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## *Commentaries on Lenten Lectionary Scripture Texts, Year A*

### **First Sunday of Lent**

#### **Psalm 32**

Psalm 32 opens the season of Lent. Identified since the Middle Ages as one of the seven penitential psalms (the others are Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143), this particular psalm deals with sin in the past tense and actually focuses more on thanksgiving for forgiveness than on penitence.

The psalm begins with a ringing affirmation: "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (v. 1). In a pattern typical of Hebrew poetry, the affirmation is repeated in a parallel statement in verse 2: "Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." The effect of the use of the passive voice is to emphasize God's role as Forgiver. Not able to rescue themselves from sin and its consequences, human beings are utterly dependent upon God's intervening grace for redemption.

Verses 3-5 present a poetic and all too familiar description of the story of human failure. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the psalmist remembers a sequence of events that begins with "hiding my iniquity" (v. 5). Afraid or unwilling to face the truth, the sinner suffers both physical and emotional pain depicted in a series of vivid metaphors: "my body wasted away though my groaning all day long;" "your hand was heavy upon me;" "my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."

The only way out of such misery is to speak the truth. In an act of willing and honest contrition, sin is acknowledged. As in all the other penitential psalms, God is waiting to cleanse and forgive. In describing God's posture or role with regard to sin, Patrick Miller summarizes, "...the character of God is neither bent against us, nor neutral in God's justice and righteousness, but is bent toward us in grace and mercy" (p. 141, *Interpreting the Psalms*). Such mercy is indeed good news!

In a mood reminiscent of the wisdom tradition, the concluding verses of the psalm, 6-11, step back from the immediate situation and offer words of encouragement and counsel. Verses 6-7 provide reassurance to anyone in trouble. Because God is faithful to rescue and deliver those who turn for help, the psalmist affirms the act of prayer, not hiding, in times of distress. A colorful simile in verse 9 reminds us of the utter folly of resisting God: those who do so are like ignorant, stubborn mules whose willfulness must be tamed with bit and bridle! In the voice of one who is sadder but wiser, the psalmist reiterates that torment is the reward of the wicked but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in God. All that is left is to offer praise: "Be glad ... shout for joy!" (v. 11).

With such a resounding affirmation, one might suppose that worshipers would eagerly anticipate the act of confession during the Sundays of Lent. If the end of sinning is to become aware of and receive God's healing mercy, then we should all come without hesitation to the throne of grace. Such eagerness, however, has not been my own experience nor has it been what I have observed in others. More often we resist God and stumble on the journey to repentance. Preferring our independence and illusions, we want to control our own destiny. What Psalm 32 affirms profoundly and emphatically is our helplessness to rid ourselves of sin's clutches and our utter dependence on God's sovereign grace. We cannot be reminded too often of such a lavish gift.

A hymn which breathes the spirit of Psalm 32 is #551 (Hymnal: A Worship Book), "In the stillness of the evening." A remarkable and memorable text and tune from the Norwegian Lutheran Church, the song invites us to feel the pain of sin, name our defeats, and yet find courage to turn with hope to "the One who is beside me," always ready to heal and forgive.

Marlene Kropf

### **Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

The Lenten season locates us in the drama between two gardens, Eden and Gethsemane. Eden's original sin bears its fruit in Gethsemane, where Jesus is "betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Matt 26:47). According to the New Testament, those are our hands, inherited from our first parents. (They are not named until later [Gen. 3:20; 4:25], but I shall call them Adam and Eve.)

Our lectionary text reports the Lord God's generous grant to Adam: he may eat freely from every tree in the garden, God's garden, which he has been appointed to tend. God's first words to humankind are words of permission and freedom. They grant free access to God's own bounty, so that Adam may eat and live. Only one tree in the whole garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, does God guard with a prohibition, because to eat from it means death. "On the day you eat of it, you shall surely die." It is about this single, life-preserving prohibition, not about the Lord God's generosity, that the serpent raises a question.

The scene in Gen 3:1-7 involves two creatures, the serpent and Eve, neither of whom existed when God spoke to Adam. Indeed, God formed all of the creatures following Adam in search of "a helper as his partner" (2:18, NRSV). Only Eve, formed not from the ground like Adam and the serpent, but from human flesh and bone, was a true partner. Omitted from the human community that God granted stewardship of the garden, the serpent engaged Eve in theological conversation. He was, the text says, the shrewdest or wisest of all the beasts, but he employed his wisdom to question, to misrepresent, and then to contradict the word of God, so that Eve would disobey it.

The serpent's opening question to Eve could be translated, "God didn't really say, did he, that you shouldn't eat from any tree in the garden?" Eve's answer first corrects the serpent—"From the fruit of the garden's trees we may eat"—but then adds to God's own words. "We may not touch" the tree "in the midst of the garden," she says, "lest we die." Eve, too, misquotes God, who said nothing about touching the tree. Moreover, her response to the serpent does not name the tree, making God's prohibition seem arbitrary and assigning to this "tree in the midst of the garden" almost magical power—the power to kill. The serpent knows better. "You will not die," he says. And he goes on to explain God's hidden motive: he knows what God knows, and knows what God wants to prevent (3:5).

Freed by the serpent's words from the fear of immediate death, and desiring the knowledge that, as she recognized, its fruit could provide, Eve ate from the tree; so did Adam, who was with her but remained silent (3:6). It happened just as the serpent had predicted. Their eyes were opened (3:5, 7). And as God acknowledged, they had indeed become like God, knowing good and evil (3:5, 22).

Out of rivalry with the woman, Eve (cf. 3:15), the shrewd and wise serpent tempted humankind into unwitting rivalry with God. He also tempted humankind into a permanent disruption of human community. The second chapter of Genesis concludes with the notice that Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed (2:25). After they ate the forbidden fruit and "their eyes were opened," Adam and Eve "knew that they were naked" (3:7). Out of shame in each other's unconcealed presence, they made clothes to cover their genitals—to conceal their difference and their desire.

Human history after Adam and Eve is a long, shameful story of murderous rivalry, decisively interrupted by Jesus, in whom alone there was a sacrificed equality, and no rivalry, with God (Phil 2:6-11).

Adam and Eve did not die on the day they ate, despite God's explicit threat that they would die. God never executes punishment more severe than what God threatens, but God's mercy often and regularly mitigates God's threats. Jesus, who was also tempted in the garden, bore on our behalf the punishment of death and incarnated the mercy of God toward us. In Lent, we reflect on who we truly are—children of Adam and Eve, for whom Christ suffered and died. All rivalry ends in Christ, and all our shame.

Ben C. Ollenburger

With credit to members of the Exposition of Genesis class at AMBS, Fall 1998

### **Romans 5:12-19**

Paul begins his letter to the Romans by reminding them about the gospel of God: a gospel concerning God's Son, Jesus Christ who by his resurrection from the dead became Lord of all (1:1-6). This is the gospel of which Paul is not ashamed: It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith ... (1:16-17). The remainder of Romans is an expanded discussion of the relevance of this gospel for their situation.

In Romans 5:1-11 Paul talks about how believers experience God's righteousness by finding peace and reconciliation through Jesus Christ. At 5:12 Paul begins a further round of reflections utilizing a comparison between Adam and Christ. Adam represents humanity's first disobedience, which ended up in death as a consequence (5:12-14). Jesus Christ is the free gift graciously given by God; through his obedient life and his obedience unto death on the cross God raised him to be the first one within a renewed humanity (5:15-19).

A Lenten message on 5:12-19 might focus on several themes, perhaps along the following lines:

Sin and death are depicted as occupying powers, which have invaded the world and are seeking to exercise their control over all humanity, indeed over the entire cosmos. Sin is viewed as a contagion that threatens to contaminate whatever it touches. Like a virulent virus, sin entered the world through the one man Adam, and sin and death have spread like a contagious flu throughout the human community. It is important to note that Paul is neither advocating a doctrine of original sin nor arguing that humanity is utterly depraved. Rather Paul characterizes sin as a tyrannical and oppressive power seeking to exercise control over its subjects. As a consequence of the invasion of sin into the world, death has reigned from the time of Adam.

Paul's articulation of God's remedy for the contagion of sin includes the diagnosis that in solidarity with Adam all humanity has sinned. Everyone has sinned, and so the consequences of Adam's sin continue, and death continues to hold sway among all humanity.

But God has intervened in a "new Adam!" Paul's diagnosis of pervasive sin spread by the disobedience of one man leads him to celebrate the remedy made possible by another human, namely, Jesus Christ, whose obedience unto death on the cross leads to righteousness being made available potentially to all. God's free gift, Jesus Christ, destroyed the power of sin and death and began a new humanity whose Lord is Christ.

As believers, therefore, we continue to find ourselves in solidarity with Adam whose transgressions contaminated the human race with sin. Sin still seeks to exercise dominion in our lives. Yet in solidarity with Christ we experience the free gift of life. In fact, the invading power of sin has effectively been stalled because of the obedience of Christ on the cross. So, the question to consider during Lent and always is whether sin will rule our lives, and lead us in the direction of death, or whether Jesus Christ will reign, and lead us by grace through righteousness to eternal life!

Jacob W. Elias

## Second Sunday of Lent

### Psalm 121

Given the title A Song of Ascents, Psalm 121 was associated with the pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Whether recited at the beginning of the journey, when approaching the city, or when starting for home, this affirmation of trust and confidence acknowledges the dangers of the trip. The hills encountered on the journey to the city probably appeared foreboding. Their steep grades required sure footedness and extra energy to climb and descend. There was the possibility that bad weather would leave washed out paths or rock scramble. There was always the chance that one would meet wild animals or dangerous strangers.

The first two verses are set in a different tone than the remaining six—more personal, perhaps even a bit brooding. “From when will my help come?” may function as a rhetorical question, but it is not trivial for the pilgrims. It is vital and heartfelt. Why else would a confident summary of God’s protective watchfulness be needed?

Starting with verse 3 the psalm shifts to address Israel. God, who keeps his people, does not need a wake-up call (like Baal in 1 Kings 18:28). Israel’s God is constantly attentive and aware of every moment of danger. The peril of the sun in a Mediterranean climate is clear. The relentless and searing heat of the sunlight threatens dehydration and heat exhaustion. But the moon was also a peril. Moonlight was associated with lunacy (ever been moonstruck?); nighttime required special watchfulness for menacing animals and good footholds. God is at the travelers’ right hand; their first and most favored defense.

God keeps Israel (as a nation and as individuals) in all things-going out and coming in-in their pilgrimages to and from Jerusalem and in their journey through time.

“From where will my help come?” It is a question that underlies the activities of our daily life whether we acknowledge it or not. Raising children, growing deeper in love with spouse or friends, traveling to familiar and unfamiliar places, negotiating with co-workers, resolving conflicts of all sorts, caring for sick or elderly parents—a myriad of demands in our lives confront us with situations over which we have no control. Perhaps more than we care to realize, life pushes us into danger zones.

In linking Psalm 121 with Genesis 12:1-4a, we as worshipers see that Abraham’s call carries with it the dangers of faithfulness. Like Abraham, we too will go places to serve God we would never have chosen. We too encounter perils that deplete our resources or may drive us crazy. But like Abraham and Israel, God keeps us in our “going out and our coming in, from this time on and forevermore.”

Rebecca Slough

### Genesis 12:1-4a

In the chapter preceding our lectionary text, God confused the speech of humankind at Babel, dividing them into nations scattered across the earth. Following that division and scattering, God’s attention narrows; it narrows from all humankind to one family, descended from Shem the son of Noah (Gen. 11:10-32). And from within that extended family, God’s attention focuses finally on Abram and Sarai. To one man, Abram, God speaks.

God’s first words to Abram issue a command, a command to go. In one respect, God’s command seems arbitrary. Why Abram? Out of all the earth’s population, why did God choose to address Abram? Some early Jewish commentators said it was because God knew that Abram would obey. A seminary student suggested that, in fact, God addressed everyone, but only Abram was listening. Perhaps both suggestions are right, but the text does not say. It says only that God told Abram to leave his home and his parents’ home, to set out on a journey whose destination God does not disclose. Here and in Genesis 22:2, God commands Abr(ah)am to go, without telling him where he is going. Both times, God only promises, “I will show you.” Both times, that promise is enough.

In a second respect, God's command is anything but arbitrary: it has a purpose, and that purpose is the content of 12:2-3. God's purpose in calling and commanding Abram itself takes the form of an extended promise. Note the structure. Genesis 12:2 discloses God's purpose with respect to Abram: to make of him a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great. And these purposes culminate in a final one: all of this is so that Abram will be a blessing. Not because of who Abram is, or because of how great his name will be, but because of what God promises to do with, and to make of, Abram will he be a blessing. The following verse (v. 3) depends on what God has just promised, but here God speaks, not to, but about those who respond to God's blessing of Abram. Blessing is the first word of v. 3: "I will bless those who bless you." Thus the text draws an explicit connection between God's blessing of Abram and God's intention, through Abram, to bless "all the families of the earth." But v. 3 also mentions cursing. Notice that here, though, unlike blessing, cursing is not initiated by God.

Rather, God's curse will fall only on those who refuse to recognize God's blessing—those who curse Abram, God's chosen mediator of their own blessing! So God returns, at the end of v. 3, to Abram and to blessing: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Hearing all this, "Abram went as God had told him" (12:4a). He went, he knew not where.

Genesis 12:1-4a is all about blessing, and about the obedience of the one whom God called and commanded to be the mediator of God's blessing. Only as a barely conceivable possibility, in a parenthesis, as an unthinkable alternative to blessing, does God mention cursing. Yet here we are, rushing toward Good Friday, toward crucifixion.

Ben C. Ollenburger

#### **Romans 4:1-5,13-17**

Paul begins his argument here as though he is engaging a Jewish interlocutor, someone who is arguing against him. This was a typical strategy in the rhetoric of Paul's day. Paul signals a transition in the argument by asking, "What then shall we say?" He then imagines a heckler in the audience raising the question, "Have we found Abraham to be our ancestor according to the flesh?" (4:1).

In many circles within Judaism of Paul's day, Abraham was viewed as the quintessential patriarch, whose faithfulness to the point of sacrificing his son was considered ultimate obedience to God. Many of Paul's Jewish contemporaries believed it was this obedience, this "work," which made Abraham righteous in the sight of God (e.g. 1 Maccabees 2:52). In Romans 4 Paul enters into a debate with this prevailing interpretation by recalling the story of Abraham and Sarah as narrated in Genesis. In particular he focuses on Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul intended to convince his Jewish counterparts that righteousness is a gift of God's grace, and he does so by reinterpreting this familiar passage from the Torah.

What might constitute a Lenten message based on Paul's reflections on this passage?

Paul emphasizes the primary importance of establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship with God. The relationship between humans and God cannot be established by working for wages but by trusting God for a gift (4:2-8). Obviously wages earned while working are not reckoned as a gift. Those who believe God are counted as righteous. It is important to note that to believe God is not just to give mental assent to propositions about God but to trust in the living God. As the quotation from Psalm 32:1-2 attests, God's gift in Christ includes the forgiveness of sins. Blessed are those against whom God will not count sin!

In 4:9-12 (unfortunately omitted by the lectionary as part of the background text) Paul actually answers the heckler's question, "Have we found Abraham to be our ancestor according to the flesh?" (4:1). In his reading of the story of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, Paul realizes forcefully that the descendants of Abraham and Sarah are not "according to the flesh" but all who follow "the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised" (4:12). It was while Abraham and Sarah were Gentiles that they received God's

promise of many descendants; and it is only on the basis of their faith (trust) that both Gentiles and Jews share in that promise.

What it means to exercise faith is developed in 4:13ff. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah was not fulfilled in their lifetime. Nor does this promise come to fruition through the law, which came years later. (The law Paul mentions here is the Torah as well as an enormous list of purity rituals and other rules devout Jews followed in order to fulfill what they thought was required by the Torah.) Through the type of faith demonstrated by Abraham and Sarah, namely that God would deliver on promises made, even though humanly speaking it seems impossible, God's people can trust in the One who creates "out of nothing" and gives life to the dead.

That is good news! We are called, as were Abraham and Sarah, to be channels of blessing to all the world. In God we trust, as we share the news with a broken world.

Jacob W. Elias

### **Third Sunday of Lent**

#### **Exodus 17:3-7**

The theme of Israel at Rephidim (17:1-7) is that the Israelites encountered in the wilderness a threat of deadly danger, occasioning anxiety, cries for help (17:2), and revolt against their leader, Moses. This threat is repeated on similar occasions, becoming the theme of the entire wilderness narrative.

At Rephidim, the people defined their situation by a confession of unbelief: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children...with thirst?"(17:3). So they contradicted the first word of the Decalogue, blaming on Moses what God would acclaim for the divine self: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"(Exod. 20:2).

Already at the Red Sea, facing death from Pharaoh's army on their entrance into the wilderness, the people had cried this "anti-confession" against Moses: "Was it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?"(14:11-12).

At nearly every stage on their wilderness journey, the people encountered death. At Mara the water was bitter, and they cried out for help to God (15:22-25). Faced with hunger in the Wilderness of Sin, Israel made their first "anti-confession" against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

On all these occasions, the Lord intervened to save. At the Red Sea: "The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still (14:14). At Mara: Moses threw a piece of wood in the water, "and the water became sweet"(15:22). At Sin the Lord said, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you;" this manna continued until Israel entered Gilgal (16:4; Josh. 4:19). At Rephidim: Moses took in his hand the symbol of divine authority, the staff that he had wielded in Egypt. And that which struck death at the Nile struck life at the Rock (17:6).

The season of Lent, February and March, is for many a time of gloom and depression. Like Israel threatened by death, Jesus himself cried out against God at Gethsemane. As in the wilderness, God intervened-not before, but after death. As it did for Jesus, this for us demands ultimate trust.

Millard C. Lind

## Psalm 95

This anonymous Psalm divides into three sections (vv. 1-5, 6-7a, and 7b-11). In each of the three a call or summons is made to the hearers (vv. 1, 6, 7b). The first two are invitations to praise while the third is a warning to be observed. The final section is somewhat odd to read here in the context of vv. 1-7a, but the metaphors of the "Rock" (v. 1) and "sheep" (v. 7a) link the opening two parts with the conceptual context for the third—the third part being an interpretation, lesson, or homily on the traditions in Exodus 17.

The Rock language used in this Psalm reflects a major term for God in the Exodus period, denoting both stability and deliverance motifs. It is also reminiscent of the incident in Exodus 17: Moses strikes the rock so that water may come out for the people in the desert. Just as God guides the people as sheep, so the people from the Exodus story are said to have "hearts that went stray" [like sheep]. Of course, this negative action will be the reason given for their failure to enter the Promised Land (or, God's rest in v. 11).

Thus, the Psalmist uses these two images to express the actions of God in the past: stability, deliverance, and guidance. The previous generation did not respond appropriately to their God, but this generation who sing and hear "today" (v. 7b) can make the correct choice to listen to God's voice.

Another concern is the creation language used for God in the Psalm. God has created the entire world, and thus controls it as its King (vv. 3-6). God's creative activity is intimately connected to God's concern for creation. Just as with the people, God serves as caretaker and administrator for this universe.

The New Testament book of Hebrews explicitly cites the third section of this Psalm as part of an extended exhortation to its readers to continue steadfastly in their faith/faithfulness and not give up (Hebrews 3:7-4:11). The call for the hearers to respond "today" to the voice of God seems to weigh heavily on the hearts of both the Psalmist and the author of Hebrews. In Lent, we engage in a time of "today"—when God's voice comes to us and we must respond accordingly. Let us "not harden our hearts," but instead allow God's Spirit to soften our hearts in humility and repentance, never giving up our patient endurance till the end.

Steven Schweitzer

## John 4:5-26

A nameless Samaritan woman has the longest conversation with Jesus in the Gospel of John. She is the first person to engage in a serious theological discussion with Jesus and the first to acknowledge Jesus as Christ. Quite a contrast after the cleansing of the temple (2:18-20) where the Jews openly express their disbelief and challenging Jesus' authority. Quite a contrast with Nicodemus, a pillar of the Jewish community with education, responsibilities, authority, and power, who nevertheless shows a puzzling uncertainty (3:1-21).

In sharing the drinking cup Jesus, as a Jew, would have made himself unclean. Jesus has violated two societal conventions with his request, for Jews didn't invite contact with Samaritans and males didn't talk to females. Later on we find this outreach reversed when the woman reaches out to Jesus by requesting living water. Jesus shows in this encounter that he is not limited by traditional, cultural and social restraints or laws. Grace is available to all.

Note the progression of titles for Jesus: Sir (v.11), prophet (19), Messiah (25), Savior of the world (42) and his self-revelation: living water, giver of life (v.10), temple where God is to be worshiped (23), giver of Spirit and the I AM (26). As a response to Jesus' call and self-revelation maybe the most important feature is the water jar the woman left behind (4:28). This is the feminine version of the standard gospel formula for responding to the call to discipleship just as the other disciples left their boats and nets in Mt 4:18-22.

While his own people did not accept Jesus (1:11,12), while he was rejected by Nicodemus (3:1-21), he was accepted by Samaritans as the "Savior of the world." Some scholars suggest that this scene is a parallel to the passion narrative: Jesus is in physical distress (4:6//19:1), he is thirsty (4:7//19:28), it is the 6th hour (4:7//19:14), and the work is completed (4:34//19:30). Jesus is recognized as the savior of the world.

This Lenten season gives us opportunity to encounter Jesus anew and reflect on our own and the global brokenness, to call for repentance, to renew our commitment to our own faith journey, and to proclaim anew that grace is available for all.

Maren Tydemers Hange

See also a Sunday School lesson on John 4 prepared by Loren L. Johns

### **Romans 5:1-11**

In Romans 4 the apostle Paul explains to the house churches in Rome that God has chosen both Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, to be God's people in the world. Paul emphasizes the nature of Abraham's calling. Abraham and Sarah experienced the gift of righteousness even before circumcision and the law. Paul declares that God has initiated through Abraham and Sarah a community of people that is inclusive and not elitist. This inclusive gospel is summarized in Romans 5, beginning with the assertion, "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Some interpreters suggest that Paul is extending an exhortation here, "Let us have peace with God ..." A textual variant to that effect makes that a possibility.)

During the season of Lent, churches all around the world recall God's gift to humanity in Jesus Christ, through whom righteousness and peace can become a reality in the world. Let's follow Paul's reflections in 5:1-11:

In Christ God grants peace in the midst of affliction (5:1-2). Peace is more than the absence of trouble; it is a new relationship with God. Enmity is removed through God's grace; there is peace in the heart, a new relationship with God, and the potential of loving relationships between people. This peaceful fellowship with God is given to us through Christ, through whom we gain access to enter and live in this grace. Therefore we rejoice in this new relationship and in the hope of glory to come.

In Christ God also grants joy, love, and hope, even in the midst of affliction and suffering (5:3-5). There is a "stair step" progression here, a movement from suffering to endurance to character to hope. How could tribulation and hardship be the occasion for joy? Ultimately Paul reassures his hearers that through the Holy Spirit God's love has already been poured into their hearts, so that they can endure their hardships with the confidence that God will ultimately triumph over oppression and evil. This message would have been reassuring to slaves, the poor, and the marginalized in Roman society.

How has God demonstrated this love? Through Christ's death on the cross, at the right time, God exhibited costly love for the ungodly, the sinner, the enemy (5:6-11). Paul emphasizes this truth by means of multiple images. He utilizes lawcourt imagery when he says, "We are justified by his blood..." (5:9a). The reference to the blood of Christ undoubtedly reminds Paul's hearers of the sacrificial system in both the Jewish temple (especially the Day of Atonement rituals) and some pagan temples (especially the mystery rites, also involving blood). But Paul also uses liberation and deliverance language: "We are saved through Christ from wrath." (5:9b). And, having referred to humanity as "enemies," Paul employs the ambassadorial language of diplomacy and its desired outcome of reconciliation between warring parties: "We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (5:10) and "We have now received our reconciliation" (5:11).

When it comes to putting into words the essence of the message of the gospel of the love of God, it is necessary to employ a variety of word pictures and metaphors! During Lent, and always, the challenge is to convey the indescribable depth of God's love in Christ in ways that will be understood by people of our day.

Jacob W. Elias

## Fourth Sunday of Lent

### Psalm 23

#### God as shepherd.

God as shepherd—God as host. Two striking metaphors in a very short psalm.

If God is shepherd, the psalmist is a sheep.

If God is a host, the psalmist is a guest.

Equally striking are the settings pictured in the psalm: the pastures and the house of the Lord.

On one level the two metaphors and the two settings seem entirely unrelated.

There is no graceful transition offered between the field and the temple or from praying with the psalmist as a sheep and then as a guest.

The connecting link between the contrasting settings and metaphors is God, who is a protector, providing the psalmist and us with physical safety and blessing wherever we find ourselves.

The shift in address between verses 3 & 4 is difficult to explain. Verses 1-3 describe the shepherd in third person, as if recalling the ways the shepherd has been caring and faithful in the past, and ways the shepherd is now caring and faithful. When the scary part comes (walking through the valley dark as death) the psalmist speaks to God directly—"you are with me." The felt sense of protection is personalized and trusted.

This psalm was written prior to the Babylonian exile. Several commentators believe the table set in the midst of enemies may suggest it was used in a meal, possibly a sacrifice of thanksgiving, after the speaker had been acquitted of a crime or legal difficulty. Others believe the psalm simply describes a journey that starts in the fields and ends in God's dwelling, in God's full presence. That this psalm is David's creation is not settled beyond doubt.

#### Several words and phrases are worth a closer look.

Shepherd/sheep—a relationship not nearly as ideal in real life as it can be in the imagination. Sheep are not intelligent animals. They are excitable, willful, naively curious, easily led astray and at times unreasonably stubborn. For the psalmist to liken himself to a sheep hardly demonstrates a high view of human abilities to discern one's way or care for one's needs. For a shepherd keeping the flock together is not easy task. At the time of the psalm's writing, sheep were led not driven as they are today. Shepherds guided sheep to places that did not endanger their lives and that provided adequate water with places to rest. The metaphor of the shepherd shows up frequently in both Testaments, of particular note Is. 40:11, Ezek. 34:11-6; Luke 5:3-7; John 10:1-18.

Nothing shall I want—can also be read "nothing shall I lack." To lack nothing suggests that all one's needs are supplied. To want nothing may extend our desires beyond what is necessarily required for well-being. Frequently we want things we don't need. To lack nothing or want for anything is to have everything—to be fully cared for and satisfied.

The darkest valley = valley of the shadow of death = a valley dark as death—Clearly the valley is full of danger. Perhaps it is a place where others have died or a place where death is a real threat. It may be a passage that is inhabited by dangerous animals or a dark maze in which a sheep might get lost and never be found (thus the need for the shepherd's rod and staff). In this valley fear is palpable; passing through it safely is not a foregone conclusion.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies—eating is not only a primary mark of hospitality in Middle Eastern culture, it is also a means of covenant making. A meal is a sacred event. Here, sitting at table in the presence of enemies suggests that some type of new relationship is being forged. God is offering protection to this one who has been chosen and anointed, and by this selection the psalmist's relationship with his enemies is changed.

Enemies—people who may have brought some type of charge against the psalmist or threatened his well-being in some way.

You anoint my head with oil—A ritual act that sets the psalmist apart from others, consecrates him for service, or used as a sign of reconciliation or healing. Anointing is a tangible sign of God's blessing.

Psalm 23, though a comforting prayer used at funerals, seems archaic to many people. Some argue that the shepherd image has no power for people who are cut off from agrarian life and who rarely see sheep on the range. It may speak more powerfully as a prayer for private use than for public worship. Its link with David's anointing as king highlights prominently the role of leadership (shepherding) and blessing in the face of adversity (eating in the presence of enemies). It may strike the wrong tone for contemporary worshipers because we resist being led (after all we aren't as dumb as sheep!), and not because the metaphor itself is remote. The shepherd image may in fact speak too clearly.

God as host of a reconciling meal is rich with meaning. This is a moment of blessedness—being well-attended, protected, secure, satiated—even in the presence of people who had threatened or still threaten harm. The act of eating together as a sign of reconciliation and peace in the family, the community, and with strangers is diminishing in significance in North American culture. We eat alone. We eat "fast food." We eat on the run. We gulp down meals so quickly we barely recognize what we have eaten or whom we have eaten with. We frequently complain about the food offered for our nourishment and enjoyment. We are starving for meals that feed us in body, soul, and spirit. We long for the power of fulfillment in eating together with friends, strangers, and enemies at the table where God is the host.

Rebecca Slough

### **1 Samuel 16:1-13**

In this text we have the entrance of David into the life of Israel. But, interestingly, David is not the center of attention until the very end of the passage. In fact, he is not even named when Samuel anoints him. It is not until the narrator notes that the spirit of the Lord came rushing down on him that he is called by name. Up until that point, he is one of Jesse's sons—the smallest, the shepherd, the last one to be presented to this visitor, Samuel. At the anointing, the spirit comes down on the anointed. And it rests on whom? David. This is an "ah, yes" moment for the repeat hearer of the story—because David's name is well known in Israelite history!

At first, though, the narrative makes it clear that this is not a significant son. He is not someone a guest would automatically notice and approve of, as is Eliab. He is not one of the group of seven (a complete number) sons that Jesse sees fit to call before Samuel. But when Jesse has brought forward the seven, Samuel has still not pronounced any of them the choice of YHWH. And this is Samuel's task, from the beginning: "Go, I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite for I have selected for myself a king among his sons"(v.1). So to find this final son, someone has to be sent out to the flock, to fetch the young chore boy. But then, when he appears, and his appearance is noteworthy, at least to the narrator, he enters the group of sons. His entrance is, in fact, marked.

This smallest of the sons gets a comment out of YHWH, who has not spoken since the first son was considered. Initially Samuel is impressed with Eliab. Samuel notices him before any introductions are made, a marked difference from the following sons, who are each presented to Samuel by their father. YHWH's response to Samuel's enthusiasm for Eliab is matching in enthusiasm, but negative. Not what humans see, but what the Lord sees will determine this decision, explains YHWH.

After Eliab and his explicit rejection, the hearers of the story do not hear YHWH speak again until this outside-the-seven, flock-herding, small one appears. At his presence, we get a clear, "This is he"(v.12), spoken by YHWH. And now the one who had to be brought in from the field is "in the midst of his brothers" being anointed. A significant role change has taken place.

Another important motif that the narrative draws to our attention is the act of seeing. "Seeing" is a noteworthy verb throughout the passage. It occurs in noun and verb forms, and a

synonym also appears. The word “eyes” appears twice. Even YHWH’s instruction right at the beginning includes the affirmation that “I have seen among his sons ...” one who will be king. While the NRSV’s translation “I have provided for myself a king among his sons” suggests additional meaning for English speakers, it obscures the fact that the verb “to see” occurs here. Significantly, the motif dominates YHWH’s speech after Samuel makes his assumptions about Eliab. “Do not look upon his appearance and at his height, for I have rejected him. Indeed, not as the human sees, for the human will look into the eyes, but the Lord will look into the heart”(v.7).

The passage is one of the last narratives in which Samuel is an important player. Right to the end, then, he is learning to see. That is, the narrative draws vision to our attention, and makes a bold claim about the nature of sight—that God’s sight is essentially different than human sight. But this is a lesson Samuel (the seer?) is still in the process of learning. His vision for the anointed of the Lord is not the same as YHWH’s own choice.

Julia Zacharias

### **Ephesians 5:8-14**

The epistolary text for the fourth Sunday of Lent, Ephesians 5:8-14, is part of what most scholars agree is a larger unit—either 5:1-20 or 5:3-14. The debate about the literary unit has to do with how one understands vs. 14—with its scrap of hymn. Does the poetic “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light” sound the climactic tone at the end of 3-14? Or is it the pivotal point of a chiasm in the middle of 1-20?

In many ways the longer designations make more sense since the discussion of light/dark and fruit/fruitlessness in 8-14 depends upon the contrast between children of God and children of disobedience earlier in the chapter. Nevertheless, the discussion of light and darkness is certainly a subset of the text and we pick it up in 5:8.

The image of light and darkness as a way to describe the difference between life in God and life apart from God is not a new one in the biblical texts. In the OT, light stands for the salvation that comes from God while darkness stands for death and judgment (Word Biblical Commentary, 327). Psalm 27:1 is a bold declaration: “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” In Psalm 49, rich people are characterized as those who are happy when they are alive. But when they die they do not carry any of that happiness with them. They are like their ancestors—who will never see the light again. They are like animals.

The images of light and darkness are also common in the NT and its contemporary literature. The Gospel of John, John’s letters and the Revelation all use this imagery extensively as do some of Paul’s letters and the literature of the community at Qumran.

What stands out in this text, however, is the boldness of the statement in 8. Literally, it says, “you were darkness but now, in the Lord, light.” You are not in the darkness or the light, you are darkness or light. This particular phrasing, which suggests a change of being, not just disposition, plus the ending of the passage with the liturgical “Awake, O Sleeper” suggests that the passage emerged from or was used in the ritual of baptism.

For teaching or preaching, the most striking communicative point in this passage seems to me to be the connection between darkness/unfruitfulness and light/fruitfulness. Unfortunately the force of that connection is covered over in the NRSV by a poor translation of verse 5:9. The life with God, initiated in a public acknowledgment of allegiance to God, is to be a productive one. The fruit of the light is, according to the NRSV, “found in all that is good and right and true.” But to arrive at that translation, the Greek nouns must be translated with English adjectives. The alteration changes the force of the statement considerably. What the English version communicates is that the child of the light will be a seeker after “all that is good and right and true.” But the Greek nouns communicate something different. The first noun holds the key because there is a Greek adjective, *agathos*, which regularly functions as a substantive noun. This common adjective must be what the NRSV translators had in mind. Here, however, the word is *agathosyne*. The usage practically screams, “Hey, look at me, I’m a noun.” Thus it is better translated as an act of goodness or, as one dictionary suggests,

an act of generosity. The second is *dikaiosyne* the word that is translated as “act of justice” or “justice” as legitimately as it is translated “righteous.” The third word is simply “truth.” I would argue that in this context, because it is in parallel structure with the other two words, that it should be understood as “an act of truth telling.” The communicative point is that the child of the light, the one who walks in the light, the one who is light, will be actively engaged in doing acts of generosity, acts of justice and acts of truth telling. What pleases the Lord are these actions on the parts of believers and what the believers are to “wake up to” is a life of service-doing the acts of generosity, justice and truth.

Mary H. Schertz

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

### **Psalm 130**

This Psalm is one of the fifteen Psalms of Ascents (Pss 120-134), which are believed to have been used in the major festivals at the temple during the Second Temple period. These are “pilgrimage” songs in that either the people sang as they journeyed to the temple or sang one song on each of the fifteen steps going up to the temple proper. In either case, as a whole the fifteen Ascents symbolize a type of “spiritual journey” culminating at worship in God’s house.

Psalm 130 is a combination of confession and proclamation. The Psalmist voices intense prayer to God, desiring God to listen and accept his prayer. The Psalmist confidently asserts God’s forgiveness, love, power, and redemption. Although the present situation may seem difficult, requiring petition to God (vv. 1-2), the Psalmist does not despair. Instead, he emphatically “waits” for the LORD in hope. This future orientation of this Psalm (seeing beyond the present to a different future) promotes a visionary sense while remaining grounded in reality.

The repetition of the line “more than those who watch for the morning” is striking. What is its significance? Typically, the night watchmen would be replaced with the coming of dawn. So, this would be the end of their “job” and time of freedom away from work. But, on another side, the passing of the night and its darkness brings about a time of day and safety. Or, “joy comes with the morning” (Ps 30:5) as a new day begins and the old one (perhaps a “dark night of the soul”) slips away.

Finally, the Psalmist moves from his own experience to the religious experience of corporate Israel. The same hope that this individual has in God is to be embraced by the community of faith (v. 7). Israel can rest assured in the knowledge that God is in the business of forgiveness and deliverance no matter what the current circumstances may suggest is reality. The truth is God’s unrelenting desire for restoration, wholeness, and shalom. God’s peace will come to those who wait for it. In Lent, we are called to embrace this sense of waiting in hope, of expectation for forgiveness and deliverance, and the joy that comes with Easter’s sunrise.

Steven Schweitzer

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Israel was dead. It was dead “in trespasses and sins”-by its idolatries, its treaties with violent Near Eastern nations, its internal violence with every person against the neighbor. No longer viable politically, Israel’s people were scattered from Egypt to Mesopotamia, assimilated into NE empires.

Israel was dead. Two centuries before Ezekiel, Amos preached that the end had come. Every prophet after him had agreed. First, the end had come for the North by the Assyrians (722 B.C.E.), then for the South by the Babylonians (587 B.C.E.). The exiles acknowledged the end by their proverb, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (37:11). Appointed to lead the nations, Israel had become like the nations and had lost to them on history’s battlefield, in the valley of dry bones.

Israel was dead, their bones “very dry.” After touring Ezekiel around the battlefield, Yahweh poses the question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” “Mortal!” To this rhetorical question, a “son of death” on the lost battlefield of his people must defer the issue of history to God: “O Lord Yahweh, you know.”

But Yahweh enlisted this “son of death” in this supra-historical event: “Prophecy to these bones, ...O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: ...breath...sinews...flesh...skin...breath..., and you shall live; and you shall know that I am Yahweh”-determiner of history, leading Israel out from Egypt (37:6).

This was no mere resuscitation of the dead bodies of Israelites to continue their old history. It was a resurrection from the battlefields of history to a new order, the order of a new heart and spirit (36:16-28), in a renewed land (35:1-16:15), with a shepherd leadership (chap. 34). Like Ezekiel’s vision of resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus is no mere resuscitation of dead bodies. It is a communal resurrection of Jesus and his followers into a new order that begins now. God, “even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...” (Eph. 2:5-6). Today, we are reconciled with our fellow Jews “in one new humanity..., thus making peace” (2:15).

Even after bodily death there is a future for this new order. God will remember our DNA to create new bodies, connected with the old, yet with genes repaired and renewed—a new community with new heart and spirit, renewed land, and shepherd leadership!

Millard C. Lind

### **Romans 8:6-11**

Romans 8:6-11 continues Paul’s argument from chapters 6 and 7 concerning the question, “since we are not under law but under grace, should we continue to sin?” Paul responds here by laying out the two choices facing every Christian. Like Hamlet asking, “To be or not to be?” the Christian must ask, “To live a life according to the flesh, or to live a life according to the spirit?” Paul showed earlier how all humans live under the law of sin and death, Jews and gentiles alike. But the law of the spirit (8.2) accomplishes what the Torah could not: dealing effectively with the power of sin and death. During these days of Lent, this text challenges us to assess whether our choices are open or closed to the reality of God’s activity in the world. What power has real mastery over our lives?

Flesh (sarx) is Paul’s general term for the human condition, a condition that Paul has already told us is “under the power of sin”(3:9). The flesh-life and the spirit-life are two radically opposed kinds of existence. Are we flesh people or spirit people? The mindset of flesh is “hostile to God”(8.7). This hostility is not a psychological belief or an emotional feeling but a shaping of one’s life in a way that is closed to God’s activity in the world. Paul takes a hard line here: those who remain with the flesh-life are not merely failing to move toward the Kingdom, they are enemies of God because they make choices opposed to God’s activity.

The spirit on the other hand represents “life”(8.10). Life is Paul’s shorthand for the goal of human freedom: sharing in God’s presence. The spirit of Christ (a gift from God) is the source and the guide to godly behavior. It is what connects us and defines us (Jews, gentiles, all) in common as the “body of Christ.” Jesus’ “gift” to all the baptized then was to release the divine power to break the bondage of sin and resurrect humans to eternal life. This is a high Christology: Paul uses spirit of God and spirit of Christ interchangeably. God’s people are Spirit-people, who are becoming what they truly are in Christ.

Paul’s theology of power is a distinguishing aspect of Christian belief, for the power of Christ-in-us is an intimately known power, not a power “out there” or in one’s cognitive understanding alone. This power neither originates from believers nor is correlated to their individual merit. Spirit-power is the experiential component to the confession, “Jesus is lord” and in Christian language is called the Holy Spirit. Flesh people and spirit people both live in a world mastered by the power of sin. Both exist side by side in the “already but not yet” of

Paul's eschatology. But spirit people are not enslaved by sin since they have "Christ in you," (8.10) the same spirit-power of God that resurrected Jesus from the dead.

Said another way, the problem is not our human bodies. Paul's theology of the body is that the body always belongs to someone and the two options are sin (the flesh-life) or Christ. The power of sin that rules the flesh-world has enslaved the body, but is not located in the body. Though the body is dead because of sin (8.10), the Holy Spirit has the power to break the power of sin. The struggle then is between our present weakness/suffering and our future glory. The flesh and spirit language does not represent for Paul a war between "body" and "spirit" nor is the human body itself evil or the habitation of evil. Indeed, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies (8.11).

Jacob W. Elias

## Sixth Sunday of Lent

### Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

O give thanks to the Lord ... his steadfast love endures forever.

The above are pivotal statements for understanding this section of Psalm 118 and its appointment for Palm Sunday.

The opening four verses of Psalm 118 function as an antiphonal call to worship extolling God's faithful love. The psalm ends as it began, "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever." Verses 5-18 recount the battle of a person (many presume to be the king), who was vindicated by God. The people of Israel enjoy well-being and salvation because of this man and his victory over his enemies.

In verse 19 the celebrating pilgrims reach the Gate of Righteousness or the Gate of Victory through which they pass to enter the temple square. The conquering leader's enemies underestimated his strength, disregarded him, never realizing that God was on his side. In victory he is the chief cornerstone for God's purposes and for his people. (The cornerstone metaphor shows up frequently in scripture: Is 28:16-17; Mk 12:10-12; Luke 20:16-18; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:6). This day of celebration was the Sabbath that God had long before set aside for worship and rejoicing in him. It is not a special day to honor the leader, but the Lord Day's when God, who acted with vindication, is honored.

"Hosanna" of Matt 21:9 is translated in verse 25 as "Save us." The acclamation of blessing for "the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (26) acknowledges the leader's identification with God and with God's blessing. This is echoed word for word in Matthew. The meaning of the last half of verse 27 is obscure. Verse 28 is likely the confession of faith offered by the vindicated leader.

Psalm 118 is one of the Hallel Psalms (111-118) sung at Passover and at the Feast of Tabernacles. It may have been created for the dedication of the temple. Jesus' followers would have known the psalm well and found it natural to reinterpret it in light of his teachings about the kingdom of God, his death, and resurrection.

This psalm involves us in movement. A procession fits the movement of this psalm most adequately. If a physical process is not possible, the internal movement of the faithful heart acknowledges God's work in vindicating the leader. The political ramifications of this psalm's procession were (and are) immense. To follow a leader vindicated by God, blessed by God, and now a servant of God is to share in the responsibilities of loyalty and service as the leader does. In light of all that vies for our loyalty (e.g., family, work, church responsibilities, civic duty, leisure activities, friendships, etc.) perhaps joining the process of the servant king Jesus will put many things in sharper focus.

Rebecca Slough

**Isaiah 50:4-9a**

On Palm Sunday, we see the celebration of the crowd at Jerusalem, receiving Jesus expectantly. However, by the end of the week, the tide will have turned against him, resulting in his crucifixion. The prophet in Isaiah 50 describes his own experience, which finds echoes in the language of the Gospels regarding certain events of Passion Week (see Matthew 26:67-68).

In Isaiah's words, this individual—the "I" of the passage—is a faithful disciple, one who is taught by God every morning and who in turn communicates that teaching to others (vv. 4-5). However, this role as a prophetic voice seems to have gotten the prophet into trouble, being abused and rejected by his audience (vv. 6-9a). Yet, even in the face of hostility, the prophet is not deterred. The prophet will continue, depending on God's assistance and strength. One hears echoes of Paul's climatic confession of Romans 8:32-34 [If God is for us, who can be against us?] in the words of verse 8. Truly, the righteous will be vindicated by God, who remains near to this disciplined disciple. The prophet is resolute, setting his face like flint. Nothing will prevent him from obeying the daily voice of God.

This determination to see it through to the end is mirrored in the Gospels' accounts of Passion Week. Jesus will not take a way out; although he desires "this cup [to pass] from me" (see Mark 14:36//Matthew 26:39//Luke 21:42) he nonetheless accepts the trials while depending on God's help and ultimate vindication. Jesus refuses to fight or resist, but in the same spirit of Isaiah 50, receives violence from others without retaliation. These actions of Jesus are clarified in 1 Peter 2:23: Jesus was abused, but did not return in like kind. Instead he "entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." Jesus followed the example of the prophet in Isaiah 50, choosing to suffer for the sake of God's message. As we prepare for Easter and the glorious resurrection, we should not ignore the suffering that precedes it. Lent reminds us of the reality of suffering, and of Jesus' decision to embrace its pain instead of avoiding it. As Christians, do we "follow in his steps" (1 Peter 3:21) or do we enjoy the celebrations of Palm Sunday and Easter forgetting the difficulties that come in between the two? As Lent comes to a close, let us not move too quickly to the joy of Easter. We must linger yet a while at Good Friday first.

Steven Schweitzer

**Matthew 21:1-11**

The gospel reading for the fifth Sunday of Lent is, naturally, the story of the triumphal entry—this year from Matthew's gospel.

Probably the first issue that comes to mind, especially when using this text with children, is why Jesus rides two animals in Matthew and only one in the other gospels. But there it is, bold as day, in verse 5—"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey"(NRSV). This seems incongruous, or even silly, to any honest person. Riding one animal is difficult, two more difficult, and two animals of quite different sizes, as implied, is almost impossible. And not only difficult but incomprehensible. Why would anyone in his or her right mind even try such a thing?

It's unfortunate that this puzzle has been so distracting, for the most probable explanation is that Matthew failed to understand the Hebrew poetry that underlies the quotation he uses here to make an OT connection to an event in Jesus' life. The Hebrew text Matthew is using here is not talking about two animals. Rather it is an example of Hebrew parallelism—particularly synthetic parallelism, where a second line intensifies the first by repeating it almost word for word. So the second use of an animal, the foal of a donkey, does not add another animal to the first but more weight or emphasis to the first. But as Matthew takes up the quotation he does not make this clear and so what we have in this text is the awkward image of Jesus trying to ride into Jerusalem on one big donkey and one small donkey. While Matthew routinely stretches the Hebrew texts to make them fit his contexts, this instance is quite a stretch—even for Matthew!

More seriously, as Richard Gardner notes in the BCBC commentary, what is more important than how many animals Jesus rode into Jerusalem is why he rode any animals at all. It was a double message writ large. Any popular leader, as Jesus was during parts of his public ministry, who rode into Jerusalem on an animal would rouse the people's messianic expectations. But the fact that it was a donkey, or donkeys, would have added a note of parody to the panorama. More fitting, for a messianic rescuer, would have been a war-horse decked out in full military gear. Instead, what the crowd gets is a donkey or two, the disciples' clothes, well travel worn by now, and a few branches on the road. An upside down image for an upside down king.

The end of the passage is especially interesting because, with the acclamation of the crowd, the double messages continue. In verse 8, most of the people get into the spirit of the occasion, also divesting themselves of their outer clothing and spreading the garments on the road to soften Jesus' way. They hail him as the Son of David, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. They offer the traditional blessings and hosannas. But then, almost as a minor key sounding under a major chord, the city is "stirred." The Greek word is "shook" from the same root as seizure, seismograph, etc. It is also the same word that is used to describe what happened to the earth in the crucifixion (27:51). As such it serves as a foreshadowing of the ominous events that will happen in Jerusalem. And, then, after the city is shaken, there is a significant question and answer. The question is a question one might expect after such a "stirring" entry into the city. "Who is this?" Who is this who is creating such a stir? But the answer is not what one would expect after such adulation. At least, one would have expected the people to answer with the title they'd just been shouting-the Son of David. But, no, the answer is simply "a prophet." A quieter claim, and in light of Israel's history with prophets, a more ambivalent claim.

Mary H. Schertz

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

Passion Week begins with Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus descended the Mount of Olives on a lowly donkey, crossed the Kidron Valley, and then ascended the slope of Mount Zion on his way toward the temple. Jesus' physical descent and subsequent ascent at the beginning of Passion Week provide a geographic metaphor for his cosmic journey of descent and ascent as portrayed in Philippians 2.

Philippians 2:5-11 is an exalted poetic narrative about Jesus Christ. The story that Paul shares here features neither Bethlehem and Nazareth nor Jerusalem and Bethany. Rather this narrative describes the pilgrimage of Christ from his pre-existence to his incarnation, including his death on the cross, to his exaltation as risen Lord.

There is a widespread consensus that Paul is quoting an early Christian hymn in honor of Christ. Whether Paul cites an existing hymn or composed it himself, it is clear that he employs this lofty poetic story of the cosmic Christ as part of his pastoral care and admonition addressed to the church at Philippi.

This hymn is framed by pastoral admonitions that relate to the Philippian church situation (2:1-5,12-16). Paul is concerned to point out that the Christian life needs to be grounded in the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, his life, and especially his death, and resurrection. Christian relationships also must be shaped by God's character, by the mindset of Christ: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus ... (2:5)

What are the dimensions of Christ's journey, his descent and ascent as pre-existent and incarnate and exalted Lord? And what are the correlates for the life of the believer and for the mindset of the Christian community?

The hymn begins with the prior existence of Christ in the form of God (2:5,6). When seeking to convey the realities glimpsed in the realm of divine mystery, human language fails to communicate adequately. Debates abound concerning the meanings of the complex terms in

this part of the poem, but the message is clear enough: Christ's attitude is characterized as non-grasping and unselfish.

The hymn continues by describing Christ's "kenosis" or self-emptying. His mindset moves Christ to demonstrate the depth of God's love through being poured out, through servanthood, through self-sacrifice for the sake of others, through obedience even unto death on the cross (2:7-8). Again the interpretive issues are complicated, but the import is indisputable: in his incarnation Christ came to identify and to serve. His service took him all the way to the cross.

The hymn reaches its climax with the acclamation of Christ as Lord (2:9-11). In this way Paul keeps before the Philippians the prospect of God's ultimate vindication of all who (like Jesus the incarnate Lord) trust God, even when obedience is accompanied by persecution and suffering. Certainly the acknowledgment that some day every knee will bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord must have struck a responsive chord with believers in Philippi. They were suffering public rejection or overt persecution because of their unwillingness to participate in the civil cult, which called upon the citizens to confess Caesar as Lord. What does our confession of the lordship of Christ cost us?

Jacob W. Elias

## Easter Sunday

### Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

This proclamation of God's steadfast love (*chesed* in Hebrew) in this psalm is a corporate expression of trust. The Psalmist describes "glad songs of victory" celebrating God's triumph over some type of calamity—possibly a physical disease or other potentially deadly occurrence (vv.17-18). It is God's deliverance over the power of impending death that provides the context for the Psalmist's desire to praise God in the midst of the corporate assembly at the temple (vv. 19-21). The Psalmist understands the appropriate response to God's assistance: public proclamation in the midst of the community, telling of God's acts on behalf of one in need. This testimony from the individual is to be echoed by the community, who affirm the goodness of God and the joy that comes with God's intervention (vv. 23-24).

The two verses regarding the "stone that the builders rejected" seem out of place in its present location. In the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Psalms, James Waltner suggests that this psalm was part of a processional liturgy moving the worshipping community within the inner courts of the temple complex (p. 571). In this scenario, the community would come to the actual cornerstone or keystone used as the primary marker for the temple structure. The Psalmist and community thus celebrate this physical representation of God's wondrous activity—using what others discard for God's glory and purposes. Waltner's suggestion has merit, at least as the use of Psalm 118 in the Jewish celebrations of the festivals of Tabernacles [Booths/Sukkoth] and Hanukkah during the Second Temple period is well attested.

Further, the New Testament clearly associates this image of rejection and exaltation on "this day" with the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Mark 12:10//Matthew 21:42//Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6-8). Thus, the Psalmist's concern for deliverance from death has been applied to God's deliverance of Jesus on Easter. Now, we—the Church, the community of faith—are invited to celebrate Jesus' new life on "the day that the LORD has made" which is truly "marvelous in our eyes." On Easter, in worship we proclaim the good things that God has done. We testify to God's deliverance, and hope in God's continued activity in our present, demonstrating God's steadfast love (*chesed*) again in the wake of Easter's joy and new life.

Steven Schweitzer