

Commentaries on Advent Lectionary Scripture Texts for Year A

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 122

Psalm 122 is labeled as a song of ascents, one of a series of ascent psalms beginning in 120 and extending to 134. It is the song of joy a pilgrim coming to the Jerusalem temple might sing. The psalmist begins by recalling the excitement of being invited to join a group making the journey to the temple.

Next the experience of arriving is recounted. “Our feet were standing inside your gates,” [pby]. They had made it to Jerusalem, and the psalmist is not disappointed. It is everything he expected and more.

The next verses are a paean of praise to Jerusalem. Note how the city is described. It is a solid city, a pilgrimage center for all the tribes, a place where God is to be praised and the place from which the Davidic monarch reigned. It was the center of Israel’s political and religious life, the place of rule and worship.

The preceding verses seem to be placed in the past — although not all are agreed on this. Now we turn to the psalmist’s present and to the language of request. The audience is commanded to pray for the shalom of Jerusalem. Shalom in this context is more than the absence of war; it is a prayer for the prosperity and integrity of the city.

Next we have the language of longing — may those who love Jerusalem be at rest and may there be shalom within the city itself. This a very particular prayer for Jerusalem, and in this sense a very national prayer — may the capitol and the temple endure as the place of the Davidic king and place of God’s presence in the temple.

The final verse gives the motive for this prayer. The well-being of Jerusalem is for the sake of others, the friends and relatives of the psalmist. The well-being of Jerusalem is also sought because the center of God’s worship, the temple, is found there.

The centrality of the temple is of more than national importance as Isaiah 2.1-5 reminds us. The hope is that some day all nations will stream to Jerusalem to learn the ways of God and to accept the reign of God. The particular is for the sake of the many.

This seems a forlorn hope in our day, as it was in the days of Jesus, because Jerusalem is not the center of peace but of strife, robbery, and oppression. A national vision has been replaced with a nationalistic one. Jerusalem is no longer seen as a universal treasure but as a national treasure for the benefit of the nation. Just as in Jesus’ day, Jerusalem does not know the things that make for peace.

Yet there is more than disappointment in this psalm. It reminds us of the importance of place for the worship of God. We may claim that God is always everywhere, but it is hard to find God when talking on a cell phone while driving a car. We too need a place to which we may go, to take time out, as it were, from our furious life, and to find ‘insulation’ from the frenetic pace of Christmas, so that we may enter more fully into the presence of God and ponder the particularity of God’s presence in Christ. We might also ponder how it is that Christ has become the center of a nationalistic vision in our day.

Perry Yoder

Isaiah 2:1-5

Like Advent itself, the vision of Isa 2:1-5 arrives like a burst of light in a starless night. Isaiah's first chapter describes a scene of devastation, and one of violence, injustice, and oppression. It hurls contempt at Israel's worship, threatens Jerusalem with a purge, and ends with the image of endless burning. Beginning in v. 6, Isaiah's *second* chapter announces a cataclysm so complete and so terrifying that people will hide in caves and under rocks, "when the Lord arises to terrify the earth." Exactly in the middle of these grim visions stands our text with its brilliant vision of peace.

Several features of Isa 2:1-5 call for comment, beyond its striking parallel in Micah 4:1-4. First, Isaiah's vision, the "word that Isaiah...saw," is of an unspecified time in the future (cf. Gen 49:1). Isaiah describes a future reality that contrasts markedly with the present, both his and ours. The initial contrast is physical: God will establish the unimpressive mountain of Yhwh's house, Mt. Zion (elevation 772 meters), as the highest of mountains, towering above the hills. This dramatic physical alteration of Jerusalem's terrain should alert us that the future Isaiah envisions will not come about through natural developments or human means. No, this will be--can but be--the work of God.

Second, despite Zion's exalted elevation, the nations will stream to it--they will flow, like a river, *up the mountain!* Apart from the parallel in Mi 4:1, the Old Testament uses this verb, "to stream," in only one other text: Jer 51:44 says that the nations will no longer stream to Bel--that is, to Marduk, the high god of Babylon. While the nations, including Judah (Jacob), were forced into exile in Babylon, they will freely choose to ascend Zion, Yhwh's mountain. And while the nations streamed to Babylon under force of military arms following defeat in war, following their journey to Zion they will flow (*upstream*) to Zion where they will convert armaments into farm equipment. This conversion, of nations and of armaments, can only be the work of God.

Third, the conversion that the nations undergo, and then undertake, comes by way of God's word. Indeed, the purpose of their coming to Zion, to the temple ("the house of Jacob's God"), is so that God may instruct them. And their purpose in receiving this instruction is so that they may walk in God's "paths"--to conduct themselves according to God's instruction, and thus according to the word of the Lord. This word, this prophetic word, goes forth from Jerusalem, from Zion.

Fourth, the Lord will resolve disputes among nations--will decide and arbitrate equitably (cf. Isa 11:4) among them. We should not regard this arbitration as some kind of future United Nations, where nations try to resolve disputes among themselves. No, in the future Isaiah envisions, the Lord alone, the infinitely just and wise Judge, will decide and arbitrate. As a consequence--*only* by way of God's own word and work--the nations will have no need of armaments and will "learn war no more."

In the midst of judgment, of destruction, of calamity--in the middle of the darkest night--comes this vision. How should the house of Jacob prepare for it? How *could* they prepare for it? When our text, at its end (2:5), turns toward its readers, toward the house of Jacob, it implores them to walk in the *light* of Yhwh. It does not deny the darkness that surrounds and threatens them, and that threatens the earth; it calls the house of Jacob to walk in the light--God's light--that penetrates the darkness. Not to stumble in the dark on the broken crutches of their self-reliance, their strength, their wisdom and cunning; but to walk in the light of the Lord. What is this light? Is it anything other than the same word of God that the nations will one day seek in their common pilgrimage to Zion? Does walking in God's light mean anything other than seeking and hearing, now, that same gracious word of God, submitting to its peaceable, liberating judgment; and so turning our own weapons of aggression and self-defense into instruments of our shared life? This is not something the nations could do on their own; they do not and they cannot disarm themselves first. *First*, they come to God's house, to the sanctuary, to hear the word of the Lord--the same word that is *light* for Jacob's house, and for us (Ps 89:15).

Advent marks, not a dawning, but the penetration of light into darkness. John's Gospel, much like our text, relates *light* with *the word*. In the Word who became flesh among us was life, and in that life was light. He still shines, gloriously, in every darkness (John 1:1-5, 14). Advent is

an occasion to hear the word, to see the light, and to follow the way it illumines--the way, the truth and the life, Jesus Christ. No darkness can ever overcome this light. This is God's work and God's promise.

Ben C. Ollenburger

Matthew 24:36-44

As I grew up in Illinois, the wide and ever varied sky became a theological companion. Rays of sun breaking through the clouds and falling to the earth in a curtain were evidence of God's comforting presence. Just so, there was a certain night skyscape that held a kind of apocalyptic awe for me. A wildness of moving air, clouds skittering over the face of the moon, black, wet tree branches in silhouette—all brought to mind this passage about the two men in the field, the two women grinding—one taken, the other left. Long before the *Left Behind* series came along to titillate the evangelical imagination, I was doing my own job of scaring myself silly.

Apocalyptic passages such as Matthew 24:36-44 present something of a conundrum for us. All too often we find little use for them beyond a spookiness more fitting for Halloween than Advent. How do we make sense of them for this season of the year? How do we fit them into Matthew? How do we take them seriously as gospel, as good news for us?

Being human, I suppose, and being competent readers of suspense and mystery, we are wont to read this passage in light of what happens—the action. The flood comes and sweeps Noah's neighbors away. One of the farmers is taken. One of the millers is taken. The house is robbed. But a closer look at the passage reveals something else. The emphasis of the passage really is on the question of being aware of the priority of the Kingdom of God amidst the mundane activities of human life and relationship. The difference between Noah and his neighbors was not that they were eating and drinking and marrying. Presumably Noah and his family were doing all those things as well. Even more telling, the difference between the two farmers and the two millers is not the farming and the milling. In each case, both people are doing the exact same thing. The difference lies not in the activity but in the awareness of the broader perspective of the Kingdom of God as one is going about the mundane activities of daily life—whether that is satisfying one's own physical needs, relating to one another in social contracts or working.

The passage is about orientation. Is the eating and drinking, the marrying, the work of tilling a field or grinding grain all there is? Are these tasks and relationships, important and vital as they are, the reason we have been created and given life? The answer of this passage, the answer of the gospel of Matthew, the answer of the incarnated Christ whom we celebrate in Advent, is an unequivocal "no." But it is not the kind of "no" that sends people into ascetic denial either. As we attend to the details of being alive in the company of those who share our air and earth, we must also be alert to what God is doing in our world. We live in hope, a hope in the God who is, in the end, in charge of history. Meanwhile we tend fields and grind wheat—but with a heart oriented to God and a mind alert to the incarnate Christ.

Mary H. Schertz

Romans 13:11-14

This paragraph seems oddly placed until one realizes that it echoes 12:1-2. Paul begins the exhortation section of his letter to the house churches in Rome (12:1-15:13) by appealing to them, Present your bodies as living sacrifices (12:1). Using stock apocalyptic language Paul elaborates on what this means: Do not be conformed to this world (better, this age), but be transformed by the renewing of your minds (12:2). In 13:11-14 Paul returns to this timely eschatological reminder and appeal: Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers.

These two paragraphs (12:1-2 and 13:11-14) serve as “bookends” for exhortations concerning the way of love. In the body of Christ (12:1-13) and even within a hostile social context (12:14-21), believers are summoned to the way of love. This love ethic is reiterated in a summary of the Torah in 13:8-10. And this emphasis on radical Christian love in turn brackets Paul’s counsel about relationships with the governing authorities (13:1-7). Clearly his view of the eschatological context of the church moves Paul to depict Christian faithfulness as nonconforming to the values of this age. Paul underscores the urgency of faithful living within the tension of the “already” and “not yet” of God’s reign, a reign already inaugurated but not yet fully consummated.

In 13:11-14 then Paul provides the big picture for the community living between the times. During Advent the church is reminded to continue to view its life within this broad perspective:

Paul issues a ringing wake-up call to those who have known God’s salvation but need to be reminded about the urgency of participating in God’s redemptive intent for all the world: Wake from sleep, ... the night is far gone, the day is near (13:11-12a). Salvation, the revelation of God’s power and justice (cf. 1:16-17), has begun but still awaits completion.

Here is a clarion call for readiness and vigilance. However, this is not a call for passive waiting but for active engagement: Let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day (13:12b-13). Believers are summoned to put off certain allegiances and activities which are alien to the values of God’s reign. Paul urges avoidance of wickedness and indulgent excesses, of self-gratification and behavior motivated by priorities of the flesh. Believers are also invited to be equipped with weapons needed to participate in God’s liberating agenda in the world.

In 13:14 Paul summarizes his appeal using language reminiscent of what he says elsewhere about baptism (Gal. 3:27; see also Rom. 6): Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh. Christians are to live in a manner conformed to the character of their master, Jesus Christ.

During the season of Advent, Paul’s words remind us how to live as we celebrate our identity as citizens within the kingdom of God who also struggle with their commitments as citizens of the kingdoms of this world. In a season that has been taken over by a secular society with its holiday parties and gift-giving, too often marked by excesses, it is timely to rethink what we are celebrating. Paul’s words call us to remember that we are celebrating more than a birthday. In Jesus’ birth as well as his life and death and resurrection God has offered a salvation which has real implications for the choices we make and the way we live.

As the church reflects on the times, it is highly important to realize anew the eschatological tension within which we all live. Experiences of terrorism and the instinct to retaliate in kind can remind us of Jesus’ teachings and Paul’s pastoral admonitions. And, as individuals we need to be reminded that no one is immortal. The appeal to “wake up” to the lateness of the hour has personal relevance for all of us.

Jacob W. Elias

Second Sunday of Advent

Matthew 3:1-12

One of the issues for John the Baptist, preaching his lonely and unpopular message out in the wilderness of Judea, was tradition—and how one uses one’s tradition with integrity. This text divides clearly into three sections. The first two, 3:1-6 and 3:7-10, contrast two ways of understanding and using tradition.

The first section represents what tradition truly calls us to do. There are two right actions required by tradition. One is to recognize what God is doing now by recognizing it’s continuity with what God has done in the past. John is preparing the people of Israel to recognize and accept the prophet Jesus because of the words of the prophet Isaiah. There is an affinity, a similarity, a resonance in Jesus, the one who is to come, that the people ought to understand in continuity with the great prophets of old. The other right action is confession and repentance. God’s action in the past for the benefit of Israel called for a response of humility, repentance and obedience. God’s action for the benefit of Israel in the present likewise calls for a response of humility, repentance and obedience. The good news is that the hearts of many in Israel were ready to meet the requirements of their tradition, a tradition of God’s actions among them in grace. They trek to the wilderness to see this odd character preaching in the desert—and respond to his message with openness and integrity.

But there is another group of people who do not show the same integrity. This second group is also trying to live by tradition—some Pharisees and Sadducees. It is important to understand New Testament polemic for what it is. What Matthew says about both these groups is colored by his understanding them as Jesus’ opponents—the historical reality is that both groups were far more complex and diverse than the gospel paints them. With that caveat in mind, however, it is fair to note that these groups were quite religious and religious people often have a far greater complacency about their tradition than is healthy. Here John perceives the Pharisees and Sadducees who have come out to hear him as counting on their tradition to *exempt* them from the very recognition and repentance that it actually *requires* from them. They are counting on their lineage, a lineage that goes all the way back to Abraham, to move into baptism without repentance. They are willing, perhaps even eager, to embrace a form of spirituality, the desert baptism, but unwilling to engage their hearts in an act of true repentance.

The lectionary reading ends, in 3:11-12, with a harsh prediction about Jesus. John contrasts his water baptism with Jesus’ baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. Even in Luke, Jesus does not actually baptize anyone with either the Holy Spirit or with fire. Matthew’s gospel does not anticipate the Acts of the Apostles—so the saying here seems even more figurative. Nevertheless, the images of the Holy Spirit and fire speak to the crisis of loyalty that Jesus created in his ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus’ call to disciples to join him as nonviolent partners of the work of God in the world presents us, as it did those earlier disciples, with a clear choice. It is a choice that will prove our mettle time and time again.

Mary H. Schertz

Romans 15:4-13

In this passage Paul concludes the main body of his letter to diverse house churches in ancient Rome. Already in the opening of this letter Paul makes it clear that he looks forward to visiting the Roman believers, not only to give but also to receive encouragement (1:11-12). As he wraps up his letter, Paul offers a reminder concerning the role of scripture (15:4), he speaks prayers of encouragement and hope (15:5-6,13), and he urges a welcoming posture between Jews and Gentiles in the church (15: 7-12). Located in the capital of the empire that dominated the Western world, the Roman church had a mixture of Jews and Gentiles with varying religious backgrounds, and a blend of wealthy business owners, freedmen and women, and slaves.

In 15:4 Paul addresses the Roman Christians in the spirit of Advent. He reminds his hearers that the Scriptures were given to invite enduring hope in God. This hope points them to

promises for the future while providing assurance that they are already recipients of God's grace in the present. The prayer in 15:5-6 identifies God as the God of steadfastness and encouragement. Here Paul articulates in prayer his longing for harmony among believers. One of Paul's major priorities in writing this letter was to establish the basis for relationships between Jew and Gentile in the church. The observance of dietary laws and of holy days (discussed in Rom. 14) was of crucial importance to the Jewish people trying to maintain their identity while scattered among the nations. Now the church faced the question of what, if anything, these laws meant to Gentiles who had accepted Jesus as Messiah. Instead of "we/you" arguments among them, Paul urges them to live in harmony and to glorify God with one voice. After Paul's extensive theological reflections in the earlier sections of this letter (especially Rom. 1 to 8) his hearer knows exactly what Paul means when he calls them to live in accordance with Christ Jesus (15:5). The desired oneness among diverse people can be found in Jesus Christ, whose faithfulness unto death on the cross climactically revealed God's redemptive righteousness toward all people.

In 15:7 Paul shifts into the imperative mood, urging a welcoming posture toward each other, grounded in the fact that Christ has welcomed them. Through Christ, God is shown to be truthful and faithful toward Jews and merciful toward Gentiles (15:8). In 15:9-12 Paul cites a series of scriptures, not as abstract proofs in a learned argument, but as support for building community. Although the ritual commands of the law are not binding on Gentiles, the promises of the Scriptures are given to Gentiles as much as to Jews. As final reassurance, Paul the Jewish scholar offers texts proving that even as the ancient Jews praised the God whom they did not name, they looked ahead to the day when all peoples of the world would join them in God's praise.

How does this speak to us in Advent? Few of us face deep disagreements over food choices, circumcision, or the proper day on which to worship. Like the Roman believers, however, we are part of a church with jarring diversity. The lines of division change through the years, and from generation to generation; but there are always divisions. Yet in the midst of disagreement, the life of the church goes on. Advent calls us as Christians to rest from focusing on our differences. There is a time to discuss the issues that sometimes invigorate and sometimes threaten the bonds we share. For this season, though, we look instead to the legacy of faith that we all hold in common. The promises of the past and the promises for the future are bound up for us in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah of the Jews, the Christ of the Gentiles, in whom we place our hope.

Paul also reminds us that it is in worship (note the references to praise, glorifying God, with one voice) that the church celebrates with hopefulness and joy. During Advent we anticipate Jesus' coming, knowing that Christ is already in our midst, yet awaiting also the completion of what God in Christ has begun, and participating in a worshiping and welcoming community of hope!

Jacob W. Elias

Third Sunday of Advent

Matthew 11:2-11

The reading for this third week of Advent is a companion piece to the John the Baptist text that we had last week. There are two movements within this text. The first consists of a question and an answer. John is in prison, so he is unable to come to Jesus himself. But he sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is the one they have been expecting and seeking or whether they should turn their hope elsewhere.

The question seems a bit odd in light of how sure John seemed that Jesus was the one for whom he was preparing the people of God in chapter 3. But perhaps the answer Jesus gives is the surest way into the heart of John's concern. In answer to John's question, Jesus points not to the Sermon on the Mount, the calming of the storm or the calling of the disciples—all of which have happened since he left John in the wilderness. Instead he points John to observable events of his ministry—blind people seeing, lame people walking, lepers healed, deaf hearing, dead people raised, poor people living in new hope. In light of this answer, Jesus seems to perceive John's question from prison to be a concern for the practical justice aspect of his ministry. Perhaps there are parts of the Sermon on the Mount or the other activities of Jesus' ministry that made John wonder if Jesus were over-spiritualizing the concept of the Kingdom of God. Although we cannot know exactly what is behind John's inquiry, it is interesting to note that Jesus does not seem to take amiss the implied criticism of the question. Rather he addresses it as a legitimate concern.

The second movement within the text, verses 7-13, is a resounding affirmation of John and the way he has prepared the people. Jesus takes the opportunity to point out to his followers just how great a prophet John is. He asks two rhetorical questions about what attracted them to John in the first place. The attraction was not ambivalence—a reed shaking in the wind. Political “spin” was not a characteristic one would use to describe the ministry of the wilderness baptizer. Nor was the attraction any kind of human refinement. The accouterments of culture and wealth, the fine clothes and soft ways of privilege, stayed in the houses of kings. The attraction was, rather, prophetic integrity. The crowds sought John in the wilderness for the love of truth, in hope of hearing a word from God.

Yes, John is a prophet—and, in Jesus' estimation, more than a prophet. There is no greater human being than the wilderness preacher. Paradoxically, and fully in the prophetic tradition, although no one is greater than John in the kingdom of God, the least in the kingdom is greater than John. Jesus' praise of John is loaded with reversal themes. Jesus contrasts soft clothing and king's houses with John's life in the wilderness. Finally, in the difficult final two verses of the passage (11:12, 13), which the lectionary omits, he contrasts the hierarchy of violence, the world's traditional understanding of power, with the essential egalitarianism of the kingdom of God.

Mary H. Schertz

Luke 1:26-55

There are three sections in this text: The first is the annunciation scene between Gabriel and Mary (1:26-38); the second is Mary's visit to Elizabeth (1:39-44); and then there is Mary's song, often called “The Magnificat” in 1:46-55. These vignettes not only play an important role in the story of Jesus' birth, they tell us a lot about the role Jesus would later play in the life of God's people. Along with other texts in Luke's birth narratives, they are programmatic for the gospel. They set up themes and motifs that will be important later in the gospel.

The heart of the first text, the annunciation narrative, is the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary. This dialogue happens in three scenes. The first is the angel's greeting to Mary and her response of confusion and uncertainty. The second is the annunciation itself; Gabriel tells of the baby's birth, that he will be named Jesus and that he will be great, the Son of the Most High and the heir to David's throne. To this announcement about what will happen, Mary responds with

continued uncertainty about how it will happen since she has no husband. The third scene is the angel's explanation of how these events will happen, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Gabriel then adds that Elizabeth has also conceived a son. Mary's response to this assurance and explanation is acceptance and consent to the new turn her life is taking.

Initial confusion and uncertainty in the face of an epiphany is normal in the biblical text and normal in human experience. God's visitation catches us, as Mary, in the midst of ordinary, common life and has the potential to turn our selves and our lives in new directions. Naturally, our first responses are apt to be uncertainty and confusion. But in this epiphany, the love of God is the foundation of what is being required of Mary—the first words Gabriel speaks to her are words of assurance and love. By the end of the encounter Mary is able to perceive this new direction from the perspective of trust in God's love. She accepts and consents to the annunciation.

Following her momentous encounter with God's messenger, Mary makes a journey into the hill country to visit Elizabeth. There is a delightfully feminine holy moment in this section when the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps in response to Mary's greeting, or so it seems to Elizabeth at any rate and so it is reported by the narrator. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and utters a threefold blessing—for Mary, for the baby in Mary's womb, for "she who believed" who is Mary and possibly also herself. The song known as the Magnificat is then the song that Mary sings in response to this blessing.

It is a remarkable song. It is structured in two parts. The first stanza (verses 46-49) of the song expresses Mary's private joy. It is written in the first person. Mary's emphasis is on what God has done for her. Notice that in this section Mary interprets what God has done for her as a blessing rather than as a dilemma—which it must also have been. Explaining an unexpected pregnancy as a gift of God surely had its awkward moments and surely demanded a great deal of courage from Mary.

The second stanza, verses 50-55, is written in the third person. In this part of the song, Mary makes the connection between her private joy and the blessing of God's people. In this stanza she moves from commenting on her own good fortune to commenting on the good fortune of God's people. She exults in the leveling that is a result of God's action—the rising of the humble and the falling of the mighty; the filling of the hungry, the emptying of the rich. In the miracle of her baby, in her own private joy Mary perceives the blessing of justice for the people of God.

Salvation, as it is presented in the beginning chapters of Luke, has two distinct dimensions. One component is the forgiveness of sins (1:77), but the aspect of salvation to which Mary calls our attention is the justice of God.

Mary H. Schertz

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

First note the structure of this psalm. There is a threefold refrain, the repetition is practically identical, in verses 2, 7 and 19. A similarly worded refrain occurs in verse 14. In these refrains there is a play on the word turn and return. In the refrain of verses 2, 7 and 19, the prayer is for God to return the people (the NRSV translates restore, thus missing the word play). In the refrain of verse 14, the cry is for God to turn. The returning of the people depends upon the turning of God. God's grace enables the human response.

In this psalm, the community gives voice to its sorrow at the destruction of the nation and of Jerusalem. Their grief is all the greater because of their history in which God's grace and saving action has been evident. Note the recital of past history in verses 8-14 where God's grace toward Israel is described as the growth of a luxuriant vine. The fertility of the past forms a bleak contrast with the ruins of the present. Life as they know it has come to an end.

In this situation of despair the cry comes once more to God to save Israel. This saving action is described as God once again caring for the vine. In the Hebrew, the ending of verses 15 and 17 is virtually identical. This does not show up in the NRSV which omits the second half of verse 15 (see their footnote; they regard the end of 15 to be a scribal error.) In the NJPS we find these two verses translated as follows:

the stock planted by Your right hand, the stem You have taken as Your own. (v. 15)

Grant Your help to the man at Your right hand, the one You have taken as Your own. (v.17)

In verse 15 the petition is that God would once again care for the vine which was planted by God's right hand and which was adopted as God's own. In verse 17, the parallel petition is aid for the one at God's right hand, whom God has adopted. In the restoration of the community, the community as a whole needs to become vibrant along with the leader, the one empowered by God.

In this lament, as in others, the underlying conviction is that God alone is the one who is able to save. The community is dependent upon God's grace for their existence. They do not pray to be strengthened to withstand their present trouble, nor do they ask for wisdom as to how to live in these troubled times. Rather, they cast themselves upon the mercy of God and proclaim their faithfulness to this God. (The NRSV unfortunately begins verse 18 with then. The NJPS translates more accurately, We will not turn away from You; preserve our life that we may invoke your name.) Restoration and revival of the community of faith begins with acknowledging dependence upon God and that we are not masters of our fate, nor can we fix all that is wrong.

Perry B. Yoder

Matthew 1:18-25

Luke's version of the Advent story is more popular than Matthew's version. It is more of a story—its narrative style is more palatable in many ways. Matthew is, to say the least, a no-nonsense narrator. He begins with the genealogy, a rather dry list of names and then begins the story of Jesus' birth starkly, with no preamble, no preparation for the reader at all—"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way." Unlike Luke, the focus of this account is on Joseph—the events are told from his point of view. Joseph's actions and reactions take center stage, not Mary's responses and thoughts about the event.

This story is also told from the point of view of the law—one of the reasons that scholars usually characterize Matthew's gospel as being the "most Jewish" of the gospels. Joseph is carefully described as a just man (1:19), one who takes the law seriously. He is not only a lawful man but also one who lives with the blessing of the Torah compassionately. As Christians we sometimes tend to make quick and facile assumptions about law versus grace, the Old Testament versus the New Testament. In doing so, we may consciously or unconsciously do

disservice to some of the basics of Jewish faith. The law is a blessing that God has given the people of God. It *is*, in and of itself, the grace of God. As such, it is to be practiced with compassion—sometimes even in the face of good sense. Without such compassion, the law is not the law—something that a good Jew like Joseph has learned well.

As one who understands compassion to be at the heart of the law, Joseph responds to the dismaying news that Mary is pregnant with no help from him with remarkable equanimity. The designation of Mary's baby as conceived by the Holy Spirit in verse 18 is the narrator's point of view—not Joseph's, at least not at that point. It is only in verse 20 that Joseph is told the origin of the baby. So what Joseph hears first is simply that Mary is pregnant. Since he knows he is not the father, he imagines all the usual possibilities, what any man caught in that situation would imagine. His decision is to take toward Mary the most compassionate stance he can under the circumstances. In that decision, Joseph proves himself to be a man of faith, a true practitioner of God's Torah.

Because Joseph is a man of true faith, one who understands compassion to be at the heart of the law, he is also open to the revelation God has for him in the form of a dream. The revelation has two parts. The first is very familiar—the information about the baby's conception by the Holy Spirit. This information provides the justification for Joseph's action in taking Mary as his wife—and, not incidentally, comforts and sustains Joseph for the difficult days ahead. The second part of the revelation is the information about just who this child is and what his role in the history of his people is to be. The name for the child, Jesus, which also describes his destiny, is given to Joseph. Joseph, the faithful Jew who understands how the law is to be practiced, is the one to whom the good news of Jesus is first proclaimed in the gospel of Matthew. At the end of this story, Joseph makes that name public. In naming the baby, he not only legitimizes this child of dubious birth but also becomes the first evangelist. In this gospel, he is the first public witness to the gospel.

Mary H. Schertz

Romans 1:1-7

As he begins his letter to the house churches in Rome, Paul moves immediately to a self-introduction. Ancient letters of that time normally began with an opening prescript with three components: name of sender, recipients, and a greeting. In comparison with his other letters, the "identification of sender" section in Paul's epistle to Rome is long and detailed (1:1-6). Since Paul has not yet visited Rome in person, he is evidently quite concerned to introduce himself appropriately to these believers in first century Rome.

Why focus on this text during Advent? During Advent the church captures the sense of eager anticipation of God's coming into the world in Jesus Christ. By writing this letter Paul sought to prepare for his intended visit to Rome. Might Paul's eagerness to introduce himself be viewed as something of a parallel to God's strategy of self-introduction in Jesus Christ, God's incarnational visit to humanity in the person of Jesus?

We note that Paul identifies himself first in terms of his relationship to Jesus Christ. He views himself as a servant of Jesus Christ (cf. Phil. 2:7: Jesus took the form of a servant), and then more specifically as called to be an apostle (an authorized representative of Christ). Paul also elaborates on this calling by using language reminiscent of the prophets (see Jeremiah 1:5): set apart for the gospel of God (1:1). Most of the rest of this self-introduction enlarges on the nature of the gospel of God:

God's good news has been promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures (1:2). Here Paul captures the theme of Advent; he notes the scriptural rehearsals of God's promises (as in Isaiah 7:10-16) and the longing of the people for their fulfillment. Yet Paul in the rest of Romans also testifies that God's engagement with Israel and God's promised intervention participate in the character of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which still awaits a greater fulfillment in the future!

The decisive content of the gospel of God is packaged in the One whose coming the church celebrates during the season of Advent: God's Son (1:3), Jesus Christ our Lord (1:4). Verses 3 and 4 are often considered to have been drawn from the church's early confession concerning the identity and nature of Jesus. Whether this is traditional material or composed by the apostle it is evident that Paul has deliberately chosen to portray Jesus using two sonship designations. Jesus is the Son of David; he is descended from David according to the flesh (1:3). Jesus fulfills the Jewish messianic expectations (as in Psalms 2 and 89; 2 Samuel 7) that another king in David's lineage would deliver Israel from bondage. Yet Jesus is also Son of God through being exalted as crucified and resurrected Lord: he is declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead (1:4).

These two ascriptions of Jesus as Son are not to be seen as contrasts but as testimony that Jesus as Jewish messiah is the Lord of all! Nor should flesh and Spirit be considered as two competing realms. Through Jesus in the flesh God offers new life through the Spirit of holiness!

In 1:5 Paul brings his self-introduction full circle by noting that Christ is the source of his grace and apostleship, and that his calling as apostle has as its goal to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name. The gospel of God elicits faith: not faith expressed only through confessing the right doctrines but faith, which consists of obedience and faith, which leads to obedience. During Advent, and throughout the seasons of the year, the good news of Jesus Christ invites and calls people into such obedient faith!

Jacob W. Elias

Christmas

Psalm 148

Psalm 148 is a fantastic psalm of praise. Everything that is, is summoned to praise God. The psalm divides into two parts (1-6, 7-17). In the first part we find the inhabitants of the spheres called to praise God. In the second part, those on the earth are commanded to join in. The recurring refrain, "Let them praise the name of the LORD" is found in verse 5 and 13. Following the refrain, the reasons for praise are given. After verse 5 the reasons that the inhabitants of the heavenly realm praise God is because God created them, made them everlasting, and provided an order for them.

On the earth all nature and life are to praise God because of God's uniqueness – God's fame, splendor, and care for Israel. Up to verse 14 the poem has stressed the universal and the general by the use of a poetic device called 'merismus,' in which the poet names two opposites as a way of including the whole. For example in verse 10 we find wild beasts and tame beasts, flying things and creeping things. In verse 12 we have young men and young women, old people and young people. These pairs are a poetic way of saying these things mentioned and everything that falls in between them.

However, in verse 14 the psalm gets specific. God is to be praised because of God's care for the faithful, for Israel, the people close to God. This twist from the absolute universal to the historically particular catches the problem and miracle of the incarnation. How can the God of all the earth, the God of all creatures, the God of all humankind, be the God of a particular people? Why should all things and beings praise God for what God has done for a specific people?

At this advent season we celebrate the particular, the birth of a single individual in a historically unique time. Yet we believe that this particular event has universal significance. But the universality of this event should not blind us to the universality of God both before and after Jesus' birth. All are called to praise God in the hymn, whether they are part of God's people or not. In Jesus' birth we find a new reason why all humanity should praise God.

Unfortunately, sometimes people want to take the particular and keep it particular. They want exclusion rather than inclusion. They praise God for what God has done for them, not believing that God is worthy of praise by all.

This powerful hymn has had an influential history. The hymn used by the three Hebrew boys before being cast into the furnace was modeled on our psalm (this psalm is found in the Apocrypha). It also served as a model for St Francis' "Canticle to the Sun," which in turn led to the hymn "All Creatures of our God and King."

Perry Yoder

Isaiah 63:7-9

These three verses from Isaiah 63 form the introduction to a prayer of confession and lament that extends through the end of chapter 64. The longer portion of this prayer, from 63:10 on, appeals to God for deliverance, for salvation--from internal conflicts that rend the community (63:16; cf. 66:5), from desolation (64:10), and especially from God's own furious and severe absence (64:5-7, 12). But the beginning of this prayer, its introduction in 63:7-9, consists in confession--not confession of sin, but confession, profession, of *what God has done*, and thus of who God is. Herein lies Israel's only hope, and ours.

The Isaiah who speaks in v. 7 announces his aim: to call to collective memory, to *recollect* publicly, what the Lord has done. But in the Hebrew text (so also in the Greek version) the *what* precedes the announced aim. The very first term in v. 7 is "the gracious deeds (*hesed*) of the Lord" (NRSV) or "the steadfast love (*hesed*) of the Lord" (NIV). Translators and generations of scholars have struggled to define the Hebrew word *hesed*, which occurs frequently and prominently in the Old Testament. Our text, even v. 7 itself, provides some clues. First, the *hesed* (plural) of the Lord elicit praises of the same Lord. Second, the Lord's *hesed* is demonstrated in what God has accomplished, which amounts to great goodness or favor graciously granted to God's people. Third, all of this derives from and constitutes God's own "mercies," which we should understand as divine, loving, freely-granted compassion. And fourth, all of this together constitutes *God's hesed*--the first and the last word of Isa 63:7. In other words, God's own self defines *hesed*, and *hesed* names a defining feature of God's own self. In Exod 34:6, God gives explicit, self-defining testimony: I am "a God merciful... rich in *hesed*" and in forgiveness.

The KJV's translators, in 1611, rendered *hesed* as "lovingkindness." They got it about right. It's all about--it all depends on--God's own freely given and never-ending, ever faithful, self-giving love.

The second verse in our text, Isa 63:8, coordinates God's determination with his expectation. The expectation seems natural. Given who God is, as demonstrated in God's faithful, merciful, self-giving, liberating love freely extended to the people who are God's just in virtue of this divine love, God expects that these people will not prove faithless--faithless to their Savior. Still, and first of all, God determines to be and does become their Savior. God's faithfulness, and so God's salvation, deriving from and expressing who God is, precedes everything else. How could anything less than faithful praise, on our part, follow?

The final verse, Isa 63:9, further defines God's *hesed*, and thus God's self, in terms of love and compassion. And it does so by way of an extraordinary identification: Israel's oppression (or affliction) God experienced--should we say "suffered?"-- as His own. In this mutual affliction, this suffering, God did remain powerless. The text speaks of "the angel of his presence." Routinely, in the Old Testament, God's "angel" is an instrument, a vessel, an embodiment of God's own presence in power. Here, that powerful presence of God is exercised in love and mercy, for the purposes of redemption--to lift up and to carry those with no power, no strength, no capacity of their own, but whom God *reclaims* as His own...as their only Savior.

Christmas celebrates the most extraordinary identification of "God with us," the very name Immanuel. Here, embodied and proclaimed, is God's *hesed*, the triune God's lovingkindness, enduring and limitless and self-giving and loving faithfulness...and here, just here, is our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Ben C. Ollenburger

Matthew 2:13-23

This Christmas story from Matthew is a somber one—one that most preachers and teachers will likely avoid in the joyous celebration of Advent's climax in the nativity. It comes right after the more familiar and more broadly used story of the magi from the East come to worship the baby King. As the sages offer the child the treasures they have brought with them and take their leave, the narrative turns dark. Joseph, warned in another dream that the young family is in danger, takes Mary and Jesus and escapes to Egypt.

While the family is in Egypt, their every fear is fully realized as Herod murders all the male babies and toddlers in Bethlehem and its surrounding areas. As readers we sometimes tend to overlook or downplay this horror. The passage itself contrasts the miraculous saving of the baby Jesus with the cruel fate of the other boy children in Bethlehem. So we may breathe a collective sigh of relief—our baby is safe, shallow though that rejoicing may be. But, in addition to that somewhat inappropriate response, we sometimes misread verse 17 where Matthew describes the infanticide as fulfilling a word from the prophet Jeremiah. We misread this verse if we understand Herod's murder of the children to be God's will because Jeremiah the prophet foretold it. That is not the way biblical prophecy works. Matthew, the evangelist, fully laments Herod's sin by invoking Jeremiah's image of Rachel's sorrow. Rachel, the ancestral mother, was buried near Bethlehem according to one tradition. Invoking her and her wailing grief constitutes a metaphor of protest rather than acquiescence. Herod's action marks him as an unworthy king of Israel and puts him in the line of those in Israel who have historically resisted God's attempts to call the people to faithfulness down through the ages. As Ulrich Luz notes, "Herod cannot be a true king of the Jews if he kills Israel's children because of Jesus." Luz goes on to note that the point of view of the gospel is that the rejection of Jesus is not a failure of Judaism but the failure of Jews to be true Jews.

There is danger; there is evil. The story of the good news of Jesus' birth does not sugar coat that reality. The danger and evil are present within the Jewish community as well as outside of it—and the resistance to Jesus and his way of peace will continue from his birth to his death. But that resistance does not go unlamented—and it does not ultimately thwart God's designs for God's people. Herod dies, no more immune from that end than the lowliest peasant, and it is safe for Joseph to take Mary and their son and return to Israel. Not to Bethlehem, where they must have wanted to return, because Herod's son is now reigning. In Joseph's eyes, Archelaus is only marginally better than his father. So they retreat to Galilee where they feel safer—and even that second choice is seen by the evangelist to be part of God's care for the child and his parents.

Mary Schertz

Hebrews 2:10-18

The choice of this Hebrews text as one of the Christmas passages is an interesting one. There are, of course, some appropriate cautions to keep in mind when using it for preaching and teaching—especially in conjunction with the "slaughter of the innocents" text from Matthew that is paired with it for the New Testament readings. Used carelessly, it can contribute to an over reliance upon substitutionary atonement theology as our one, overarching and often rather shallow understanding of the cross. There are many ways to understand the cross in the New Testament and, in fact, the central motif of this text might be more accurately described as sacrifice rather than substitution.

A second and more serious caution is that, especially when paired with the Matthew reading, this text can contribute to a kind of glorification of suffering or seeing suffering as somehow acceptable if not noble. Feminist and other liberation theologians have rightly alerted us to the oppression that can result from such thinking. Domestic abuse is still a problem in our churches. Pastors and other church leaders have a responsibility to keep the abused women to whom they minister in mind when using biblical texts on suffering.

Having said that, however, the passage has some interesting insights on the meaning and significance of the incarnation that we celebrate in the Christmas season. The suffering that is discussed is not just any suffering. Most of the suffering we experience as human beings does not fit the category here. Rather it is specific suffering that is taken on voluntarily and taken on specifically in solidarity with common humanity. A close reading of the passage reveals that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus is not a victimization but a chosen identification with the plight of human beings. Jesus is one of the people. The author of Hebrews uses a variety of familial language to describe the incarnation. Jesus has a human name that he uses because he is a “brother” among siblings. As a named human being he stands in the congregation with the people, praising God with the people. The statement of Jesus’ solidarity with the whole of humanity could not be stated more clearly—“he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin’ (2:11). Throughout this text it is the humanity of Jesus that is being emphasized.

The purpose of this unique conjoining of the divine and the human is to defeat the power of death and the human fear of death that preoccupies us, binding us to all sorts of futile attempts to put off, get around or otherwise distract us from our unrelenting mortality. Toward this purpose, Jesus in this text is both the one who suffers and the high priest who oversees and administrates the rite of atonement and, thereby, helps the people live in relationship with God (2:17-18). It is a complex image, this multi-faceted portrait of sacrifice and priest in one. But the clear and central teaching is that Jesus was no hapless victim in a cosmic game played out between the devil and God. What is important to remember this Christmas day is that the purpose of the incarnation we celebrate is God’s age-old desire that the people he created move beyond our mortal fear and join in the life of the Kingdom with vigor and joy—salvation.

Mary Schertz

Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Before moving into commentary on the passages for Epiphany, it is worth reviewing the various theological strands woven around this day (January 6). Epiphany (which means appearing or manifestation) was being celebrated by Christians early in the third century. It predates the Western Church’s Christmas date by about a century. Three events narrated in the gospels (the coming of the wise men, Jesus’ baptism, and the wedding at Cana) were associated with this celebration. Through these accounts Christians saw evidence of God’s manifestation in Jesus. Other lectionary texts eventually were added to these key accounts. Both the Isaiah and Psalm 72 readings end at somewhat odd places when taken at the level of the text. However, when Epiphany is used as an interpretive key, the choice of verses makes more sense: Jesus, the Redeeming Messiah prefigured in these texts, has come and God is revealed through him.

Isaiah 60-62 forms a unit within the final section of Isaiah (chapters 56-66). They triumphantly describe the restoration of Zion through God’s intervention. Chapter 60 opens with quite a different tone from the one heard in Chapter 59; it is a rhapsody of promise and fulfillment. Verse 1 summons Zion to wake up and greet God’s glory rising on her like the sun. Though there is darkness like nightfall surrounding this city on a hill, God’s light is bringing a new day to the place that had been God’s habitation in earlier times. It is significant to notice that God’s light is dawning on the city (“your” here is a feminine possessive agreeing in gender with city or Zion), one filled with inhabitants of course, but whose citizens are secondary in importance at the beginning of this chapter. God’s glory is making Zion holy ground. The brilliance of the light will draw other nations and kings to witness the radiant glory surrounding the city.

Verses 4-6 describe the ingathering of people returning or being drawn to Zion. Sons and daughters who have religious or familial connections to the city are coming home. Some people bring offerings from the sea (whether this is restricted to the actual fruits of sea life or extends to goods brought by ship [see verse 9] is unclear). Other people bring goods from as far away

as Sheba (today's Yemen) in such abundance that the city is covered with their gift-toting camels. Their gifts to the city of glory signify their praise of God. Verse 7 continues the theme of offering, specifically rams that would be acceptable on the altar of God's dwelling place. (The omission of this verse in the suggested reading makes sense if one bears in mind the Christocentric nature of Epiphany and the Christian belief that Christ has fulfilled the requirement for sacrifice.) These verses picture an abundance of people and gifts flowing into Zion, not because the inhabitants of Zion deserve this outpouring (see the preceding chapters if this is in doubt) or because the city in and of itself is such a wonderful place. This abundance comes to Zion because God's glory has transformed it; people are come to her bringing great wealth as a response to God's luminous presence.

Several interesting translation differences show up between the NIV and NRSV in this passage. The NRSV uses the future verb tense (shall) in all cases except verse 1a and 4a where the present tense is used in the imperative mood. The text leaves the sense that God's new day is a present reality but as a morning that breaks leisurely. The NIV uses the present tense in verses 1, 2, 4 and the future tense (will) in the remaining verses. This rendering is more emphatic with a greater sense of urgency and confidence. It is almost breathless in exuberance.

The word "Zion" has become layered with meanings over the generations. The origins of the words are not certain, but it appears to have identified a particular geological feature in the terrain. Later it identified 1) a fortification on the crest of a hill, 2) the area also known as the City of David which eventually included the temple area where the ark of the covenant was set, 3) Jerusalem and thus considered a religious and political center, 4) the people of Jerusalem as a collective group, and 5) the heavenly Jerusalem. (See the Interpreter's Bible Dictionary for more information.) It may be hard for contemporary Christians to hear more discrete aspects of this word in the text through these cumulated meanings. When reading English translations it's easy to think that God's glory is dawning primarily on the people, especially if one reads directly from chapter 59 into chapter 60. The context of the entire chapter makes it clear that God light has come first to the city.

These verses (along with the rest of chapter 60) reveal a picture of Zion that is nearly contradicted by the sad state of current affairs in Jerusalem. The glory of God seems hidden behind the clouds of distrust, belligerence, and violence. Central to the announcement of chapter 60 is that God has acted on the city despite the actions of her people. Zion's new day is God's gift and the fulfillment of a promise. It was not arranged by political negotiations or diplomatic maneuverings. Perhaps our prayers for peace in Jerusalem miss the mark. Perhaps we should pray for God's light to manifest itself in Jerusalem as promised in Chapter 60 so peoples whose religious home is Zion and those from other nations and faiths will be drawn to the radiant glory of God. And should we be courageous enough to pray for God's new dawning, may we be attentive and trusting enough to perceive it.

Rebecca Slough

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

The psalms appointed for each Sunday's lectionary readings are intended to pick up or extend themes heard in the Old Testament reading. In Isaiah 60 God reestablishes the peace and righteousness of Zion; this psalm describes the nature of its just and righteous ruler. Reading all verses from 1 to 14 would be fine. Given the overall intent of the psalm and its connection with Isaiah 60 for Epiphany, it would be fitting to include verses 18-19 when reading the text for worship. .

Psalm 72 is considered by many scholars to be in the category of royal psalms, which have Israel's king as the central topic. This psalm is believed to have been composed before the exile. Along with the other so-called royal psalms (Ps 2, 89, 110) it makes clear the relationship between God as the universal sovereign and the early king. It is no surprise that early Christians saw in Psalm 72 a prefigurement of Jesus. "Joy to the world" is Isaac Watts' hymn based on it.

The sections of the psalm appointed in the lectionary listing petitions God to grant the king the gifts of justice and righteousness so that he may govern rightly. Verses 2, 4, 12-14 emphasize the king's administrative authority for redressing the needs of the poor and oppressed people of Israel. Verses 8-11 pray for the king's dominion to extend beyond the boundaries of Israel. The just and righteous rule of the king affects the natural world making the mountains and hills prosper for the good of all people (verses 3, 6-7).

The NRSV uses "May he..." throughout verses 1-11 shifting to the present tense in verses 12-14 where declarations of the king's righteous acts are made. This suggests that the king delivers, pities, saves, and redeems those in need now. Because of this current action, the fulfillment of their prior petitions can be grounded in the hope. The NIV uses the future "He will..." in verses 1-14 implying that the king will fulfill these righteous acts as a result of God's gifts of justice and righteousness. In footnotes each translation indicates the validity of the other's rendering.

The NRSV opens the psalm with the petition "Give the king your justice, O God." The NIV opens with "Endow the king with your justice, O God." Other translations equally use "give" and "endow." The subtle difference in the word choice is interesting. Giving the king justice and righteousness can suggest that these qualities for governing are handed over or offered as one might hand over a crown or scepter. They are significant "tools" of authority and power. While the idea of God "giving" the king justice and righteousness does not preclude the possibility that the king's character can be transformed, this is not an obvious meaning for the word. To endow the king with justice and righteousness implies that these gifts are taken into the fabric of the king's character becoming a part of his way of governing. Acting justly and righteously is integral to the king's way of being.

The social picture presented in this psalm demonstrates the interconnected relationships between God and the king, the king and his people, the king's rule and the natural world. When these various sets of relationships are aligned properly, peace and prosperity are by-products of justice. And when peace and prosperity prevail, the nations are blessed through the king (vs. 17b).

Righteousness in Old Testament understanding is more specific and less legalistic than most of our current notions of the word. To act righteously was to fulfill obligations within one's social network of relationships, that is, to act rightly toward those people to whom one is accountable. While these obligations may be in keeping with laws governing human interactions, they are not limited to matters of law. For the king to act righteously, he was to use his power and authority to "make right" relationships within his domain. There may have been clear legal reasons for why poor and needy people lived in the realm. But such legalities did not exempt the king from righteous action that would reinstate the well being of people suffering as a result of poverty or violence. The righteous and just king is not simply a manager of the various affairs of state, setting policy and maintaining law and order. He actually could disrupt legal systems and processes to restore to full humanity those people in his domain whose relationships had been distorted by the powerful. Their blood is precious in his sight. (See Interpreter's Bible Dictionary for more information.)

The king of the psalm is called to exercise God's gifts of righteousness and justice for the sake of his people. They pray for God to give or endow him with "your justice ... your righteousness." These are not gifts of the king's making; not attributes of his own creation. The psalm does not suggest that the king should govern righteously and justly so he can "cover his bases," "save his own skin," or "bolster his approval rating." The king's continuing reign, with all its rights and responsibilities, is not the end to which righteousness and justice are exercised. These powerful gifts are for saving and redeeming the "little people" of Israel.

The messianic qualities of this psalm foreshadow Jesus as the ideal king, the supreme sovereign in whom justice and righteousness are perfected. But, the exuberance of the psalm might leave a hollow ring in the hearts of some worshipers, and not only because of the exclusive "king" imagery. This interpretation of the psalm opens a sticky theological question:

why do suffering, racism, oppression, poverty, abuse and violence continue to plague human beings if the supremely just and righteous ruler, Jesus, has been revealed and reigns among us?

For Israel and for us this psalm remains a prayer of hope. The reign of Davidic kings fell short of the justice and righteousness for which the people fervently prayed. Leaders ever since have fallen short as well. The reality of peace and prosperity for which the psalm sings has yet to break fully into any place in the world. But the signs identifying their presence in our midst are seen in glimpses and shadows. Those among us blessed to see and believe these fleeting peeks at shalom continue to pray with anticipation.

Rebecca Slough

Matthew 2:1-12

The gospel text for Epiphany, the church's festival of light, is the familiar journey of the magi to worship the tiny King of the Jews in Jerusalem. This text, in Matthew 2:1-12, is also one of the most starkly political texts in the New Testament—a reality that often seems to get lost in the general slosh of sentimentality that marks North American Christmas celebrations.

Wise strangers from the East set Jerusalem afire with gossip when they start asking about a baby king they have sought by following the light of a star. The other king, the grownup one meanwhile on the throne in Jerusalem, has his ways of knowing what happens in his city. This news troubles him—not that he hasn't heard these messianic expectations before—but the arrival of the wise ones and their inquiries make it a more immediate concern. His response to the possibility of a small rival in Bethlehem is to set in motion a treacherous plan to use the ardor of the sages for his own nefarious purposes. It is a plan that is thwarted by the sages, at least in its most immediate purpose. They heed the warning they receive in a dream, a warning surely supported by their own perceptions and misgivings, and return to their own country without informing Herod of the whereabouts of the child.

There are two things about this simple story that continue to take my breath away. One is the integrity to the light maintained by the sages. These are not peasants—the clues in the text indicate that they are people of power and wealth. They cause a stir when they come to Jerusalem. People notice them. They come to the attention of the king in ways that not everyone coming into Jerusalem does, no matter what they ask. They have treasures to open and lay before the baby when they find him. Yet, even though Herod sweeps them into his court, flatters them with his questions and his need of their help, they stay true to the purposes of God. They honor the light they have followed so long rather than succumbing to Herod's attention—making their homeward journey a precarious one. They take courage in hand and disobey the reigning king to protect the baby king they came to honor.

The other is the sheer terror of the principalities and powers that is unleashed against the light that we celebrate on this Sunday. A boy child under two and some unruly sages completely upset the reigning monarch in Jerusalem. He is enraged. We cannot read the story of the wily magi and their protection of the infant Jesus without attending to the pain of the other families in Bethlehem who lost their baby boys to Herod's rampage. It is a sobering account of how fragile the emotional balance of those in power is. The baby king of the Jews posed no real, political threat to Herod—then or later. His rage is completely out of proportion to the reality. But what havoc and sorrow the parents of Bethlehem suffered as a result of his paranoia.

And so the light shines—on through the centuries—at great cost. Epiphany is a time to recognize both the light and the darkness it illuminates.

Mary H. Schertz

Ephesians 3:1-12

On the Sunday following Christmas congregations often focus on the Lukan narratives about Jesus' birth. On Epiphany Sunday the church normally turns to Matthew's story about the visit of the Magi from the distant east. When the stately visitors from the east show up with their

gifts for the Christ child the message is clear. Jesus' birth receives notice and acclaim far beyond what would have been expected, given his humble origins as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem to a teenage mom displaced by Caesar's decree. The birth of Jesus has implications not only for the people of Israel but also for all the peoples and nations of the world.

The epistolary text for Epiphany Sunday is Ephesians 3:1-13. This passage naturally presents itself for this occasion since it dwells on an expansive vision of the gospel as encompassing both Jews and Gentiles within the embrace of God's marvelous grace. In Ephesians 2 this inclusive portrait of God's embrace has already been painted in vivid strokes. Both members of *the commonwealth of Israel* and those who had formerly been *strangers to the covenants of promise* (c.f. 2:12) have now become *citizens with the saints* (2:19) and *members of the household of God* (2:20).

Ephesians 3:1 introduces Paul reflecting gratefully and with awe on this cosmic turn of events—including his role in announcing this revolutionary gospel. Paul is characterized as *a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles* (3:1), an indication of his own special calling as apostle to the Gentiles to make the gospel known beyond his own Jewish people.

The word "epiphany" does not occur in this text. However, Paul's privileged preview of the gospel includes the theme of revelation, the unveiling of God's all-encompassing grace: ... *you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation* (3:2,3). The word *mystery* appears three times within a few verses: Ephesians 3:3,4,9. God has now revealed what had been previously kept hidden from human view and comprehension. Imbedded within these reflections are some of the most exalted of all the claims concerning what God is about. The mystery of the inclusion of the Gentiles is elaborated in a sweeping portrayal of the salvation drama, in which the proclamation of the gospel has a strategic role: *In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.* (3:5-6)

After further reflections about Paul's role in bringing the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles (3:7-9) the grandiose intention of God (*who created all things*, 3:9) is articulated: ... *so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.* (3:10) What the author describes as *the eternal purpose* being accomplished in *Christ Jesus our Lord* (3:11) obviously includes a strategic role for the church.

An Epiphany message on Ephesians 3 which weaves into it themes from Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi might well highlight the awe and mystery of God's still unfolding purpose, a purpose which includes the church and elicits both adoration and obedience. This purpose is

- * Previously hidden within God's wise plan for the ages
- * Now revealed in Jesus Christ through the gospel, through whom people of every tribe and people and nation can become fellow heirs of God's grace
- * Glimpsed by the foreigners from the east, and clearly communicated by the prophets and the apostles, including the imprisoned apostle Paul
- * Now made known through the church in an ongoing Epiphany of the inclusive Gospel, which addresses all peoples, including the rulers and the authorities!

Jacob W. Elias