Commentaries on Advent Lectionary Scripture Texts for Year C

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 25:1-10
These verses of Psalm 25 form an acrostic pattern. Most of the verses begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with aleph and concluding with taw. Such devices are usually considered to be part of the repertoire of wisdom writers. In any case, the psalm is united by the themes of *waiting* and *path*.

First the theme of *waiting and trust*. Already in the second verse we find a statement of trust. Along with trust comes the plea that the psalmist not be disappointed – a better translation than the NRSV's "be put to shame." The psalmist hopes that trust has been placed in the right one, namely God. In the next verse, verse 3, we find the element of waiting. Trust and waiting go hand in hand – to trust in God is to wait on God; to wait on God is to trust in God.

Verses 5 and 21 also stress the waiting of the psalmist. In verse 5 the psalmists asks for God's guidance on the way – "direct me along the way" might be a good translation, since the verb used here is from the same root as the word *way* or *path.* Looking to God is not passive, but waiting and trust manifest themselves by living in the right way. In verse 21 the hope is that integrity and uprightness will protect the psalmist while looking to God for guidance.

As suggested, wait and hope are not only abstract notions for the psalmist but express themselves in learning the right way and walking in it. This brings us to the second theme, *path,* introduced In verses 4 and 5. Verses 8, 9, 10, and 12 continue this theme. Verse 4 is a general request, followed by the specific "lead me by your truth" (rather than in your truth) in verse 5.

Along with the request for direction on the right path we find a parallel plea – that God's mercy and faithfulness will be shown to the psalmist. We do not always do the right, so along with the need for guidance comes the need for forgiveness. It is also the case that walking on the right path may not always be enjoyable and popular; note verses 16-19.

The time of advent is a time of expectancy, a time of waiting and hoping. One of the lessons of this psalm is that we are not to be twiddling our thumbs while looking to God, as if we are just marking time until God does something. Rather, expectant waiting involves both trust in God and walking according to truth. We might think of expectant waiting as active waiting – living as a sign of trust in God and expectancy for what God will accomplish.

Given the commercialism and busyness of the Christmas season, it takes discipline to find in this time a space for expectant living.

Perry Yoder

Jeremiah 33:14–16
The prophetic lection for Advent's first Sunday draws from Jeremiah, a book ringing with announcements of judgment against Judah. Like Israel before it, Judah had proven faithless to Yhwh, pursuing other gods (Jeremiah 2–4). And also like Israel, Judah suffered defeat and destruction at the hands of an international aggressor, in this case Babylon. Jeremiah devoted much anguished energy trying to persuade the people of Judah that Babylon was God's own purifying instrument. Trying to resist Babylon was futile: God had given Judah and Jerusalem

into the hands of Nebuchadrezzar, Babylon's king, because Judah and especially its kings had abandoned Yhwh and the practice of justice (Jer 22:13-17; 27:5-11). Indeed, Jeremiah argued that Babylon's king, Nebuchadrezzar, was God's servant (Jer 25:9)!

But Jeremiah denied that this arrangement was permanent. Judgment was not God's last word, and God's purposes with Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon were limited. They were limited to seventy years. In chapter 29, within a letter written to Jewish exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah proclaims God's "promise" to bring them back to Jerusalem, when Babylon's seventy years have expired. What the NRSV renders as "my promise" and the NIV "my gracious promise" is, in Hebrew, "my good word." It is that good word, that gracious promise of God that our lectionary text reiterates: "I will put into effect the good word that I spoke to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah" (Jer 33:14, my translation). Our text, part of a larger unit comprising 33:14-18, goes on to announce that God's purposes for the future do not rest with any Nebuchadrezzar. To the contrary, God promises include a "righteous branch" for David (33:15).

This promise harks back to chap. 23, vv. 5-9, where God first promised to "establish for David a righteous branch" (v. 5). The term "branch" in both passages means something like "descendant," as when we speak of a family tree with different branches. But this will be a living branch, whom God will cause to "spring up:" literally, to sprout! He will be a righteous descendant of David. The imagery here has two senses. First, the term "righteous branch" has the sense of "legitimate king." In other words, Judah and Israel will no longer be ruled by alien oppressors like Nebuchadrezzar. But second, the branch—the coming king—will also do righteousness. The second half of v. 15 makes this clear: the coming king, the branch or scion of David, "will execute righteousness and justice in the land." That is, not only will the land be free from foreign aggressors, but the Davidic branch will do what is right and make equitable judgments.

As a consequence, Judah will be safe (that is, "saved") and Jerusalem will dwell securely (Jer 33:16). Moreover, Jerusalem will receive a new name: "Yhwh is our righteousness." Interestingly, in the earlier passage, the name of the branch himself will changed to "Yhwh is our righteousness" (23:5). In both cases, God does right, proving true to his promises. Jerusalem's security and the just rule of David's branch will be the proof—the proof of God's good word, which will not pass away (Luke 21:33).

Readings for the first Sunday of Advent draw our attention and our hope to God's final triumph, God's consummate act of righteousness (see the gospel reading from Luke 21). Jeremiah 33:14-16 does that, even as it speaks of Jerusalem's security or safety. Does any city on earth today more tragically symbolize the absence of security, of safety, than does Jerusalem? Does any place on earth more powerfully evoke the hope of God's coming reign of righteousness and justice than does the ground on which Jeremiah stood to utter God's promises? But at the same time, when Jeremiah speaks of the coming Branch, we Christians cannot avoid thinking of Christ's first advent—of the birth of Jesus, son of David. And properly so. For that first Advent, that birth, that incarnation of God, is the birth of our hope.

The violence and oppression of this age, and those who rule it, have their limits. On the first Sunday of Advent, we pray for God's reign of righteousness and justice, through the one who came and will come: David's righteous Branch.

Ben C. Ollenburger

Luke 21:25–36

December 3 is the first Sunday in Advent and thus the first Sunday in the church year. The season of Advent is marked by expectation-expectation for the first and second coming of Jesus. We often associate Advent with the coming of Christmas—and properly so, for it is at Christmas that we celebrate the first coming of Jesus. But the season of Advent invites Christians not only to look forward to Christmas, but also to awaken in each soul and each Christian community the seed of hope that longs for God's redemption of the world. It is a time of expectation, of looking forward to the ultimate triumph of God, when God will redeem all

creation and make all things new. Thus, the church year begins with the heart-felt cry that concludes the New Testament, “Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday in Advent comes from Luke’s version of the “synoptic apocalypse,” which is paralleled in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. This Sunday’s reading contains three sections:

1. Verses 25-28 speak of the coming of the Son of Man, which will be accompanied by cosmic signs, distress among the nations, and an ultimate redemption of God’s people.
2. Verses 29-33 consist of the parable of the fig tree. The fig tree itself is a kind of “sign” of God’s coming Reign and a version of this parable appears in all three of the synoptic apocalypses.
3. Verses 34-36 conclude this section with a lesson on the proper ethical implications that derive from the apocalyptic revelation just described.

In popular speech, the words apocalypse and apocalyptic communicate death, violence, and cosmic catastrophe. But the words actually derive from a Greek word that means revelation or revealing. Thus, the synoptic apocalypses are compact narratives about the revelation of God in the final triumph-a revelation that makes all the difference now, in the present.

The Christian doctrine of end-times is called “eschatology.” There are varying eschatological views in the New Testament. On the one end of the spectrum is the “realizing” eschatology of the Fourth Gospel, which emphasizes the present reality of the “eschaton” in which God’s powerful presence transforms the present without reference to the future (cf. John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent,” or John 11:25, “I am the resurrection”). On the other end is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, which looks forward to the Day of the Lord, which has not yet come (cf. esp. 2:2-3).

So how does this “preach”? Many pastors in today’s postmodern world hardly know what to do with eschatology, which seems to depend on pre-modern ideas, let alone modern ones! Yet when eschatology is properly understood as the proclamation of God’s transforming presence in the world, it opens up to the preacher the wonderful possibility of participating in the universe-creating activity of hope. Preaching is thus an opportunity to be a co-creator with God in the ministry of hope, which is no mean thing, but is capable of creating (or revealing!) alternative universes totally unseen by those who consider themselves enlightened by the politics of so-called realism. Some texts lend themselves to quite specific practical instruction. This text lends itself to the painting of the big picture: to the kind of sermon that inspires even as it shapes a worldview transformed by an awareness of the inbreaking presence and power of God.

Luke’s description of the cosmic signs of distress (Luke 21:25-28) sounds ominous and could cause some Christians to fear the future. However, Luke himself reports the preaching of Peter at Pentecost, which reports those cosmic signs as having already occurred in the first century (Acts 2:19-21). The coming of the Son of Man in a cloud is a direct reference to Daniel 7:13, which became a centerpiece of apocalyptic hope in Jesus’ day.

Much Christian preaching on eschatology envisions a Christian ethic that is based on a future-only eschatology, rather than on the broader already/not yet eschatological tension of the New Testament as a whole. As a result, the future coming of the Son of Man is treated as sanction for getting right with God now. Although a future-oriented eschatology is envisioned in the New Testament and getting right with God is always an appropriate thing to do, this view of the function of eschatology in Christian life and preaching is too limited and does not take seriously enough the breadth and richness of New Testament teaching in this regard or the power of God to transform the world in the present. It is not just that “being ready” for the future means behaving oneself in the present; it is that a revelation of God’s triumph transforms present existence in light of what God has done, is doing, and will do.

Luke separates Jesus’ words about the coming destruction of Jerusalem (21:5-24) from his words about the coming end of the world (21:25-36) in a way that Mark does not (cf. Luke’s intentional omission of the phrase, “in those days”; Mark 13:24). Nevertheless, even Luke implies that the eschaton is not only a future event, but also a present one. First, the signs and

portents listed in Luke 21:25 are cited in Acts 2 as having already occurred. Second, the fig tree parable emphasizes the signs and nearness of God's Reign in "this generation" (i.e., Jesus' generation). Third, this revelation is intended to lead to a different quality of life in the present (21:34).

Eschatological visions that are exclusively futurist tend to reflect an anemic sense of God's transforming power in the present. This is certainly true of the vision reflected in the Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. In that series, Christians exhibit much the same character as that reflected in the fallen order of creation: they lie, they deceive, and they even kill in the name of God! Although the books may be entertaining, they are built on the same might-makes-right domination myth that has informed most successful fiction in the Western world. LaHaye and Jenkins' vision of the future has little in common with Jesus' vision of life in God's Reign (Matthew 5-7).

Taken as a whole, the New Testament maintains a creative tension between the "already" of the transformed life of realized eschatology and the "not yet" of future eschatology, which awaits decisive transformation in the future. It sees the coming triumph of God as the natural and inevitable consequence of the victory that God has already won through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, that victory is not simply a portent of things to come, but is already transforming God's creation, including the church, through the applied power of the resurrection, though in imperfect and incomplete ways. New Testament eschatology is ultimately about allowing the hope of God's activity in history to transform one's understanding of life in the present in such a way that God's spirit can empower God's people to live as if God's Reign were fully present and thus transform that present into the first-fruits of God's restored creation.

In the end, be alert (but not fearful or defensive). Do not let your hearts be weighed down with dissipation or drunkenness or the worries of this day (and thus miss what God is doing in the present). And do not let the Day of the Lord catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. Rather, live in the reality of the Day of the Lord in the present, for it represents the reality of God's will done on earth, as it is in heaven. This is the river of life; let all who are thirsty come. And come, Lord Jesus!

For further reading in preparation for dealing with eschatology, I recommend the following:

Armageddon and the Peaceable Kingdom, by Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1999).

"Armageddon and Satan's Six-Pack: A Pastoral Response," by John Dey, chap. 27 in *Apocalypticism and Millennialism: Shaping a Believers Church Eschatology for the Twenty-First Century,* ed. Loren L. Johns (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2000), pp. 386-394. This chapter contains specific suggestions for how to preach on eschatological themes in the believers church tradition, including suggestions on how to prepare a congregation for Advent.

"Facing Revelation's Beasts: The Opportunities and Challenges of Pastoral Ministry at the Edge of History," by Loren L. Johns, chap. 25 in *Apocalypticism and Millennialism,* pp. 364-379.

The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide, by Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, and Richard V. Pierard (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture, by Paul Boyer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

"Assessing the 'Left Behind' Phenomenon," by Daniel Hertzler, chap. 24 in *Apocalypticism and Millennialism,* pp. 353-363.

Loren L. Johns

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

For the third time in the pastoral letter that we know as 1 Thessalonians Paul here offers a prayer of thanksgiving to God (3:9; previously 1:2; 2:13). Paul's priestly ministry of intercession in behalf of this fledgling congregation in Thessalonica is framed within praise and

thanksgiving. As Paul's rhetorical question in 3:9-10 attests, this attitude of gratitude comes from a pastoral heart which feels both joy and concern.

Earlier in the letter Paul refers to the Thessalonian believers themselves as our hope, joy, and crown of boasting (2:19) and he adds, You are our glory and joy! (2:20) The witness and worship of this congregation, whose initial reception of the gospel was accompanied by both affliction and joy (1:6), testifies to the eschatological glory already made known in Christ.

But the note of grave concern in 3:10 demonstrates the "not yet" dimension of the Thessalonian's experience of eschatological glory. His prayer report indicates that Paul has been praying earnestly for a reunion with the congregation in order that he might supply what is lacking in their faith.

In 3:11-13 Paul offers an intercessory prayer, one of several such prayers included at various transitions within the letter (5:23-24; 5:28). Like a pastoral prayer within congregational worship, this prayer gathers up the present concerns of both pastor and people in a way which recapitulates their past experiences and anticipates the future. This summation of past and present in light of the future is especially appropriate as an emphasis during Advent:

As he has already reported (3:10), Paul's eager desire to make his way back to Thessalonica (3:11) is motivated by the longing to supply what is lacking in their faith. For Paul faith refers to much more than giving mental assent to a set of doctrines or beliefs. Timothy had been dispatched back to Thessalonica to establish these new converts in their faith in the face of persecution (3:3-5). Life for these believers had been hard. Some among them had already died (4:13), possibly a result of sporadic official opposition. Paul longed to strengthen these believers in their faith and faithfulness by urging them to trust God to preserve them in their ongoing affliction.

Within their congregational life these believers also needed to grow in love and holiness (3:12-13a). In 4:1-8 Paul affirms the evidence of their holiness in sexual matters and urgently exhorts them to avoid immorality. Similarly in 4:11-12 he commends their love within the community and urges them on to greater love.

The eschatological perspective is brought home in 3:13b. The Thessalonians' faith (3:8,9) and their love and holiness (3:12-13a) are viewed from the perspective of the Christian hope: at the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints. The nature of this coming becomes the subject of Paul's pastoral teaching and admonition in 4:13-5:11, and misinformation about it occasions much of 2 Thessalonians, especially 2:1-12.

An Advent sermon on this text needs to invite the congregation:

- to review the past and pray for increased faithfulness in facing divisive and seductive influences which tear at the fabric of family and congregational life;
- to reflect on the present, especially on personal and congregational expressions of holiness and love;
- and to do so from within the eschatological framework of expectancy of the future coming of the Lord Jesus.

Jacob W. Elias

Second Sunday of Advent

Malachi 3:1-4

In the Hebrew Bible, Malachi, the last of the prophets, is followed by the Psalms. In our English translations, which follow the order of the Greek version, Malachi is the Old Testament's last book, followed immediately by Matthew's Gospel. This makes Malachi seem an especially appropriate herald of Christ's advent. Moreover, the very name Malachi means "my messenger," or herald (3:1). Appropriately, then, in the first verse of our text God announces, "I am sending my messenger [malachi], and he will prepare the way before me." This announcement echoes the voice in Isa 40:3—"A voice cries, 'in the wilderness prepare the way

of the Lord." The Gospels identify this voice with John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus' coming (Matt 3:3). Indeed, Mark quotes Mal 3:1 just before quoting Isa 40:3 (Mark 1:2 attributes both to Isaiah). From the beginning, then, Christians have read our text, Mal 3:1-4, as an Advent text.

In their context, these verses follow an accusation against God by the people of Judah. First they accuse God of being absent and, thus, failing to uphold justice: “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal 2:17). This accusation is strengthened by their complaint that God seems to favor injustice: “All who do evil are good in the Lord's eyes.” God's announcement and promise in 3:1 respond directly to the people's accusation and complaint. They will not have to wait forever for God's appearance among them. God promises to send “my messenger” before “the Lord ['adon] whom you seek” comes “suddenly to his temple.” Further, “the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come.”

For Malachi's audience, this announcement about the future was not entirely good news. The verse preceding it (2:17) says that the people's accusation and complaint wearied God. As the preceding verses make clear, the people's own violence and faithlessness, toward each other and toward God, had created the circumstances that they now attribute to God's absence and injustice. Consequently, the day of the Lord's coming will be a day of terror, because Yhwh will be like fire (3:2). However, the purpose of this fire is not destruction but purification, or refinement, and its immediate object is Judah's priesthood. The Levites or Levitical priests, who were Judah's religious leaders—its preachers, administrators, and theologians-bore particular responsibility for the conditions about which the people complained. It was their responsibility to teach the people of God and to lead them in proper worship. Indeed, as Mal 2:7 says, the Levitical priest was “the messenger of the Lord [Yhwh].”

With the priestly ancestor Levi, God made a covenant, but the priests had corrupted it (Mal 2:5, 8). Not unexpectedly, then, the whole people had profaned the covenant God the creator made with the ancestors, a covenant that formed them as God's particular people (2:10). As we have seen, Mal 3:1 expects the coming of the “messenger of the covenant whom you desire.” This messenger, the Lord's messenger, heralds the restoration of the covenant, both the covenant with Levi and the covenant with the ancestors. But he will do so in a way that the people neither expect nor desire. In fact, the messenger's appearance gives way to the appearance of the very Lord of hosts, who is like a refiner's fire (3:2). Given the priests' responsibilities, the Lord will “refine” them first, so that they stand before God in righteousness (3:3).

Beyond the limits of our lectionary text, the passage speaks of a broader judgment against corruption, injustice, and faithlessness (3:5). Not only the leaders of the community, the priests, but all of the people-all of those who asked “Where is the God of justice?”—will witness God's refining justice.

Malachi's references to the coming of the Lord and of the Lord's messenger made it possible for the evangelists to identify the expected Lord ('adon) with “the Lord” Jesus Christ, and the messenger with John the Baptist. Since the conclusion of Malachi identifies the coming messenger with Elijah (Mal 4:5), the evangelists further identified John the Baptist as the Promised Elijah (Matt 11:10-14; Mark 9:13).

We do well to remember that the messenger of Christ's advent, John the Baptist, preached a message of repentance and purification in light of God's approaching and refining judgment (Matt 3:1-12). But he also proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins: “repent, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The good news of Advent includes the entire gospel, even the cross. Otherwise, as Malachi says, “Who can endure the day of his coming?”

Ben C. Ollenburger

Luke 1:68-79

Luke 1: 68-79 is the text known as Zechariah's Song or the Benedictus after the Latin translation of its first word-blessed. It is the text that concludes morning prayer in the Daily Office tradition

and, with its tender emphasis on both salvation and peace, it is a fundamental text for the Believers Church tradition as well.

The theme of salvation in the gospel of Luke is clustered in the introductory chapters and then does not appear explicitly until the story of Zacchaeus in chapter 19. Of course, in the meantime, Jesus does many acts of salvation-proclaiming good news to the poor, healing, exorcising demons and teaching his disciples. But no one in the gospel specifically talks about salvation in the period of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Rather, it is here in the song that Zechariah sings in praise and wonderment after the birth of his child, that the gospel makes the most explicit statement of salvation.

In the events surrounding the birth of John and his cousin, Zechariah perceives and proclaims that God has visited and "made a redemption" for the people of God. We are accustomed to thinking of salvation as personal-rescue from our own sin and deliverance from our preoccupations with the self. But here salvation is couched in political and communal terms. The images that Zechariah chooses to express the hope of salvation come from his own scripture-Psalms and Isaiah. God has raised up a horn of salvation-with the image of a charging bull, nostrils flaring and horns held high. God has saved the people from their enemies. God has performed the mercy promised to the ancestors and remembered the holy covenant made with Abraham. The language is language of victory and might, power and pageantry.

But even here, in the fresh hope of Luke's opening chapters, there are indications that the victory and might that are being anticipated and celebrated are not the ordinary, political and military kinds of victory and might. The celebration of salvation is the service of God in holiness and justice (the word in 1:75 translated "righteousness" in most versions is also the word for "justice"). The celebration of salvation is communal-forgiveness of sins and the dawning of the light are actions that encompass us as a people rather than as individuals. The movement from sitting, passively and hopelessly, in the dark awaiting death to the active journey along the way of peace is not something that we take up individually. It is as the people of God that we repent and rise to walk with God in the paths of peace.

The transformation of the individual is, however, not to be overlooked or discounted. The transformation of God's people is emphasized but there is no doubt that individuals also become caught up in this hope and experience personal change. We need look no farther than the transformation of Zechariah himself as a harbinger of the salvation he proclaims. In the opening verses of Luke 1, Zechariah's response to the message of his holy visitor is a lack of belief that results in him being silenced for the term of Elizabeth's pregnancy. We do not know what happened in Zechariah's mind and heart during those nine long months. We do know that on the day of the baby's circumcision, he is filled with the Spirit and able to speak with joyous and exuberant faith in the salvation of God's people through the humble births of two Jewish babies.

Zechariah, in his song to his son, gives us some of the most tender and poignant moments in the epiphany of divine and human that we know as the Incarnation. The human heart of Zechariah and the divine heart of God meet in the yearning for the light of salvation in the deeds of peace and justice.

Mary H. Schertz

Luke 3:1-6

The second of the two Luke readings for the second Sunday of Advent, 3:1-6, introduces the ministry of John the Baptist. The baby celebrated in his father's song, 1:68-79, has become a man. Here, as John begins his ministry calling for repentance in the wilderness, Luke uses the same kind of historical "drum roll" as he does to introduce the birth of Jesus in 2:1-2. In fact, this summary of events is even more elaborate. The ministry of John is located in relationship to the governments of Rome, Judea, Galilee as well as the regional tetrarchs. It is also located in a particular priesthood. In its political detail and particularity, this introduction resembles the introduction of Jeremiah's ministry in Jeremiah 1:1-3. It is common to prophets that their

proclamations are set up against a political backdrop. No less so, the prophetic career of John the Baptist. Indeed, the familiar phrase that the "word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness," only enhances the presentation of John as a prophet of God (3:2).

The wilderness in Luke's gospel is a space with an ambivalent ambiance. It is the place where John the Baptist is nurtured (1:80) and, as noted here, the place in which the word of God comes to him (3:2) and from which he preaches the baptism of repentance (3:4).

Following this text, the wilderness serves as a place of refuge for Jesus. After a flurry of exorcisms and healings, including Peter's mother-in-law, at the end of chapter four, the wilderness is where Jesus seeks refuge and solace from the crowds and from which he makes clear that his purpose is to preach the kingdom of God (4:42). Then again, in 5:16, after another vigorous round of ministry that includes calling disciples and healing, Jesus again with draws into the wilderness to pray. It is clear that the wilderness is a source of rejuvenation for Jesus, a place where he seeks and finds God.

But there is another side to the symbol of the wilderness. While it is the place where both John and Jesus find God, it is also the place where the Spirit leads Jesus to be tempted by the evil one. It is also a place of chaos and an emptiness where demons find room to roam. It is above all a place of stark contrasts, a place where both God and evil are at home. It is from this marginal, liminal place that John begins his ministry of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As he will with Jesus' ministry in chapter four, Luke introduces John's ministry with a quotation from Isaiah. This text about preparing the Lord's way was also used by the Essenes to explain their presence in the desert. But whereas they considered the study of the law as the preparation they were to be about, John comes out of the desert to preach the baptism of repentance, an upright life and the salvation of God to all people. It is speculative, but not inconceivable, that John spent some time with the Essenes. Certainly the emphasis on baptism as a ritual has similarities to the ritual washing practiced in the Essene community. But if John was trained by the Essenes in some part or all of his youth, his emergence in Luke 3 as a preacher and ethicist represent a break with the doctrines and practices of that group. It is a different kind of preparation of which John speaks and for which he calls.

Mary H. Schertz

Philippians 1:3-11

We often talk about the pastor as “change agent” or discuss “pastoral leadership” as if it were essentially the same thing as “pastoral ministry.” Such understandings of pastoral ministry have value, but they are limited. Pastoral ministry is more than just leadership in a congregational setting; it has also to do with representing God to your people, and your people to God, and with fulfilling a call that is bigger than the proper exercise of certain gifts.

In this letter of joy from Paul to the church at Philippi, we see some concerns that Paul had concerning the life of the church there; we read some exhortations and warnings. However, the dominant tone in this letter is one of confidence, thankfulness, joy, and the love of a mutually satisfying and even intimate relationship between Paul and this congregation. This relationship, while challenged by the physical separation of 800 miles (with Paul in prison in Rome), is characterized by genuine longing for one another: “You hold me in your heart”; “you share … in my imprisonment”; “I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.” Paul wants only God’s best for this congregation, and this congregation seems to want only God’s best for Paul. What is *right* with this picture?

What makes this relationship work are the three-way partnerships between the Philippian church, Paul, and God (or Jesus Christ). Even though Paul may not be deeply concerned with making proper changes in this church, he does see the church as *being on the way* somewhere: it is headed toward a goal. Paul mentions three points in history-points that mark off the past and the future. The “first day” (v. 5) probably refers to Paul’s initial visit to Philippi (cf. Acts 16:11-40). The time between the “first day” and “now” (5) is the time of the past--a *good* past--which

elicits both joy and thanksgiving in Paul. The time between “now” and “the day of [Jesus] Christ” (6, 10) is the time of the future, which elicits both faith and confidence in Paul.

With respect to God, Paul is confident that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (6). Even though this congregation is clearly on the right track, they have more work to do to get ready for the Advent (Second Coming) of Christ. This “work” is ultimately God’s work through them (6), and its goal is purity and blamelessness (10b). Purity and blamelessness are the result of a “harvest of righteousness” (11a), which in turn is the fruit of discernment about “what is best” (10a). And discernment about what is best depends upon the kind of “knowledge and full insight” that only overflowing love can produce (9).

It may seem odd that Paul sees overflowing love as what is required in order for the congregation to arrive at knowledge and full insight, yet it is love that puts us right with God and with each other, and which characterizes the “rightness” of our relationships. Love is the key to knowledge and full insight … because that is who God is.

In Advent we look both to the past (in the first coming of Jesus) and to the future (in the Second Coming of Jesus). The season of Advent is thus a season that orients us to what God has done in the past, to what God is doing in the present, and to what God is bringing us to in the future; it is not a static time, but an active one-a time for pressing toward the goal. As reflected in this opening thanksgiving by Paul, Advent is a time for joy, confidence, thanksgiving and love. But it is also a time for work-for discernment about what is best and about what God is doing in the world. It is a time for recognizing that we are “on the way” somewhere, heading toward God’s goal. And that goal ultimately is not about us and our own purity or blamelessness, but about “the glory and praise of God.” If as congregations we remain committed to the glory and praise of God, then like the Philippians, we are on the right track.

Loren Johns

Third Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-20

The greater part of Zephaniah's three chapters speaks unremittingly of doom and of the Lord’s anger. The people of Judah—God’s own people—are both the cause and the object of this anger, though Zephaniah provides only a few details about the reasons why: the people were worshipping false gods and ignoring Yhwh their God (1:4-6), and Judah's leaders, both civil and religious, were corrupt (3:3-4). Altogether, the people regarded God as impotent or apathetic (1:12). But now God is about to act—on the “day of the Lord.” Some form of that phrase occurs about twenty times in Zephaniah's fifty-three verses. It will be a terrible day, of wrath, distress, anguish, anguish, and devastation (1:15). While God’s anger is directed especially at Judah, its people, and their leaders, it threatens all the nations (2:4-15) and jeopardizes all of creation (1:2-3).

In Zephaniah's time, the greatest power on earth, and the greatest threat to Judah and its capital Jerusalem, was the nation of Assyria, with its capital in Nineveh. (The ruins of Nineveh lie a few miles northwest of Baghdad, in Iraq, along the Tigris River.) The Lord’s ire is directed against Assyria, and in particular against Nineveh, a city known for its arrogance (2:15). But, remarkably, it is directed especially against Jerusalem, described as a corrupt city of oppressors (3:1). This is remarkable in two respects. First, Jerusalem/Zion was the city of God—the site of God's dwelling (Isa 8:16), the Lord’s holy mountain (Zeph 3:11). And second, our passage (Zeph 3:14-20) opens with instruction that Zion/Jerusalem should rejoice, because God has taken away the judgments against her.

Nothing in Zephaniah prepares us for this—for this remarkable turn from universal and angry judgment to an act of unprecedented, unfounded, grace. Well, perhaps that overstates

matters. In 2:3, Zephaniah advises that the humble and obedient in the land should seek the Lord; and the Lord promises to remove the arrogant people from her, so that she herself will no longer be haughty (3:11). Her people also will be humble; that is, they will know that their refuge is God alone and not in themselves (3:13).

It was common in the ancient world to personify cities as women. Thus, here, Zion is personified as “daughter” (not “daughter of”)—perhaps we should translate “beloved Zion/Jerusalem” (3:14). Taking the metaphor further, Isaiah portrays Zion as Yhwh’s wife (Isa 50:1; 54:5; 62:4-5). Zephaniah does not go that far, but our text does speak of the Lord’s love for Zion, where God will dwell (3:17). Zion will be a city where, and to whom, God is present, and where the Lord will gather the lame and the outcasts, changing their shame—undeserved shame—into praise and fame (3:19). All of God’s cosmic wrath and judgment, which puts all of creation at risk, is bent on just this: to welcome into God's own love, in God's own beloved place, those whom the arrogant and proud would reject and shame.

The relation of our passage to Advent is perhaps obscure, but it becomes clear in just this way. For Advent is nothing if not the advent of the Christ of God who chose to identify with those excluded and shamed by the arrogantly pious. The Epistle to the Hebrews says that we, Christians, sinners, have come to Zion; and it goes on to identify Zion with Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (Heb 12:22-24). This is a remarkable act of God's grace, foreshadowed in Zephaniah.

Ben C. Ollenburger

Luke 3:7-18

The Luke reading for the third Sunday of Advent picks up the story of John where we left it last Sunday. John's good news to the people consists of five emphases. First, they are not to be complacent about their status as the chosen people. Second, rather than resting on their laurels as the chosen ones, their lives are, in fact, supposed to bear good fruit. This is the first use of this image but it will appear again in the Sermon on the Plain in 6 and also in the parable of the sower in 8 and the parable of the fig tree in 13. The third point of John's message is that those who repent are to engage themselves with radical sharing of the "good things" such as clothing and food. This part of John's message echoes the statement in Mary's song that God will fill the hungry with "good things." One of the ways this filling happens is through the faithful sharing half of what they have, a proportion that will appear again in the story about Zacchaeus in chapter 19.

John's fourth point has to do with justice and non-violence. Interestingly, when repentant and baptized tax collectors and soldiers ask him what they should do, John does not tell them that they must leave their professions. We might expect this advice in light of the generally radical nature of John's language. But that is not the case. Instead of leaving their vocations, they are, within the parameters of their vocations and occupations, to move toward practices of justice and non-violence. Converted tax collectors are not to use deceit or extortion in their collection of taxes. They are to collect no more tax than they have been assigned to collect. Tax collectors were required to pay Rome in advance and then recoup their payment plus expenses. The system was ripe for corruption. Although John does not directly attack the taxation system, he effectively undermines its excesses and potential for misuse.

Converted soldiers are told not to use violence to take goods from people or to make false accusations in the fulfillment of their responsibilities. Furthermore, they are to be content with their rations. These soldiers were not Roman soldiers, since no legions were deployed in the region at this time. Probably they were Jewish militia serving Herod Antipas. Or they could have been mercenaries as 3:14 implies, since Julius Caesar had exempted Jews from being required to serve in Rome's armies. Again, while John does not attack the practice of military service as such, he effectively strips it of its potential for those who might use it to bully people or indulge their greed.

The final point of John's ministry is to point toward Jesus, whom he pictures as a farmer taking in the last harvest of the season. The dialog begins with questions that arise in John's audience about whether he is indeed the Messiah. This expectation on the part of the people had been around in the common culture of Palestine since about the beginning of the second century B.C.E. John's preaching, both his pronouncements about the preparation of the way of the Lord and his ethical injunctions as the specific way of making those preparations, had turned the peoples' thinking in the direction of the hope of Israel, the Messiah. Was John in fact the one for whom they had been looking?

But John turns these hopes and dreams aside. He points instead to Jesus as the one on whom they should center their expectations of the coming Messiah. He defers to Jesus, describing him as the mightier one, the one whose sandal thongs he, John, is not worthy to untie. This is a slave's duty, so John is being very emphatic at this point. He also distinguishes his baptism of water from Jesus' baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. When it comes to revealing the human heart and its intentions, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and fire all have a common power to clarify, refine and chasten. All three come together in the first chapters of Acts-the promise Jesus makes before he ascends to heaven, the Holy Spirit who descends in fulfillment of that promise and the tongues of fire that accompany the descent. But elsewhere as well, the twin motifs of refinement and judgment are present in the gospel and Acts. Jesus purifies what is true and destroys what is false. He forces a decision, a crisis, a fork in the road for those who encounter him. The good news has an edge of judgment and there is no wish on Luke's part to soften that conclusion.

Mary H. Schertz

Philippians 4:4-7

The depth of Paul's pastoral identification with his people is nowhere more evident than it is in Philippians 4. During the season of Advent, when the church once again recalls how God in Christ identifies with needy humanity, this apostolic expression of pastoral warmth and concern can encourage congregations to be or become incarnations of joy and peace in the world.

The word therefore in 4:1 signals the transition from the letter body to the concluding exhortations and assurances. Paul addresses the Philippian Christians in pastoral terms as those whom he longs for and loves! And he depicts them in eschatological categories as my joy and my crown (cf. also 1 Thess. 2:19). From within this pastoral embrace and this eschatological vantage point Paul speaks his admonition, Stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

Paul's appeal for these believers to stand firm introduces a series of exhortations. Some are specific. Paul asks an unnamed individual to help his two valued co-workers, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree in the Lord (4:2,3). This request echoes Paul's earlier more general encouragement to the whole congregation to relate to each other in harmony with the mind of Christ (2:1-11). Some of Paul's other appeals (in particular 4:4-7 and 4:8-9) are more generic in character.

Among one of the most familiar passages in Paul's letters, Philippians 4:4-7 requires little comment. Pastors often quote this text when offering pastoral care in various life situations, whether to stimulate life-giving piety among their members or to reassure the dying or to encourage a more thankful spirit in the congregation. In this series of concluding statements, Paul reminds, he commands, and he promises:

* A reminder appears somewhat awkwardly, sandwiched between several exhortations: The Lord is near (4:5). It is likely this assertion which commends 4:4-7 as a lectionary text for Advent. The Lord's nearness can be understood in two ways. God is near at hand for all who pray for grace and strength in time of need. Yet Paul likely also intends the suffering Philippian believers who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:11) to realize that their eschatological vindication is assured.

* Most of the verbs in this paragraph are imperatives. The assurances invite trusting obedience, including active expressions of worship and devotion: Rejoice! (This is said twice.) Let your gentleness be known! Do not worry! By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God! Believers are enabled to stand firm in the Lord (4:1) if they continue to commune with God in joyous worship, thanksgiving, and prayer.

* A promise of God's gift of peace moves this paragraph to a climactic close (4:7). Peace in the Hebraic sense of shalom (wholeness and well-being) connotes solace for these people whose lives are marked by suffering precipitated by the clash between their allegiance to Christ as Lord and the loyalty to Caesar as required in the civic cult. This peace transcends all human categories of mind and imagination. Yet this incomprehensible gift also carries a rider: Their relationship in Christ Jesus needs to shape their individual piety and obedience and their corporate experiences of worship and mission and their anticipation of the gracious gift of peace. The Lord is near! In this confidence, they can rejoice, pray, give thanks, and know God's peace.

Jacob W. Elias

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 80:1-7
Psalm 80 is a communal lament in which the nation calls out to God for God's favor and salvation. Structurally, it is marked by the refrain, "Restore us, O God; show Your favor that we may be delivered," which occurs in verses 4, 8, 20. Note the progressive expansion of the epithet, from God (v. 4), to God of hosts (v. 8), and finally, to Lord God of hosts (v. 20). A variation of the refrain is found in verse 15 using 'God of hosts.' This refrain stresses the central concern of Psalm 80: restoration, blessing and salvation.

In its petition, the psalm draws upon ancient Israelite tradition,one that predates the building of the temple. God is addressed as one enthroned on the cherubim, which was the epithet given to God when the ark was at Shilo (see 1 Samuel 1.3, 4.4, and 2 Samuel 6.2). Shilo was located in the heartland of the territory settled by Ephraim and Manasseh, so it is no coincidence that they are also mentioned in this psalm. Note also the mention of Joseph in verse 2, again a name for the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Also, since Benjamin was the brother of Joseph, we have this petition coming from the Rachel tribes.

Another feature indicating the antiquity of the traditions used here is the expression "let your face shine upon us," which is found in the refrain. This reminds us of the priestly benediction in Numbers 6.25.

Although the psalm begins with the image of God as shepherd, the most striking metaphor in this poem is God as gardener. God has brought a plant out of Egypt, cleared land for it, and planted it. It took root and grew luxuriously. However, God ceased to pay attention to the prayers of the people. In fact, God now seems to have turned against the vine. As a result the vine has suffered burning, cutting, and exploitation by the animals.

The psalm expresses the sentiments of the northern Israelites, perhaps dating from the time of the fall of Samaria in 721. We know from history that these northern tribes never were restored to the land. For them this prayer was offered in vain.

We are not used to having unanswered prayer represented in the psalms. We assume that all the petitions were answered. However, we must not forget that a flourishing vine, blessed by God, can become lost. So how much more we Christians who are grafted in can be marred and destroyed.

Advent is a time of new life and the joy of new life. However, we should rejoice within a perspective that recognizes that just as new life can sprout forth and flourish, so too can the new plant suffer harm and destruction.

Perry Yoder

Micah 5:2-5a
Micah's prophecies alternate between announcements of judgment and portrayals of a glorious future. The stinging indictments of chapter 3, which includes the prediction that “Zion will be plowed as a field” (3:12), are followed immediately in chapter 4 by the “swords into plowshares” passage that Micah shares with Isaiah (Mi 4:1-4; Isa 2:2-5). In the future, the nations will stream to the very Zion/Jerusalem that God has consigned to destruction (Mi 3:12; 4:3). But farther into chapter 4, daughter Zion or beloved Zion (4:8; cf. Zeph 3:14) is again suffering at the hands of the nations, who are assembled against her for battle (4:11).

Our passage responds to this distressing situation, whose description culminates in 5:1—Zion is under siege, and her ruler, the king, has been humiliated. All of 4:8–5:1 addresses Zion directly, but 5:2 turns to another, much smaller city, Bethlehem of Ephratha. Bethlehem was small but significant, as the ancestral home of David's royal house. We know of this, and of the Ephrathite clan, from the story of Ruth, David's great-grandmother (Ruth 1:1-2; 4:13-22). When Micah says that from Bethlehem Israel's ruler will come forth, one whose origin is from antiquity (Mi 5:2), we are to understand this as the announcement of a future king in the Davidic line. Of course, it is God who speaks here and says that this new ruler will be “for me.” It was the Lord (Yhwh) who chose David and promised, in antiquity, that David’s line would always endure (2 Sam 7:16-17). In Micah, in most unlikely circumstances, God confirms that promise.

God’s promise is for the future, and Micah comments that Zion's current distress will continue until “she who is in labor will give birth.” We hear echoes of Isa 7:14. But who is the woman in labor here in Mi 5:3? It could be the mother of the promised king (cf. Isa 9:6). However, Mi 4:10 describes Zion as a woman in labor, writhing and groaning because she is going into exile. We should understand Mi 5:3 as alluding to Zion’s “labor,” which will issue in a new king, and thus in restoration. God promises to redeem Zion (symbolizing Jerusalem's people) from her enemies—from Babylon—and this redemption, this new birth, coincides with the advent of a new king from David's line. This makes good sense of Mi 5:3b-4, which expects a grand reunion: the king's family and flock will return from exile, and he will be their shepherd. “Shepherd” is a standard metaphor for king, both in the Old Testament and in the ancient world generally. The Lord is Israel's shepherd (Psalm 23), and the king shepherds the flock on the Lord’s behalf. Thus, the flock will be secure, under the royal shepherd's universal reign.

The final words of our text declare that this royal shepherd will be “the one of peace.” Among the throne names given the royal child in Isa 9:6 is “Prince of Peace.” The advent of God’s promised king will bring peace: peace on earth.

Matthew’s Gospel quotes Mi 5:2 (with some variation); that is, Herod’s advisors quoted it, informing him that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Matt 2:5-6). We remember that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David, and thus of Ruth as well (Matt 1:5). If Micah informs our understanding of Jesus, and of Advent, we will also expect a grand reunion, when all of Zion’s children and God’s dwell securely, led by the Good Shepherd and Prince of Peace.

Ben C. Ollenburger

Luke 1:39-55
Advent 4 is commonly known as Mary's Sunday, although Elizabeth also figures largely in the reading from Luke. It is the interdependence between the two women, one older one younger, that results in the exuberant outpouring of confidence and praise of God we find in this passage.

39-45 Elizabeth's blessing
Mary makes a journey into the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her kinswoman. Her solitary journey from Nazareth up into the mountains of Judea in the early stages of pregnancy would have required a sturdy person, a person with considerable stamina and endurance. In all likelihood we should "repaint" the images of Mary that we carry around inside our heads to include definite muscles and the roughened hands and chapped lips of outdoor life.

When the two pregnant women meet, there is a delightfully feminine holy moment. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps in response to Mary's greeting. At that moment, Elizabeth too is filled with the Holy Spirit. She blesses Mary, she blesses the "fruit" of Mary's womb and she blesses "the one who believed that there will be a fulfillment of what has been spoken to her from the Lord." The future tense in Elizabeth's blessing is important because it makes clear that Mary's expectation of the fulfillment is more than just the pregnancy. The future tense points to the whole of Gabriel's message. That message is not only that she would bear a son but that this son will be great, he will be called the Son of the Most High and he will reign over the house of Jacob. It is clear that both Mary and Elizabeth are thinking nationally as well as personally during this period of waiting on God and nature.

46-56 Mary's prophecy
Mary's prophetic song, known as the Magnificat from the first word of the Latin version, is structured in two parts. The first stanza (verses 46-49) is intensely personal and expressive of Mary's private joy. There are five personal pronouns in this section--my soul, my spirit, my savior, all generations will call me blessed, the powerful one has done great things for me. Mary's emphasis in this beginning part is on what God has done for her.

But what is most remarkable is that Mary chooses to interpret what God has done for her not as a dilemma, which it surely must also have been, but as a blessing. Even today, explaining an unexpected and unaccounted for pregnancy is a dilemma. But how much more so in an age when women were commonly regarded as the property of men. There were serious social and perhaps even life threatening consequences for women caught in this situation. In subsequent history, it has been clear that Mary's pregnancy was a gift of God. But there was no way for those closest to her to be so sure at the time. Surely this pregnancy must have had its awkward, difficult and even dangerous moments. Yet here, in the safety and privacy of Elizabeth's home, Mary assesses her situation as a blessing and an act of mercy on the part of the Lord, God her Savior.

On the one hand, it is of course completely anachronistic to declare Mary a feminist. On the other hand there is no better illustration of the modern feminist insight that the "personal is political" than Mary's second stanza. In verses 50-55, Mary shifts from the first person to the third person. In this part of the song, she makes the connection between her private joy and the blessing 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. It is precisely God's action on behalf of those of "low estate" or "low degree" that is perceived as "mercy," a word which appears twice, once at the beginning of the second stanza and again toward the end. God's mercy is on "those who fear him" (50) and God has helped Israel "in remembrance of his mercy" (54).

In the first stanza the action moves between one person (Mary) and God. It's a two-way connection. What changes in the second section and makes it so politically radical is that the two-way connection becomes a three-way connection. The power of God acts to empower the lowly and to disempower the exalted ones. This triangular tension, as Robert Tannehill notes, first expressed in Mary's song, foreshadows a theme that will be important in the rest of the gospel as well. Luke stands squarely within Israel's prophetic tradition. The good news is a word of comfort to many and a word of anger to some. Or as Maynard-Reid puts it, a word of hope to many and a word of challenge to some.

Mary H. Schertz

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

Luke 2:41-52

The Luke reading for Christmas Sunday is the story of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple followed by a summary about his growth in wisdom and in the favor of God. The story opens with the information that Jesus' parents went to the temple in Jerusalem for Passover every year-and this year, his coming of age year, is no different. It is their custom. The mention of the Passover foreshadows a far more ominous celebration of the Passover in 22:1, a celebration that will end in violence and tragedy for the man the child is to become. But here there is an unmarred festive spirit. There is a sense of extended family and friendship-the kind of spirit that might mark a family reunion. For, in returning to Nazareth, Mary and Joseph do not even realize until the first evening of the return trip that Jesus has stayed in Jerusalem. They do discover his absence that night, however, as they look for him with friends and relatives.

Like any good parents they go back immediately to search for him. But it is not until three worry filled days have passed that they find him in the temple with the teachers. When they remonstrate with him, as any normal parents would, he is puzzled that they did not know

exactly where to find him. "Didn't you know that it is necessary for me to be in my Father's house?"

It becomes clear in the description of the scene his parents found when they went into the temple that the law has not only been important to this family in terms of meeting its ritual requirements but in bringing Jesus up in the tradition of Torah study. He is sitting in the middle of the teachers, a familiar euphemism for Torah study, listening to them and asking questions. Although implicit rather than explicit, it is also clear that the teachers are questioning Jesus as well-for they are impressed with both his grasp of the law and his ability to articulate answers. Clearly the story is meant to indicate that the preparation for ministry to which Jesus is called requires an apprenticeship in the study of the Torah. Already at 12, Jesus is well into his intellectual and spiritual journey. And that preparation will presumably continue into the years that still lie between this appearance in the temple and his emergence as a public figure.

None of these issues are of primary concern to Mary, however, who responds to the situation with motherly remonstrance. Three days of anxious searching have taken their toll and she scolds her son for worrying his parents. But Jesus' response, even at this young age, is double edged. He challenges her perspective while obeying her as his parent. In response to her telling him that she and his father have been looking for him, he says he must be in his Father's house. But then he goes with them down to Nazareth and "was obedient to them." And his mother kept "all these things in her heart."

The story concludes with one of those summary that Luke likes to insert into his gospel. It is very like the summary in 2:40. Wisdom is mentioned again, as is favor with God. Stature replaces strength and social maturity (favor with humanity) is added. This is the third such summary in the birth narratives. The first had to do with John in 1:80. Then the two about Jesus appear just before and just after this story of Jesus in the temple. In addition to pointing out that the blessing of God, the favor of God, rests on John and Jesus, they also point out something about the environment of the two prophets. While John's milieu is the wilderness, Jesus' environment is Nazareth, but Nazareth as a place related to the temple. Jesus was blessed in the temple and, with his family, makes yearly pilgrimages to the temple. Certainly the implication is that Jesus' conversations, his questions and answers with the temple teachers is at least a yearly enterprise beginning with his twelfth year. Luke is emphasizing in no uncertain terms that the faith and ministry of Jesus is deeply rooted in the study of the law.

Mary H. 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