis of faith (*ek pisteōs*), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1, my trans.).

Inward and Outward Righteousness. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul illustrates in detail the righteousness that believers have received from Christ. Like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, Paul exhorts us to an inward righteousness. We are not to boast in external appearances—in the "face" that we present to the world (*en prosōpō*)—but "in the heart" (v. 12). We must view ourselves and all things in a new way, through the purposes of God as revealed in Christ, rather than "in the flesh" (v. 16). In a different metaphor, we have become a "new creation" in Christ; we have been reconciled, renewed, and transformed (v. 17; Gal. 6:15), which involves a complete revolution of the values that we have known. So we must now live, Paul says, not for ourselves but for Christ, who died and was raised for us (v. 15), so that we actually "become the righteousness of God" (v. 21).

Pastoral Perspective

Paul's magisterial expression of the gospel drama in 5:16–21 and a transition to a statement of how the truth of the gospel has formed Paul's behavior as a human and as an "ambassador for Christ" (5:20).

In chapter 5, verses 16–21 have been a primary focus and starting point for theological reflection upon themes such as the atonement and the relation between the identity of Christ and the work of Christ. However, for the purpose of our reflection upon Paul's etiquette and ethics, it is important to note that the theological material serves primarily as an "apology" for the apostle's behavior and motivation. Thus Paul can say, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all" (5:14). He immediately goes on to say, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view" (5:16).

Today's text gives us insight into what it means to see people through the new lens of the reconciling action of God in Christ. We are provided with more than a new set of glasses; we are given the "confessions" of Paul's behavior toward his readers and toward all for whom he bears the message of this reconciliation.

This letter is addressed to those who already have made a confession of faith, members of the Corinthian congregation who presumably embody a new way of being and seeing in the world. They are the ones to whom Paul says, "We entreat you, . . . be reconciled to God . . ." and "We urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain" (5:20; 6:1). As pastors, we recognize with Paul that being reconciled to God is a relationship one grows into through acts that can become habits, which in turn gradually delineate a character that is the touchstone of a life. It is a life that is "urged" on by the "love of Christ," but focused on the gift of the now, "the acceptable time" (6:2).

Rather than pursuing his argument by calling attention to how *his hearers* must change their behavior, Paul talks about how, in response to Christ's love, *his* behavior is being changed. He argues from personal example as an apostle and "ambassador for Christ." Paul sees no distinction between his personal life, on the one hand, and what is required of him in fulfilling his missionary calling, on the other. The latter has priority; the former is rooted in it. That logic is at the heart of what he is pleading with the Corinthians to grasp. Their lives with one another, their relation to Paul, their engagement with the world are always to incarnate and rehearse the invitation to "be reconciled to God."

Exegetical Perspective

Despite the humiliations, punishment, and hardships, this ministry extends the salvation God promised in Isaiah 49:8 (v. 2).

Lectors find this passage difficult to present intelligibly. The catalog of hardships used to describe Paul's ministry (vv. 4b–10) can sound like reading a phone book! Tackling the literary construction of each section makes it easier to understand and read aloud.

Verses 20b–21 conclude an earlier section in which the apostle speaks of himself (and his associates) as “ambassadors for Christ” (v. 20a) entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Verse 21 employs a poetic representation of Christ's death as the capstone of that appeal (cf. Rom. 8:3). The “he” and “him” references get confusing. If we supply the referent for those pronouns and move the relative clause forward, the verse reads, “God made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God.” Because the lectionary selection shifts the rhetorical function of these verses from concluding a section to introducing one, the personal appeal (v. 20b) and the soteriological formula (v. 21) now point forward to 6:1–2.

Second Corinthians 6:1–2 drops the diplomatic metaphor and opens with a plural participle, “working together with,” translated “As we work together with him” (NRSV), where the “him” likely refers back to the last word of 5:21, which is “God” in the translation. However, the Greek text has the phrase “in him,” that is “in Christ,” at the conclusion of the verse. Paul's participle is delightfully ambiguous. The apostolic ministry could be associated with God, with Christ, or even an unexpressed hope that the “you” of his audience will join in this task. Paul does consider the life of churches a powerful testimony to the gospel (see 1 Thess. 1:5–10).

Verse 5:21 spoke of reconciliation and “becoming the righteousness of God” as something the audience has received because they believe in Christ. Suddenly Paul's words introduce a note of warning. The church could receive God's grace worthlessly, to no effect. Rhetorically Paul uses the words of Isaiah 49:8 as though God were speaking directly to the community. The “now” of that “day of salvation” puts the practical problem of reconciliation within the Corinthian community in a new light. They stand once again at that juncture in which God's offer of salvation can be accepted or lost.

Since we are unaware of the situation in Corinth, the sharply defensive tone of 6:3–4a comes as a shock. Verses 3–4a call the audience back to the business at hand, criticism of Paul's ministry (see 2 Cor.

Homiletical Perspective

“We are ambassadors for Christ,” he does not actually seem to be talking about the Corinthians—or, by analogy, any of us—yet. He seems to be talking primarily about himself, and maybe the high-commitment leaders who are working with him—people like Titus. These are people who are living for others in radical, often risky ways. If the Corinthians are included, it is only in the implied sense that they may yet become fully engaged in Paul's radical ministry of reconciliation. It may also help to be clear that Paul is not writing primarily about the hardships that come upon us in the course of everyday life. Rather, Paul is primarily talking about hardship that is *chosen* as part of one's daily ministry.

In congregations where many members live in relative comfort and security, the endurance that can come from having survived beatings, imprisonments, and civil disturbances is likely to seem hypothetical and external to daily life. The homiletical challenge in this context is to avoid both the liberal guilt sermon, in which we spend more time feeling bad than actually doing any good, and the loophole sermon, in which we explore high ideals and then hedge by saying that, of course, none of *us* may be called to ministries as extreme as Paul's.

For congregations where many members live with muggings, jail time, and “too much month at the end of the money,” as I have heard many preachers say, the hardships Paul lists may be real and present in the life of the community. The challenge in this case may be to help listeners discern how the Spirit may be calling us to move, from a place of un-chosen endurance for the sake of survival, to chosen endurance for the sake of the gospel.

You may be preaching in a congregation that views Paul's theology and his self-proclaimed apostolic status as did the Corinthians themselves—at least as they are characterized in this letter. In this case, beneath the bravado of Paul's soaring rhetoric about his own good works, there is a more poignant story. It is the story of someone who founded a community, who believed unwaveringly in his unconventional calling and the sacrifices he made to get the community started, and who returned later only to find himself treated as a penniless, bedraggled impostor. The homiletical challenge in this case is to arrive at a second naiveté after we have acknowledged the underside of Paul's agenda-driven rhetoric. For example, when Paul uses the language of reconciliation with God, he is speaking just as much about reconciliation with himself and his way of doing things, as if the two are essentially identical. Even so, for Paul reconciliation with God and reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Theological Perspective

It is amazing how deceptively easy God's extreme generosity can seem to be. One of the most common pitfalls of the Christian faith is to imagine that because Christ's grace is a free gift, it does not necessarily affect or change us in any deep way, or that one can be "saved" without being sanctified. How far such thoughts are from the gospel of Christ! Paul warns the Corinthians not to accept the grace of God in vain (see the similar shift from Romans 5 to Romans 6)—which is in fact not to accept it at all, but to fall away. As Paul writes elsewhere, we must make our conduct "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27), because "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

Paul exhibits this new life in an account of his own ministry among the Corinthians (6:3–10). Opening his heart in great affection (6:11), he speaks of the ardor and love that his ministry has involved, both as a proof of the authenticity of his apostolate and as an example of God's righteousness. Paul speaks of the inward qualities of righteousness: knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness, love, truthful speech, and divine power (vv. 6–7a), which are the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), and of his outwardly righteous actions in the face of both positive and negative receptions of his ministry (vv. 7b–8a), some of which have caused him extreme social and physical suffering (vv. 4b–5). In a glorious crescendo, Paul describes the life, joy, and fruitfulness of Christ that he has known, despite repeated assaults on his person and ministry (vv. 8b–10). In other words, Paul himself has been *Christlike*, as every successful pastor should aspire to be.

Being reconciled with God is the agenda of the Christian life at all times, especially during Lent, as we undertake a concentrated period of penance and renewal. As in Paul's own case, reconciliation with God always causes us to have "a ministry of reconciliation" (5:18) toward others.

CHRISTOPHER A. BEELEY

Pastoral Perspective

Paul's rehearsal of his own experience and behavior is meant to encourage the Corinthians. It is in keeping with the rhetoric that the grace in the gospel message requires. Paul "entreats" his readers; he "urges" them. He does not order them or demand of them. There is a magisterial passionate quietness to the gospel that Paul honors with his rhetoric. In Romans 5:8 he says that God "proves his love for us." Another translation says that God "commends" his love. That dimension of the gospel leads Paul, again in Romans 12:1, to say, "I appeal to you." What understanding of God's love and grace is reflected in our choice of words?

Without making a claim or taking personal credit, Paul describes his experience and demeanor as an example to encourage and challenge his readers. He rehearses the myriad of adverse situations and conditions he has weathered as an apostle. Because these constituted the "now" of God's grace toward him, they produced endurance, patience, and perseverance, rather than bitterness, cynicism, or hostility to life.

In words that almost echo several of the Beatitudes (and incidentally reconcile the Matthean and Lukan versions), Paul sums up the vital paradox of reconciled living. It is a life of engagement and exchange. It is "sorrowful" but rejoices. It is poor but nonetheless enriches its companions in life—friend, stranger, and even foe. It does not hold back, so it does not hold on. It lives the larger mystery of the "matter of giving and receiving" (Phil. 4:15) that partakes of the security of God's grace.

What does our preaching sound like? What notes do we strike? What do our admonitions sound like? Somewhere Karl Barth says that the note of Christian ethics is not "you must," but, rather, "you may."

DWIGHT M. LUNDGREN

Exegetical Perspective

4:2; 5:11). The NRSV treats “great endurance” as part of the catalog but translates the preposition “in” which introduces the rest of the items in the list as “through.” Other interpreters think that the phrase belongs with “in every way” so that the colon should come after “endurance.” The catalog following (vv. 4b–10) divides into four sections (vv. 4b–5, 6–7a, 7b–8a, and 8b–10).

Verses 4b–5 (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23, 27) list a series of physical hardships and dangers. Some of them are represented in stories about Paul’s missionary efforts in Acts (Acts 13:50; 14:19; 17:5; 18:12; 19:29). Others, such as sleeplessness and hunger, could refer to the hardships he endured by laboring to support himself while founding churches. The next series (vv. 6–7a) contains a generic list of virtues. However, these virtues are not Paul’s personal achievement. Rather, they represent God’s gift of the Spirit working in the apostle (see Gal. 5:22).

Verses 7b–8a open with a military metaphor (cf. 2 Cor. 10:3–5). The apostle stands armed with “weapons of righteousness” in both hands (v. 7b). Though the NRSV uses “with” to introduce the metaphor and “in” for items listed in verse 8a, Paul’s Greek uses the same preposition “through” (*dia*) for the series. What are “weapons of righteousness”? Paul encourages Christians to employ their bodily members as “weapons of righteousness,” not of injustice or sin, in Romans 6:13. So Paul appears to be referring to his conduct. Knowing that it conforms to God’s will makes him indifferent to the “slings and arrows,” the “honor and dishonor” he receives from human beings.

The final section (vv. 8b–10) picks up the distinction between the way in which outsiders look at the apostle and the reality of his ministry. The accusation against Paul is a serious one: that he sells a false teaching for personal gain. Notice how Paul disproves that charge. “Charlatans” seek public honor, wealth, and comfort, not the hardships of the apostle. He ends dramatically on the “personal gain” note. Paul has not enriched himself preaching the gospel. He is impoverished. With the eyes of faith, one can see that the apostle “possesses everything.” What is the wealth of an apostle? The churches—even the troublesome Corinthians—his ministry has brought to Christ.

PHEME PERKINS

Homiletical Perspective

with others have always been intimately connected (Gal. 3:28).

You may end up choosing to preach Paul as a champion who is challenging a low-commitment church, or as a leader who has fallen prey to his own ego. You may end up preaching about the vocation of ambassador for Christ as having more to do with the proclamation of God’s saving work in Jesus, or more to do with healing interpersonal conflict. Either way, Paul’s invitation to the Corinthians stands as a theological challenge to churches everywhere. After all, this passage pretty much blows the prosperity gospel out of the water. Paul’s call to be reconciled to God and serve as Christ’s ambassadors flies in the face of the sermon that says, “If you trust in God and walk in your integrity, God will take you from the bottom of the corporate ladder to the top.” Instead, it offers an invitation to ministry in which deprivation and disrepute are par for the course, and the fruits of one’s labor may be unclear—at least in the short run.

It would seem illogical to accept Paul’s invitation. It can seem foolish to speak of God’s reconciling love or engage in ministries of reconciliation when the rewards are often mostly ingratitude and unpopularity. How can Paul invite the Corinthians into his mode of ministry with such excitement? How can he claim to have nothing, and yet possess everything? How can he be *always* rejoicing, even in the midst of his sorrow?

Perhaps only when we begin to plumb the depths of Paul’s religious experience will it begin to make sense: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Phil. 3:8–9). Whether we share Paul’s Christology or his particular brand of spirituality, a sermon that helps listeners to explore the deeper spiritual reality that buoys him up may be worth the trip to the pulpit.

CHRISTOPHER GRUNDY

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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

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

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you

Theological Perspective

It is probably inevitable that sacred texts tend to become for communities of belief so “sacred” (sacro-sanct!) that they fail, in the end, to evoke the very qualities that made them sacred. Especially professionals (clergy, theologians, educators) often become inured to the capacity of Scripture profoundly to engage, question, and shock. Sometimes, when our guards are down, a passage of Scripture strikes us as being so *radical* that it astonishes the mind and shakes the foundations of religion and of life itself. This, for those with ears to hear, is such a passage.

Just consider what is being said here (1) about “alms” (charity, stewardship, and, by extension, the *practice* of faith in general): let it be modest, undemonstrative, almost anonymous—“done in secret”; (2) about “prayer”: let it be quiet, private, brief—as direct as the Lord’s Prayer; (3) about “fasting” (religious observance, discipleship): no ostentation please, no display—wash your face, comb your hair, and keep your attempts at piety to yourself!

Religion is such a noisy affair. Apparently it was that in Jesus’ time too, but today we have raised the noise to unbelievable levels. This applies to virtually all the religions, not only Christianity, but Christianity, the conventional religion of the technologically advanced and competitive West, has surely outdone all the others. What would stewardship campaigns

Pastoral Perspective

Lent can be a dangerous time. People come to the church looking for discipline and a new way to live; they come to be challenged—prepared for the heartache and joy of the cross to come. The problem with Lent, however, is a direct outgrowth of this urgency: we contain the season to six weeks of doing good, rather than *building a Lent that becomes a life*. This, very simply, is what Jesus asks his disciples to do at this climax in the Sermon on the Mount. Do not be holy because it is what the world expects of you; rather, learn to live holy lives because a closer relationship to the God who sees in secret will be reward enough.

As a child, I toured the cathedrals of England with my parents. I was fascinated by the tin alms boxes built into the narthex walls. Dropping a coin into those boxes was a delight. The coin would drop, ring, and echo throughout the cavernous cathedral. People would look back to see what the noise was about. One day I watched an older woman, who looked to be on her daily visit to the church, stuff a paper bill in the box. The bill had far more value than my coin, but when dropped in the box, there was no great noise. It was a feather falling from the sky, and no one turned around. No one recognized the gift. Only God could hear it, I supposed.

In God’s economy, reward has a different equation than the world’s logic. The better our homeless

pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. . . .

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

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

Exegetical Perspective

Today’s Gospel lectionary text stands at the center of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. After establishing the unique nature of the Lord’s community (5:2–12), declaring its mission (5:13–16), and emphasizing God’s righteousness as its defining character (5:17–20), a righteousness that surpasses even the law of love (5:21–48; Lev. 19:18), Jesus stresses the essence of genuine faith (6:1–34). As Jesus demonstrated in the wilderness (4:1–11), he now teaches others: the “righteousness [that] exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20) and is as “perfect” as that of God (5:48) is the righteousness that stems from trust in God in every facet of life. In this portion of the Sermon, Jesus shows how righteousness (6:1; the NRSV translates *dikaiosynēn* as “piety”) relates to worship. There is often a stark difference between the appearance of faith and its reality, between idolatry disguised as religion and the charitable faithfulness that comes from a radical reliance on God. The essential challenge here is this: where or in whom do you place your trust?

Charade or Charity (vv. 1–4). In the first of three examples that draw the distinction between religious practices as disguised selfishness and acts of faith that please God (v. 1), Jesus turns to the topic of alms (vv. 2–4). Almsgiving has deep roots in Israel’s life. The

Homiletical Perspective

Who are these people coming to worship on Ash Wednesday, who want ashes imposed on their foreheads, who want to be reminded of their utter mortality: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return”? They are seriously committed. The church relies on their generous giving. When they tell you they pray for the church, they are not being hostile or flaunting piety; that is what they do. They are disciples not in word alone but as exemplars of a real and rigorous discipline. We count on them for leadership. Others may drop by Sunday morning, but these people chair committee meetings on Tuesday, attend Bible study Thursday, build houses with Habitat on Saturday, teach church school on Sunday; and on Ash Wednesday they come to worship.

So much do we count on these people—and so much admire them—that we may forget the particularly religious temptations that may lure particularly religious people away from God.

We do not have trouble imagining the temptations besetting unbelievers, and we certainly have no difficulty recognizing the temptations that appeal to sensualists. Unbelievers may be tempted, well, by unbelief, by the bland vision of life unable to make distinctions between good and bad, beautiful and ugly, wise and foolish, sublime and vulgar. Finally, unbelief is tempted by the final fruit of unbelief, which is despair.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Theological Perspective

and every-member canvasses be without the hoopla of strategic planning, grand meetings, charts, publicly displayed “thermometers,” and the like? How would seminary and college financial drives fare without those well-publicized lists of givers, arranged according to extravagant categories of generosity reminiscent of the medieval practice of indulgences? As for prayer, how many of the most ardent pray-ers could pass the scriptural test of “keep it short” and as straightforward as the example Jesus gives?

While religious broadcasts and much-touted state prayer breakfasts may indeed occur behind closed doors (v. 6), what would they come to without the television cameras that pipe them or the news of them into every corner of the land? In a society that practically functions on the power of skillful and blatant advertising, a society of “display personalities,” hype, and preoccupation with communications, the notion that religious observance should be modest, secret, and camouflaged seems ridiculous! In our increasingly pluralistic planetary context, the religions appear to be as much in competition with one another as are the big industries. Where would a religion be in such a world without regularly exhibiting and promoting its wares and accomplishments? “Holier Than Thou” has been raised to new levels of global competition in our religiously pluralistic context!

On the other hand, what have we lost—what, as Christians, are we missing—in this capitulation to display, publicity, and ostentation? According to this text, we are at least in danger of forfeiting the very essence of the faith Jesus advocates. In our desire to be “seen by others,” “heard by others,” and “praised by others,” we lose touch with the very theological foundations of this faith: communion with and the glorification of God.

John Calvin, for all his alleged austerity and lack of humor, understood this danger very well. His motto, *soli Deo Gloria*, has often been taken to extremes, but the principle remains unshakable: in our worship and practice of the faith, any attitude or influence that causes us to think chiefly of ourselves and the impression we are creating detracts absolutely from the “chief end” of faith, which is to know and be known by God.

I have not forgotten the nugget of insight I received from my first university teacher of psychology. “Why,” she asked, “do we so frequently ‘forget’ the names of persons to whom we are newly introduced? Answer: because we did not *hear* the names to begin with. When we were being introduced, we were

Pastoral Perspective

program, the more clients we gain. The more we focus on evangelism, the more people want to leave the church and start new churches. The better our volunteers become, the less the clergy are needed. Every time we give more of ourselves away, every time we do not ask for a reward, we find that a piece of our own broken lives has been mended. In order to build up, we must give out—“so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

This kind of gutsy, risky, radical behavior is true of the Lord’s Prayer as well. Though the lectionary jumps over the prayer, we will miss Matthew’s meaning if we do the same. There are days when we mutter it with the masses in the sanctuary, pray beside our four-year-olds at bedtime, or speed through it as we taxi down a runway. Then there are days when it stops us cold, moments when we have to ask ourselves if we have offered God anything in return for that daily bread, or if, in seeking God’s forgiveness in the last forty years, we have yet to forgive our own mother for the last twenty? To paraphrase James Forbes, when we begin to work on forgiving the sins of others, have we considered how many times we have gone to God’s well of grace seeking forgiveness of our own?

There will be days when we offer the prayer with a strong voice in church, and days when we can only pray that there is another strong voice able to pray it for us, when we ourselves are unsure of what we believe. This is the great secret of corporate worship.

Much like the economy of giving, this prayer turns our lives inside out. It reminds us that the Christian life is about “we” and “us,” not “me” and “I.” It teaches that, as much as we ask God to give to us, we must be willing to give to God and one another in return. The hard truth is that the Lord’s Prayer is just a starting place.

At the heart of all these caveats to give, fast, pray, and not hoard the things of this life, Jesus offers one universal truth: The world says, prepare for the worst. Secure your borders. Hoard your money and hide it under the bed. Avoid the stranger. Take care of your own and one day he or she will take care of you. Jesus says, prepare for the best. Live expansive lives. Give generously. Engage the stranger. Care for the needy. As country music singer George Strait reminds us, “The hearse doesn’t come with a luggage rack.” So Lent is not about feeling holy, but about lifelong commitments that help us hold on to the things that will sustain us.

Exegetical Perspective

people learned through their own poverty in slavery and thereafter the importance of gifts to the needy (Deut. 24:6–22). They knew that their origin and life were rooted in God’s grace (Exod. 19:4; 20:2; Deut. 7:6–8; 26:5–11). Thus everyone who upheld the law made annual provision for the needy (Deut. 24:19–22) and contributed a full tithe (10 percent) of every third year’s produce to their community’s “food bank” so that no one—not even a sojourner—would go hungry (Deut. 14:28–29; Ruth 2:2). Care for the poor, the homeless, the fatherless, widows, orphans, and strangers in their midst is a hallmark of Israel’s faith (Exod. 22:21–27; Isa. 58:7–8). Jesus insists that his followers continue the practice of giving alms, but Jesus warns his listeners of pride’s perverting power. Almsgiving is not a competition for a prize of public esteem (v. 2b). Neither can it hide from God a heart’s self-centeredness. Rather, the giving of alms ought to be motivated by genuine concern for the need of the “other,” not by a longing for prestige and praise. Indeed, the Greek word translated as “alms” means literally “mercy” (*eleēmosynēn*, v. 3), and it is so important to Matthew that God’s final judgment will be based on one’s care for the needy (25:31–46). It is self-disinterested charity that pleases God (v. 4).

Pretense or Prayer (vv. 5–6). Prayer may also be corrupted into an act of self-promotion. Personal and corporate acts of prayer ought to be honest, humble expressions of faith that reflect both the disparity between God and humankind and God’s desire to communicate personally as beneficent father to child. Regrettably, that which ought to be intimate communication with God to hear God’s “voice” can be narcissistic orations extolling one’s self-worth. Jesus warns his followers against such misuse of prayer and advises the faithful to pray in secret, where the personal dimension is inescapable and they are free of such temptation. The “room” (*tamieion*, v. 6) is literally a place where stewards keep their provisions, a private office or sanctum. The central issue here is not the kind of place but rather the disposition and focus of those who pray, as the next section makes clear (vv. 7–15). Righteous prayer is God- and community-centered, not self-centered, and it opens to God the most valued aspects of one’s life (cf. Matt. 6:24).

Faunting or Fasting (vv. 16–18). While fasts may require restraint from eating, the practice may feed the practitioner’s pride and self-interest, a just “reward” (*misthon*, v. 16; also in 6:1) for anyone who

Homiletical Perspective

Sensualists are tempted by the very world of the senses they adore. Their temptations are as evanescent as feelings themselves—now here, now there, never staying put. Those who worship at the altar of “How I feel about it” must always be on the move.

If the temptation of unbelief is not believing in much of anything at all, if the temptation of sensuality is being adrift in the world of the senses, the temptation that comes with being religious people is to substitute religion for God. We mistake our road map for our destination. We turn the means into an end. God gives us the good gifts of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting so that we may draw near to God, and we anxiously transform them into performances.

To those who take their religious discipline seriously, Jesus offers an irreverent parody. Christians may not attend worship on Ash Wednesday expecting a comedy, but Jesus nevertheless barges into our solemn proceedings cracking jokes, spinning wild exaggerations, and demonstrating how to preach to people who take their religion seriously.

Here come the almsgivers into the courts of God, and they are accompanied by the brass section of the symphony. They give a few dollars to this cause, and the trumpets fanfare; a few dollars more to another cause, and the trombones blare a salute. Everyone watching says, “My, they are generous!” Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”

Over there stand people praying. You know they are praying because everyone in the room knows their praying. People blocks away may hear their praying, and the words go on and on and on, always stretching for one more crumb of emotion and another shred of humility. People listening to them may say, “My, my, they certainly pray well.” Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”

Here come people fasting. You know they are fasting by their gaunt faces and eyes crazed from lack of sugar. They have mussed their hair and torn their garments because you have to do something to show people you are fasting. The problem with fasting is that no one can see what you are not doing. What is the good of that? So these folks stagger forward on Ash Wednesday, hoping for a formidable smudge of ashes to let everyone know they have been to worship. Onlookers will declare, “Oh, they certainly are religious!” Jesus declares, “Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”

Jesus parodies our religious behavior and does so in the most hilarious way, in the hope that we may be caught laughing at ourselves. We need to laugh at

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Theological Perspective

too interested in the impression we ourselves were giving to listen to the names of these others.”

What Jesus is teaching his disciples here is the same *kind* of lesson. The very purpose of almsgiving, prayer, and religious observance is to deliver us from the debilitating and exorbitant *self*-consciousness that dogs our lives. “Salvation” for self-absorbed creatures like us means finally—or at least intermittently!—to lose our precious selves in the other: the other who is the recipient of our alms, the Other who hears our prayers, the others who wonder what our religion really comes to if not just more public promotion and self-display! In most of the days and hours of our lives, we are burdened with the thought of how we are being perceived: What will *they* think? When faith is true, Jesus affirms, we find ourselves—at least here and there, now and then—graciously liberated *from* the burden of self, liberated *for* the other. That is faith’s essence!

Does this mean that our piety, prayer, and religious observance must *never* have the character of public address or notice? Is the life of discipleship so very internalized that there should be no occasion for open witness, no concern to make a statement, no search for words and deeds that can convey to those outside the confines of our “closets” (v. 6, KJV) the consequence of belief for life in this world? Of course not! This is not the only scriptural text that speaks of these matters.

A little later on in this Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops” (Matt. 10:27). However, this text contains a critique of “religion” that is permanently relevant, especially for Christians who consider themselves true and devout believers. For the propensity to self-promotion—and the hypocrisy that usually accompanies it!—is never stronger than when one’s “natural” egocentricity is bolstered by the false assurance that one is the very darling of divinity.

That is why, in this scripture, Jesus’ dismissal of ostentatious religion is so unrelenting. It is yet another expression of a theme that runs throughout the prophetic traditions of both biblical testaments: human pride (*superbia/hybris*) is always questionable and pathetic, but never so much so as when it is backed by religious presumption. True faith drives to modesty, not self-promotion.

DOUGLAS JOHN HALL

Pastoral Perspective

Self-proclaimed agnostic A. J. Jacobs wrote a book titled *The Year of Living Biblically*.¹ He was determined to live by the Bible’s rules and disciplines, literally, in modern-day New York City. Other than his wife’s coming close to kicking him out of their little apartment for his occasionally self-righteous behavior, what Jacobs found is that sometimes the life of faith is (or can be) about cognitive dissonance. *Put yourself in a practice in order to learn it.*

At the conclusion of the book, what Jacobs found was not radical conversion but rather genuine openness of faith, a direct result of the practices and disciplines he had introduced into his life. The truth is that Jacobs lived religion very publicly as an experiment, but real change happened in the quiet of his heart as he learned to pray where only God could hear.

The danger in Lent is that we go through the motions of discipline without learning how to live Lent. The danger is that we do everything “right” but never ask ourselves how “right” behavior changes how we live our lives. We act one way, but we never ask ourselves: Do we give to get? Are we raising our children for heaven or Harvard? Do we pray because we are supposed to or because it gives us hope?

It is a dangerous thing, to lead a holy life, to ask the same questions of ourselves that Jesus asks of his disciples. In these moments of utter truth and honesty, we are assured that, like the feather falling on the paper bill in the cathedral, in the humble act of a faceless person or our quiet prayer when no one else can hear, God does in fact hear us. That is good news.

MARYETTA ANSCHUTZ

1. A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

Exegetical Perspective

hungers for notice and prestige among the religiously observant. The ancient ritual of fasting always included prayer and was typically associated with mourning and penance (Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 7:6; 2 Sam. 12:15–23; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 9:1; Dan. 9:3; Zech. 7:5). It was an act of personal and corporate humbling. Humility and repentance, though, were not always the driving forces behind fasts. Indeed, as in prayer and the giving of alms, the observance of fasting is susceptible to sin's perverting power and may stand under God's judgment (Isa. 58:1–9; Jer. 14:11–12). Thus the prophets call the people to "sanctify" their fasts (Joel 1:14; 2:15), for the pretense of humility and repentance is unbefitting the people of God. This is also Jesus' point.

Ironically, some render their faces unrecognizable (*aphanizousin ta prosōpa autōn*, v. 16; NRSV "they disfigure their faces") in order to be recognized (*hopōs phanōsin tois anthrōpois*, v. 16). Such exaggerated fasting—like ostentatious charity and affected prayer—is a self-interested distortion of an essential religious observance that is common in God's covenant community. The driving value behind such an act is self-centeredness, which seeks to "be praised" (v. 2) and "seen" (1, 5, 16). Righteous fasting, however, is not a show; it is a profound act of worshipful self-control aimed at solidarity with God and neighbor.

Fool's Gold or Lasting Treasure (vv. 19–21). After exposing three ways that self-worship may masquerade as fervent religious piety, Jesus turns more explicitly to the topic of trusts and commitments (vv. 17–34) by focusing on treasures (vv. 19–21). Over against earthly "treasures" that may be seen and praised by people and lost (including the wealth and security that facilitates ostentatious almsgiving or public displays of religious zeal aimed at promoting one's social status), Jesus asserts that there is a true treasure that is immeasurable and endures forever. It is a treasure valued by God, seen and praised in heaven. It is the treasure of trust in God. The contrast could scarcely be stronger: Jesus is challenging his listeners to confront what and whom they worship. Are they worshiping themselves, something else, or the living God? Righteousness—expressed as piety—is more an inner disposition of the heart than any outward religious observance (v. 33; Jer. 31:33–34).

ROBERT A. BRYANT

Homiletical Perspective

ourselves. Our selves are the problem. These selves we are—these fragile, tragic, needy selves that can scarcely imagine that we are dust.

We selves, we long for God and longing for God takes time, takes years and decades, and we selves grow weary. It is so easy to back away from that precipitous edge of longing for God and settle into being satisfied with being religious.

We long to speak to God, see God's face, and sometimes in prayer we almost do. Always out of reach. It is sometimes so tempting to give up on the conversation with God and blandly parrot prayers. We know that there is a difference between praying and praying.

We have this hunger for God. Augustine knew about it, praying, "O Lord, you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."¹

That heart hunger, the restlessness, that fasting, point to and symbolize the hunger only God can fill. We can grow so accustomed to the hunger—so enchanted with our own fasting—that we forget there is One who means to fill us. God gladly will give us God's own self.

Jesus invites us to laugh at ourselves, so that we may finally lose ourselves and find God's own self. Of each of these three groups whom Jesus parodies—the almsgivers sounding their horns, the pray-ers piling up words, the fasters in ashen misery—Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward." They have been recognized for their religiosity.

So also, Jesus promises, rewards will come to those who give themselves away in almsgiving, who shed themselves in prayer, and who empty themselves to be filled by God's goodness. Only a few verses before in this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells his disciples, "Blessed are those who hunger . . . for they will be filled." Blessed are those who hunger for God; God will indeed fill them. That is what the church of Jesus Christ celebrates in holy Lent.

PATRICK J. WILLSON

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 21.