The story of Moses bringing water from the rock focuses more on Israel’s lack of faith than on the power of Yahweh that is manifested through Moses. In v. 2 Moses interprets the people’s quarrel with him as an action that also puts Yahweh under examination. When the people renewed their murmuring and accused Moses of bringing death through the Exodus, instead of liberation and life, Moses interceded with Yahweh. His prayer in v. 4 concentrates on his own safety—they are ready to stone me!—and not on the people’s thirst. Yahweh promises a miracle of water from the rock, and this will be accomplished by his own presence at the holy mountain Horeb and through the agency of Moses. In performing the miracle, Moses uses the same staff with which he had struck the Nile (7:20), and he is accompanied by representatives of the people’s leadership, that is, the elders of Israel.

The miracle itself is reported very tersely: “Moses did so.” But Moses underscores the people’s quarrel with himself and their testing of God (v. 2) by naming the site of this miracle Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarreling). The pericope ends with the people’s jarring question: Is the LORD among us or not?

Meaning and Response
God provides for our basic needs, such as thirst, and these providential actions come from the same hand that accomplished our salvation. There is a continuity between the God of the Exodus and the God who gives a thirsty people water, and between the God of Calvary and the God who addresses the economic, physical, and social struggles of our lives. The gospel is God’s good news for all of our bad situations. The little crises of our daily life are where we need and perceive the power of God. Good preaching needs to move beyond surface symptoms to deeper theological problems, and it needs to turn confessions of God’s deeds in the past into sources of power relevant to individuals and the church today.

The writer of this pericope shows the deeper malady that lies behind human complaining. It is surprising that the Israelites seem to have lost confidence in Moses even before they came to Mount Sinai, only a few weeks into a forty year journey. Once trust dissolves in human relationships, even good deeds are seen in the worst possible light. The people claimed that the result of the Exodus, if not its purpose, was to kill them. But their contending with Moses was in the final analysis a quarrel with God and God’s leadership. Every sin, finally, is a violation of the First Commandment. The people failed to draw the proper inferences from the liberation they had just experienced. St. Paul saw the action of God through Christ as directly relevant to the challenges faced by his followers and himself: “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?” (Rom. 8:31-32).

The good news in Exodus 17 is that despite the arrogant question of the people, God indeed was standing there on the rock at Horeb. Real leadership—of Moses and the
elders, and of preachers today--is the ability to see beyond the complaints to the divine solution, and the ability to affirm God’s presence in our troubles in a convincing way.

Ez. 18:1-4, 25-32

Ezekiel 18 is not the beginning of the idea of individualism, as many believe. Rather, it asserts that people cannot justify their failure to repent by claiming that they are limited in their faith possibilities by the deeds of previous generations (vv. 5-20) or by their own previous history of sinning (vv. 21-29). The proverb uttered by the prophet’s opponents in v. 2, on the other hand, argued that the events experienced by Israel in exile were the results of the sins of a previous generation. Yahweh asserts that sinners die because of their own sins.

The controversy in vv. 25-32 centers on “fairness.” Ezekiel’s opponents claimed that Yahweh was unfair, but the oracle of Yahweh reverses the charge. Past righteousness will not spare present sinners from punishment, nor does past sinfulness make repentance impossible. God’s “fairness” is shown in the call for repentance, delivered by Ezekiel. Yahweh calls and invites people to life, that is, to existence in his presence. When backsliding to death and repenting to life are the real alternatives, the house of Israel’s failure to repent is hard to comprehend. Because repentance is the goal of this chapter, the new heart and spirit are described as human achievements. Elsewhere in Ezekiel, where the emphasis is more theocentric, the new heart and spirit are identified as gifts of Yahweh (11:19; 36:26).
Meaning and Response

Two common responses to sin are discussed by Ezekiel. One response is to deny our own sin and to blame our troubles on our parents or other forebears. “Don’t blame me for racism or pollution of the environment!” A second response is to give up on any change of improvement and claim we are trapped by our own past. “We’ve developed bad habits and we cannot break them!” God’s call for repentance also conveys the promise that repentance is possible.

Ezekiel argues that the people are unfair in their complaints and that God’s “fairness” comes in the command/promise to get a new heart and a new spirit. “Fairness” has an ironic ring here. We usually speak in such contexts about God’s righteousness or about God’s grace triumphing over God’s wrath. God’s “fairness” is anything but fair. It goes way beyond what God owes us; it contradicts God’s anger and sorrow over our sin. In understating God’s kindness to us, Ezekiel manages to highlight it. The paradox between our seeking a new heart and God giving a new heart is echoed in Paul: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you.” (Phil 2:12-13).

Ps. 78:1-4, 12-16

This Psalm rehearses God’s many benefactions, culminating in the choice of Jerusalem and David, and the people’s repeated rebellions. In the first four verses, a wisdom teacher invites readers to reflect on the deeds of Yahweh and pass their significance on to
the next generation. In the second paragraph excerpted from the Psalm, the poet alludes to acts of providence for Israel: liberation through the plagues in Egypt (v. 12), the crossing of the Reed Sea (v. 13), God’s guidance through a pillar of cloud and fire (v. 14), and his miraculous provision of water (vv. 15-16). The rebellion of the people follows in vv. 17-31.

Meaning and Response

These brief excerpts from a very long Psalm might lead to a homiletical focus on v. 4, where those who recite the psalm pledge to tell the coming generation about the LORD’s glorious deeds. Parents in particular and the church in general need to take much more seriously the task and challenge of Christian education.

But these excerpts from Psalm 78 are also disturbing because they leave out one of the central themes of the Psalm—the people’s rebellion, their sin, and their testing of God. Israel in the wilderness cut God no slack: “O.K. you provided water; can you also give bread?” The great recital of God’s grace must be seen in the context of and as a response to Israel’s repeated failure. God in the abstract is not God—for them or for us.

Ps. 25:1-14

This acrostic Psalm is a lament of an individual, whose special concern is his or her sins. The Psalmist provides reasons for God to forgive because of his or her own trust (vv. 1-2; 15; 20), because of God’s pity for the Psalmist (vv. 16-18), and because of God’s
characteristics (a saving God, v. 5; mercy and steadfast love, v. 6; goodness, v. 7; God’s name, v. 11). The Psalmist is beset by enemies (vv. 2 and 19) and, therefore, also prays for protection. By asking for instruction in God’s ways or paths, the Psalmist commits to an obedient life (vv. 4-5). The Psalmist concludes these petitions with a prayer for the redemption of the entire community (v. 22; cf. 14:7; 28:9; 130:7; 131:3).

Ps. 125:4-5, 6-7, 8-9 Is this a typographical error for Ps. 25? Ps. 125 has only 5 verses.

Phil. 2:1-13

On the basis of qualities that characterize life in Christ (v. 1), Paul admonishes the Philippians to practice unity and to demonstrate selfless love toward one another (vv. 2-3). Fellowship among Christians is based on Christ’s consoling love for them and a common participation in the eschatological gift of the Spirit (v. 1). The humility of the Philippians should primarily be toward one another, not so much toward all people. Verse 5 can mean that Christians are to model themselves after Christ’s humble example, or, more likely, it means that humility is appropriate for Christians to have because of their existence in Christ Jesus. The following hymn celebrates the drama of redemption and makes known to the Philippians how they came to be “in Christ.”

Most scholars today believe that vv. 6-11 are a pre-Pauline hymn. Paul quotes the hymn to summon the Philippians to live out the selfless attitude that should characterize them on the basis of their being “in Christ.” Verses 6-8 describe Christ’s abasement and vv. 9-11 his exaltation. Christ Jesus did not use his Godlike status—at the beginning he
was at God’s side, like wisdom in Proverbs 8-- for purely selfish ends, but freely rendered himself powerless. The paradox is that the Godlike and, therefore, immortal one took on human existence and even human mortality. The mention of “death on a cross” (v. 8) may be Paul’s specific addition to this hymn, but it is appropriate to the position of slave that Christ Jesus freely chose. Nevertheless, God vindicated the one who exemplified obedience by exalting him and giving him the name “Lord,” a name that is above all names. Jesus now deserves to be honored as universal Lord, and the universality of this claim is emphasized by the mention of a three-story universe that offers acclaim—heaven, earth, and the region below the earth. The entire cosmos is brought under the Lordship of Christ. The confession “Jesus is Lord” is attested also elsewhere in Paul’s letters (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 10:9).

Paul calls for unity and humility on the basis of the Philippians’ previous obedience to himself, an obedience that was more clear when he was absent than even when he was present (v. 12). Their “salvation” in v. 12 refers to the restoration to wholeness of a church that was full of rivalries and divisions. God’s presence with them compensates for Paul’s absence, and God’s gracious assistance (his good pleasure) enables the Philippians to desire and to actively seek unity and humility.

Meaning and Response

We live in a consumerist society and we are plagued by a disease that has been described as “Affluenza: I shop, therefore, I am.” A few years ago I visited a local mega church whose message could be summed up in the words, “It’s not over until I win.” Our
society and to a certain degree our churches are also racked by divisions and by
balkanization into like-minded groups.

Paul’s invitation to the Philippians invites them—and us!—to an entirely different
lifestyle, marked by unity, humility and selfless love. It is not a lifestyle precipitated by a
fear of getting caught. Rather, the obedience of the Philippians was better with Paul
absent than with him present. Such transformed relationships are possible for those who
are in Christ.

We come to be in Christ through our baptism, but the power behind that
sacrament lies in the radical obedience of Jesus who humbled himself to the point of
death. This radical obedience was followed by God’s equally radical exaltation of Jesus,
just as the radical trust demonstrated in Jesus’ death led the centurion to recognize him as
God’s Son (Mk. 15:39). Good news accompanies this radical call for humility and unity:
God is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Mt. 21:23-32

There are five controversy stories between Mt. 21:23 and 22:46, and all are part of
the lectionary for this season of the church year, except for 22:23-33. In vv. 23-27
Matthew follows Mark 11:27-33 closely (cf. also Luke 20:1-8). The religious and civil
leaders of the day (the chief priests and elders of the people) challenged the authority of
Jesus to do “these things.” This may refer to his teaching, his entry into the city, his
cleansing of the temple, his healing, or his receiving praise from the crowds. Jesus
countered the leaders’ question with a question of his own, a method often used in the Talmud.

“Authority” is an important word in Matthew. In 7:29 the evangelist notes that Jesus taught with authority, while the healing of the paralytic in 9:6 demonstrated that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. In 10:1 Jesus gave his disciples authority over evil spirits. The authority given to the resurrected Jesus is the basis for his issuance of the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them (28:16-20). Authority, therefore, usually refers to helping or saving actions rather than to any kind of domination.

Jesus’ question about the baptism of John and his prophetic authority put the leaders in a dilemma. The Old Testament had offered criteria for choosing between true and false prophets (Deut. 13:1-5), but these criteria often proved to be very difficult to apply in concrete cases (Jer. 29:21-31). If the leaders would say that John’s baptism had a divine mandate, they could not explain why they had not believed John. If they would belittle his baptism by saying it came only from a human origin, they would stir up bitterness among the common people who considered John a prophet. By answering “We do not know” they exposed their own incapacity in religious matters. This controversy story assumes that since the leaders could not discern who John was, they were not able to discern who Jesus is. The refusal of Jesus to answer them leads the reader to conclude that Jesus did have authority to do “these things.”

The parable in vv. 28-32, which is a midrashic commentary on vv. 23-27, also poses a dilemma. Who is more obedient—a son who says he will not work in a vineyard, but then does, or a son who says he will work, but then does not? Obedient faith in
Matthew is the test for fidelity, and Luke’s story of the Prodigal son also describes a son who first rebels and then obeys (15:11-32). Tax collectors and prostitutes, though they were public sinners, acknowledged the justice of God and were baptized by John (Luke 7:29-30). They were rebellious children who later believed. Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners, who had table fellowship with them (9:10-11; 10:3; 11:19; 18:17). The religious leaders of the day publicly said yes to God, but denied that faith by their disobedience, which continued even after they saw the repentance of the tax collectors and prostitutes. John’s way of righteousness (v. 32) was the way leading to true righteousness, that is, the kingdom.

Meaning and Response

Many people have problems with “authority figures,” or they do not know how to handle the exercise of authority even when it is appropriate. Authority figures can easily abuse their status, but everyone knows that without proper authority the body politic—or the church for that matter—would dissolve into chaos. People with authority hangups may never have resolved the problem of growing up and the proper differentiation and independence children need to gain in regard to their parents. Sometimes people who protest most about misuse of authority do not have the foggiest idea of how to use authority when their turn to use authority comes.

Jesus poses a dilemma to the chief priests and elders so that he would not get caught in their trap about the source of his authority. There is no question in the evangelist’s mind, however, that Jesus indeed had authority to do “these things,” the great
miracles that have punctuated the immediately preceding chapters. Authority for Jesus meant among other things authority to forgive sins or authority to send his followers out in a world-wide mission. One of the prayers of the church notes that God’s almighty power—his authority!—is known chiefly in his showing mercy and pity.

The chief priests and elders came up with a quick response to the second puzzle Jesus posed (v. 31). Clearly those who refused to work but later changed their mind were more faithful than those who merely said they would work, but in fact did nothing. Obedient faith is the real litmus test for fidelity. John called for righteousness and repentance, and the public sinners of his day, the tax collectors and prostitutes, believed what he said about God’s inbreaking kingdom and repented. The religious leaders did not believe John, nor were they impressed at his impact on the public sinners.

Effective preaching on this text requires the preacher and the hearers to identify with both sides in this dilemma. The respectable people of the church may be more impressed with their own commitment than they are with God’s generosity. Their relative “goodness” may deafen them to God’s call to repentance. Our ability to play the role of repentant public sinners may be directly related to our openness to seeing repentance and fidelity in those who are not so easily classified as respectable, or whose lifestyle seems to make them inferior to us. Before we can understand ourselves as beggars before God we must be willing to extend God’s generous welcome to all sorts and conditions of people. That is often easier to do in the abstract than in the concrete.

Larry R. was my advisee at the seminary twenty-five years ago. He quit after the first month, finding no meaning in the academic study of theology. At the time I was also serving as an interim pastor at an inner city congregation, where Larry and his
spouse continued to attend. Each Sunday they would bring to church someone they had picked up at the bus station, or someone who had hopped a box car and happened to drop off in our city. Some of his guests were beggars; many of them smelled. Larry said no to seminary but yes to God’s call. He and his spouse did not approach these strangers with criticism or defensiveness; somehow they both had a credibility with them I could never achieve. I was a religious leader; the guests of Larry were tax collectors and prostitutes—sometimes literally. The memory of Larry never lets me hear this text comfortably.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – (Sunday, October 3) Proper 22 (27)

Ex. 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

What makes the Decalogue unique is not the specific ethical principles it enunciates, many of which are supported by people of good will everywhere. Rather, these commandments are special because they are given by the one who delivered the people who are to keep them from slavery in Egypt and so created a special relationship with them. This relationship is exclusive and all comprehensive. Anything people fear, love, and trust above anything else is their God, their idol. Eight of the Ten Commandments prohibit specific misdeeds, but thereby leave most of life open for responsible freedom. The two positive commandments underscore issues that are central to Israel’s identity. Keeping the Sabbath day was a way of seeing yes to God in a counter-cultural fashion since many of Israel’s neighbors did not keep the Sabbath. The command to honor
parents, like all the rest of the commandments, is addressed primarily to adults. This commandment refers not only to children’s obedience to parents, but much more to the obligation all of us have to honor and care for the elderly, especially those who are no longer of a financial benefit to us.

Meaning and Response

The battle over the role of the Ten Commandments in our public life is badly misplaced, not so much because of constitutional issues, but because these commandments are instructions addressed to insiders. They speak to Israelites who worship the God of the Exodus or to Christians who are already *in* Christ. They are not some kind of club to keep the unwashed public obedient. Their unique blend of categorically ruling out certain far-out behaviors like murder and adultery while inviting those addressed to live all of life in fidelity to God and neighbor means that they should be trivialized into a lowest common denominator of ethical behavior.

The words of Jesus go beyond the original intention of the Decalogue, but they do so in helpful ways. A tiny percent of people ever commit murder, but almost all of us hate or intensely dislike someone. Jesus identifies the real and potential violence in such feelings and says that anyone who hates sister or brother is a murderer. Adultery is somewhat more common, unfortunately also among Christians, but Jesus warns that anyone who looks with lust at someone other than spouse, who treats someone else as a sexual object, has already committed adultery. Our parents’ generation interpreted this commandment in a pietistic way—well and good, I suppose, but sometimes to the
detriment of seeing the wholesomeness of our sexuality. The sin of our generation, perhaps, is to turn sex into a commodity and to seriously loosen its inevitable connection to fidelity. The words of Jesus help us identify what love of God and love of neighbor might mean in regard to both violence and sexuality.

Isa 5:1-7

This song begins by describing a lover’s unrequited love for a vineyard. The reference could be to the relationship between a man and a woman or between a farmer and one of his crops. Despite constant and thorough attention by the lover, the vineyard yielded only bad grapes. Beginning with v. 3, the lover, now clearly to be identified with Yahweh, addresses the vineyard, now identified as the house of Israel and the people of Judah. Verse 3 calls upon the people of Jerusalem and Judah to acknowledge God’s faithful actions in v. 2 and thereby condemn their own behavior (cf. 2 Sam. 12:1-12). God announces punishments in vv. 5-6, still using metaphors appropriate to the parable, but also clearing referring to an enemy’s military attack on the land. Rainfall will also cease because of divine command.

The vineyard’s wild grapes are translated into ethical categories in v. 7. God expected his benefactions would lead to a passion for justice, but they resulted only in violence. He hoped for Israel’s faithfulness to the relationship he had established for them (righteousness), but all he heard was the cry of the oppressed. In Hebrew, “justice” and “bloodshed,” on the one hand, and “righteousness” and a “cry,” on the other hand,
have a similar pronunciation. In these puns is disclosed God’s disappointment in his
people’s behavior.

Meaning and Response

We have read this passage so frequently, that it no longer surprises us, but its
punch line is just as dramatic and unexpected as Nathan’s “You are the man!” was to
David (2 Sam. 12:7). By recovering the original, unexpected outcome of this song, we
may learn to examine and criticize our own behavior much more closely.

Secondly, this love song of God for his vineyard was meant to evoke and
empower justice and righteousness. There is much talk in the church today about God’s
unconditional love. That is appropriate if we mean thereby that it is unconceivable that
there is any person whose sins are too great for God to forgive, or that God does not ask
questions about lifestyle and status in dispensing salvation. But these words are
unconditional love are misleading if they neglect the fact that God always loves us with
the sole purpose of effecting radical transformation. Paradoxically, God loves us
unconditionally and conditionally.

Third, God’s disappointment in the human response is a powerful motif in this
song. God’s plaintive cry, “What more was there to do for my vineyard?” reminds us of
God’s unfathomable generosity in Jesus Christ and the sometimes tepid character of our
response.

Psalm 19
The Psalmist marvels at the self-revelatory power of the sky, which witnesses to God with “voice” and “words” without ever making a sound. At the center of the sky is the sun, here compared to the vigor of a groom or a warrior (vv. 1-6). The second half of the Psalm meditates on the power of God’s law, with several echoes of the description of the sun. God’s instruction is viewed positively, as a guide to the redeemed. The Psalmist asks for deliverance from hidden or inadvertent sins and from the power of insolent people. Verse 13 may also allude to insolent sins, that is, to deliberate disobedience. The “great transgression” (v. 13) may refer to adultery, idolatry, or other open rebellion.

Meaning and Response

There has been great disagreement in Christian theology about the relationship of nature and grace. While grace has often been the clear victor in these discussions, much more attention has been paid in recent decades to the revelatory capability of nature itself or to the cosmic nature of Christ. Psalm 19 is aware of this distinction, and it correlates nicely the two types of revelation. The heavens do—all by themselves—tell the glory of God, but the “law” of the LORD (v. 7) is also God’s revelation. It includes what Christians call law, but goes much beyond it to include the story of God or the instruction of God. This instruction is both a guide to the redeemed and a constant judge of our behavior. “Redeemer” is the final word in the Psalm. In describing God it connotes family metaphors, that is, the Psalmist hails God as the best brother or sister one ever had.
While much of the Psalm is told by a spectator, the Psalmist finally exclaims in engaged trust, “Lord, you are my rock and my redeemer.”

Ps. 80

This lament of the community may have originated in the Northern Kingdom (vv. 1-2). The Psalmists complain about the attitude and actions of their national enemies (vv. 6, 12-13, 16) and pledge themselves to repentance and a new obedient life (v. 18). The exodus and conquest are presented under the metaphor of a vine that God planted in the Holy Land, but that is now being ravaged by Israel’s enemies (vv. 8-13), who are agents of God himself (v. 12). The Psalm is structured by a refrain that appears in vv. 3, 7, and 19 (cf. v. 14). God’s shining face brings salvation to Israel, and the Psalmists pray that God’s frowning face will bring destruction to the enemies (v. 16).

Phil 3:4b-14

Paul was upset by the presence of rival, Jewish-Christian missionaries at Philippi, whom he dismisses as “dogs” (v. 2). He could, in fact, claim great confidence in his own Jewish credentials (here referred to as confidence in the flesh). He cites his circumcision and his membership in the people of Israel and, specifically, in the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin was the only child of Jacob born in the promised land, and from this tribe came the first king, Saul, which was Paul’s birth name. Paul and his family still spoke Hebrew. He had chosen to be part of the Pharisees, whose zeal for the law was well known, and his own
zeal was shown in his persecution of the church. Paul did not have a bad conscience; he
felt himself blameless under the law.

Yet all these “gains” he counted as rubbish because of his knowledge of Christ.
The law is indeed holy, just, and good, but because of sin, which the law cannot remedy,
it remains a flawed way to righteousness and leads to death. The real “gain” is in Christ.
By accepting in faith God’s offer of a renewed relationship, made possible through
Christ, Paul knew that he would at the end be able to stand before God. Righteousness
cannot be acquired on one’s own; it comes only as God’s gift. Paul wanted to
experience the power of the risen Lord in human lives and to share in Christ’s sufferings
and death. This idea has baptismal overtones. Paul wanted to die to his old life and be
raised to a whole new existence.

Paul was already raised with Christ, but still awaited achieving his final goal.
“This” in v. 12 may refer to the resurrection or righteousness he still hoped to obtain.
Paul is like an athlete, who pushes on in the race, hoping for God’s call at the end of the
race to rise from the dead and join Christ in everlasting life. The present is no time for
perfectionism or quietism, but for an earnest seeking of the righteousness from God.

Meaning and Response

Diversity is a key word in Christian thinking today. My own denomination in the United
States has been largely northern European in background and has been slow to include
the totality of the human family within its numbers. Inclusivity is the top priority in my
denomination today. The present attention to diversity in gender, color, and ethnicity has
also meant that each segment of the church has learned to appreciate what it brings to the table in terms of hymnody, piety, theology, and liturgical customs. Paul too appreciated where he had come from and what he had inherited from his Jewish roots.

Amid diversity our unity lies in Christ and in our rebirth through Holy Baptism. Our diversity is finally significant because of our common unity; unity and diversity reach their full potential when they are seen in dialectical tension. For Paul the righteousness of God was revealed through the cross, and, therefore, he desired above all to have that righteousness that comes through faith in Christ.

Paul considered his own heritage under the law to be rubbish in comparison with gaining Christ and being found in him. We take a different view of our heritage. All of us, who have been incorporated into the Body of Christ through God’s righteousness, are freed to treasure our own heritage, to welcome the heritage of others, and also to recognize that “heritage” can sometimes get in the way of inclusivity or even become something idolatrous. We treasure our heritages and we transcend them.

Paul’s pressing toward the goal in vv. 12-14 reminds me of the distinction between church membership and discipleship. “Church membership” stresses the voluntary character of our relationship to other Christians and in many cases has no particular moral energy connected with it. “Discipleship” recognizes that the relationship sealed through our baptism is the beginning of constant, even daily, transformation. Discipleship recognizes that Christianity is an eschatological religion, that believes that God’s future will be better than our past, and that God’s future entices us and encourages us toward ever-greater sanctification. Discipleship is often more a race than a pilgrimage.
Phil. 4:6-9

See the Second Lesson for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost.

Mt. 21:33-46

In its present context, this parable is an allegory, with clear references to people and events within the history of salvation. The absentee landowner is God; the vineyard is Israel; the tenants are the Jewish leaders; the first group of slaves is Israelite prophets and the second group represents later Israelite prophets or Christian prophets; the son is Jesus. The song of the unfruitful vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7) forms the background for this parable, and that song is paraphrased in v. 33. The parable of the wicked tenants also appears in Mark 12:1-12 and Luke 20:9-19.

A group of slaves has replaced the single slave in Mark’s account, and in that version of the parable he was only beaten and sent away, not killed. Matthew reports a much more violent reception for the owner’s slaves and even refers to the stoning of the prophets in 23:37. The “omniscient narrator” knows what the absentee landowner thought when he sent his son (v. 37) and what the tenants said to themselves (v. 38). The hope of the tenants to inherit the vineyard if they kill the son assumes (falsely) that the landowner is no longer alive. In Mk. 12:8 the tenants killed the son and then threw him out of the vineyard; in Matthew 21 they put the son out of the vineyard before they killed
him. This may be a reference to the tradition that Jesus was crucified outside Jerusalem (John 19:17; Heb. 13:12-13).

When Jesus asks what the owner will do to the tenants, the religious and civil leaders (see 21:23) write their own condemnation (v. 21). “Miserable death” might refer to God’s final judgment or to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Matthew even implies that the Jewish nation has lost its elect status. Jesus quotes Ps. 118:22-23 in v. 42, as providing scriptural support for the exaltation of the rejected son (cf. 1 Pet 2:6-7). The kingdom of God in v. 43 refers primarily to the reign of God over Israel rather than to the eschatological kingdom. The “nation” that produces fruit is the church, made up of believing Jews and converted Gentiles. The judgment Jesus announces in v. 43, which is unique to Matthew, lacks the violence threatened in v. 41. Verse 44 may have been taken from Luke 20:18 since it is missing in the so-called Western text. It states that Jesus will be a cause of stumbling and offense for many people and uses a figure of speech taken from Isa. 8:14 (see also 1 Pet. 2:8).

The chief priests and Pharisees (v. 45; contrast v. 23) were again put in a dilemma: they wanted to arrest Jesus, but they feared the crowds who considered him, like John the Baptist (v. 26), a prophet (cf. v. 11).

Meaning and Response

Those who read this text in church or preach on it need to be sensitive to the fact that it comes from a time when early Christians were engaged in a fierce and often personal argument with the Judaism of their day. The words of Jesus were shaped to fit that
specific controversy and should not be construed as an indictment of Judaism that is valid
for all time. Because of the long history of anti-Semitism in the church, Christian leaders
need to take extraordinary steps to guard against perpetuating false stereotypes.

In fact, this text might almost be turned around and the violence done to the
owner’s servants and son could foreshadow that violence done to Jews by Christians
throughout much of the history of Christianity. Historically, there was very little
violence done to the Hebrew prophets, and those who did abuse them were kings, hardly
the common people. A strategy for dealing more equitably with this text might be to help
listeners think their way into the posture of the wicked tenants, who squandered their
inheritance because they did not recognize the generosity and fidelity of the owner and
his right to receive the fruits of his vineyard. Specific examples could be given of ways
in which members of the church have failed to give God, the owner of the vineyard, what
was due to him. The repeated emissaries sent by the absentee owner could represent
God’s repeated efforts to reach his people with the call of the transformative gospel, a
call to which the church unto this day seems quite resistant. Verse 41 provides
opportunity for Christian readers of this text to accept their condemnation and confess
their sins.

The quotation (Ps. 118:22-23) in v. 43 announces the divine vindication of Jesus
despite his near universal rejection by the human family. In fact, instead of being a stone
to be thrown out, he is given an even more lofty position as the head cornerstone. God’s
vindication of his suffering servants surpasses their wildest imagination (cf. Isa. 53).
Luke saw this rejection and vindication incarnated in the crucifixion and resurrection of
Jesus (Acts 4:11; cf. 1 Peter 2:7). As v. 44 makes clear, Jesus is the point where and important decision must be made. Response to him determines one’s destiny.

The goal of God’s conditional/unconditional love is to empower a people who will produce the fruits of the kingdom (v. 43). Today it is not the chief priests and Pharisees who hear this parable, but people like you and me, who realize that Jesus is speaking about us (v. 45). Hence the surprise experienced by the readers of the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5 may be repeated when this text is read and reflected on in the church today.

While Matthew’s relationship to the Jews of his day was heated, his attitude toward them should not be presented as totally bleak. The late rabbi Samuel Sandmel wrote, “Matthew, partisan though he is of a Gentile mission, does not wish to discount the Jews but rather wants them in his movement inaugurated by the new law of a figure greater than Moses…. [For Matthew] the priests remain complete rascals. Matthew seems to be saying that were “the Jews” to recognize the moreal delinquency of the Jewish leaders they could find reason to come into the movement, for Christianity in Matthew’s view is the authentic Judaism.”

TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – (Sunday, October 10) Proper 23 (28)

Ex. 32:1-14

Shortly after the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites grew impatient with Moses’ absence and worked with Aaron to create a golden calf. Their idolatrous worship
of this calf is made even worse by their proclaiming that this calf was responsible for the Exodus (v. 4). In vv. 7–10, the Lord remonstrates with Moses and tells him that the people he brought out of Egypt have acted perversely. God intends to obliterate them and make of Moses a great nation (see Gen. 12:2).

Moses’ intercession in vv. 11-14 is a model prayer. He reminds God that it is he who brought Israel out of Egypt and asks him to stop his anger lest his act of judgment allow the Egyptians to claim that the LORD himself had acted with malice in the Exodus. In asking God to change his mind, Moses appeals to God’s promise to the ancestors to make them numerous and to give them the Holy Land. Moses reminds God that this promise had been supported by a divine oath, guaranteed by God’s own self. The Lord is convinced by this prayer and changes his mind.

Meaning and Response

In v. 7 God seems to disassociate himself from Israel when he chides Moses: “Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.” As Moses responds in prayer, he turns these words around and asks God about the legitimacy of his anger toward “your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt.” Even when they sin and are under judgment, Israel—and we—are still God’s very own people.

Secondly, Moses brings another argument to persuade God from judgment: “What would the neighbors think?” If Israel were to be destroyed by God, the Egyptians
might conclude that Yahweh had malicious intentions when he brought about the Exodus in the first place. As far as Moses is concerned, God’s very name is at stake in this crisis.

Thirdly, he asks God to contradict Godself: “Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.” Such divine self-contradiction is at the heart of the Christian gospel as well. God’s wrath is trumped by God’s anger; God, who remembers everything, chooses to forget our sins.

Fourth, Moses holds God to the promises made to the ancestors like Sarah and Abraham, just as we in our distresses appeal to the promises God made to us in our baptism.

At the conclusion of this powerful prayer of Moses, God changes his mind! The theological argument can be made that God never changes and that it is only our perception of God that changes. But from our human perspective—the only perspective we really have—prayer does convince God to change. In fact, sometimes the only way God is able to remain for us the same loving God is by changing.

Is. 25:1-9

Verses 1-5 are a Psalm praising God for his special benefactions to the poor and the weak. God’s ancient wondrous acts have been trumped by his more recent destruction of the enemy’s city and by his serving as a refuge for the disadvantaged. When God’s people were beset by an enemy attack, marked by heat and loud noise, God provided a cloud cover that cooled things off and silenced the enemy.
In vv. 6-9 the prophet describes an eschatological banquet, at which all peoples of the world will celebrate God’s victories. Death is compared to a shroud or a sheet, and God himself promises to swallow up death forever. This is a punishment that fits death’s crime: in ancient religion death was depicted as a monster that swallowed up all the living. According to Isaiah, death, disgrace, and sorrow will depart forever. People are invited to believe in these promises because they are based on the reliability of the divine word (v. 8). “Waiting on” God is the language of faith. Faithful waiting will be rewarded with celebrative joy.

Meaning and Response

This Old Testament text describes the messianic banquet. This banquet is a metaphor for God’s final victory over everything that limits or reduces our life, things like death, disgrace, and every sorrow. Some marriage liturgies urge couples to continue in love and faithfulness until they participate in that final marriage feast that has no ending. One very important feature of our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper is that it is a foretaste of the feast to come. The fellowship with one another and with God that we experience at the Eucharist is a clear, if partial, realization of what God plans for his people. In a sense we hear at the Table the distant triumph song, we get one more tasteable assurance that God is indeed for us, and then our hearts are brave again and our arms are strong.

Ps. 106:1-6, 19-23
The Psalm begins with the word Hallelujah, and this theme of praise lasts through v. 3.
In vv. 4-5 the Psalmist prays for his or her own personal deliverance when God will act in
behalf of the whole community. A second prayer for the deliverance of the whole people
occurs in v. 47. The community confesses its sins and those of its ancestors in v. 6 and
thereby justifies God’s acts of judgment on them. We know that during Israel’s exile
some of the people blamed all their troubles on the sins of their parents: “The parents
have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” (Jer. 31:29; Ez. 18:2).
The rest of this Psalm repeats a pattern in which God’s acts of deliverance are followed
by Israel’s rebellion. Verses 19-23 deal in particular with the incident of the golden calf.
By forgetting God’s deliverance of them in the Exodus the people called forth a threat by
God to destroy them. Moses, however, stood in the breach through his act of intercession
and was able to turn away God’s anger.

Meaning and Response

This Psalm offers a poetic version of the incident with the golden calf. Two images offer
creative possibilities for proclamation. The prayer for the personal salvation of the
psalmist in vv. 4-5 reminds us that deliverance for the whole people of God consists of
salvation for many individuals who make up that whole. The individuals gathered in our
congregations will not be content with a generic word of salvation, but they need a word
that addresses their particular challenges or problems, their strengths and weaknesses.
Each person needs to know that the gospel is also “for me.”
The second preachable image is of Moses standing in the breach to turn away
God’s anger. This is a military figure and one which emphasizes each individual’s role
on behalf of the whole. We are all called to pray for one another and to be willing to lay
down our life for our friends.

Ps. 23

The Psalmist speaks from the role of a sheep in praising the divine shepherd. While
God’s actions are described in the third person at first, the Psalmist breaks through to the
direct address of prayer in v. 4: “You are with me.” “Darkest valley” in v. 4 includes
the threat of death, but also other dangers. The image shifts from divine shepherd to
divine host in v. 5. God provides asylum for the Psalmist, who is pursued by enemies. In
the final verse, the author expresses confidence that God’s goodness and loyalty will
pursue him or her, just as enemies had pursued the psalmist in the past, and that his or her
entire life will take place in God’s presence and in God’s land (“the house of the Lord”).

Meaning and Response

Even in urbanized America, when sheep and shepherding are seldom part of one’s
personal experience, the words of this Psalm of trust connect with people and transcend
cultural boundaries. This Psalm is both an expression of trust in God (You are with me)
and a witness to others that the Psalmist is convinced that God is her or his shepherd. It
is good to pay attention to the enemies faced by this Psalmist lest we conclude that this
Psalmist was leading an idyllic existence. The good news in this Psalms fit the dangerous experience of the Psalmist. God will pursue with goodness and loyalty one who feels put on by personal or national enemies.

Phil. 4:1-9

Paul urges his readers not to be seduced away from the new existence they have in Christ. Two women, Euodia and Syntyche had apparently quarreled, and so Paul urges them to have a meeting of minds in the Lord. Paul appeals to his loyal yoke-fellow (Timothy, Epaphroditus, Silas, or Luke have been suggested) to assist in this reconciliation. Other leading women are mentioned in Rom. 16:1-15; 1 Cor. 1:11; 16:19; and Philemon 2. Paul is confident that the names of all of his co-workers are inscribed in God’s Book of Life (Exod. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1).

The Apostle urges his readers to rejoice in the exalted Jesus when they face persecution. “Gentleness” (v. 5) might be defined as “fairmindedness” to people in spite of their faults. The early return of Jesus was articulated in the ancient prayer “Maranatha” (Our Lord, come; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 22:20).

Worry (v. 6) shows lack of confidence in God’s promise to protect and care for his people. Prayer to God in time of need should also express thanksgiving for God’s past benefits. God’s peace transcends every human thought and it performs more than human plans can accomplish. Paul prays that this peace will stand guard over the hearts and minds of the Philippians.
The virtues Paul urges in v. 8 come from the Stoic tradition. “Keep on doing” (v. 9) is a fine rendition of the present tense in Greek. Many of the senses are involved in receiving the gospel: the mind, the ears, and the eyes.

Meaning and Response

Trouble in congregations often starts with misunderstandings or disagreements between two individuals. The presence of disruptive Euodias and Syntyches in our local parishes are an invitation for various “loyal companions” to seek reconciliation between them before general mistrust of others sets in. Joy is not just emotion; it is our defiant response to the troubles faced by individual Christians or by the church at large. Just telling someone not to worry usually does not help, and it only seems to invalidate that person’s feelings. In these final exhortations, Paul is not trying to sweep troubles under the rug, but to encourage his readers to take their problems and concerns to the God whom they trust enough to believe he can in fact help. Our prayers, even our public prayers in church, are too often a list of requests, often for very worthy courses, but too frequently only for our needs and our emergencies. Paul urges the Philippians to accompany all such requests with thanks for the countless times God has already stood on their side. Peace is more than the absence of conflict; peace is the presence of everything good. God’s peace is richer than we could ever imagine or dream up. Peace, as Paul understands it, is a deeply ironic metaphor, that occasionally may not be irenic: God’s peace stands guard over our hearts and minds, also, even especially, in times of trouble and persecution.
Phil. 4:4-13 or 4:12-14, 19-20

These lessons depart from the previous discussion by the addition of vv. 10-13 (Episcopal) or 12-14, 19-20 (Roman Catholic). Earlier Paul referred to a gift he had received from the Philippians (1:5; 2:25), and he now acknowledges again his receipt of their gift (v. 10). Verses 11-13 are an excursus in which Paul demonstrates his independence (1 Thes. 2:5-9; 1 Cor. 9:4-18; 2 Cor. 11:7-10; 12:13-18). Paul’s contentment with every circumstance in life reflects Stoic virtues. But independence and self-contentment pale in comparison with his indebtedness to his Lord and his reliance on him (v. 13). The “things” Paul does (v. 13) may be the responsibilities of his apostolic office, but this word may refer more generally to his ability to deal with the vicissitudes of life. The closest Paul comes to a “thank you” is in v. 14. The Philippians shared in Paul’s “distress.” Does this mean his imprisonment or his role as an eschatological apostle?

Paul promises (or wishes) that God will meet the needs of the Philippians (v. 19). What God has a lot of is glory, the sign of his power and presence. Through his power and presence God will transform the Philippians and all other believers into his likeness.

Meaning and Response

In our world of ambition and consumption, Paul’s discussion of his contentment in vv. 11-13 is good news indeed. Even he admits he grew into this, that is, he has learned the
secret of such living (v. 12). His independence of material things is in direct proportion to his dependence on the Lord (v. 13). In his imitation of Christ’s suffering, he experiences also the power of his resurrection: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” (3:10).

Mt. 22:1-14

This pericope actually contains two parables, one dealing with the rejection of a wedding invitation and the other with proper attire for the wedding. Luke has his own version in 14:16-24, which is similar to a passage from Gospel of Thomas 64.

“Once more” in v. 1 refers back to the two preceding parables that have been read on the last two Sundays. The king’s invitation to a wedding feast may refer to God’s invitation to the expected messianic banquet (Isa. 25:1-9). Because this parable in its present form deals with the Jews’ rejection of Jesus, the slaves sent to issue the invitation (v. 3) stand for the Israelite prophets. The word “ready” in vv. 4 and 8 lends urgency to the invitation—“Come while the food is hot!” When the guests refused the invitation (see Mt. 21:34-36), the king sent other slaves, perhaps referring to early Christian emissaries. Their message refers both to the bounty of the banquet as well as the urgency of the invitation. Those invited by them, however, found “better things to do,” and some even acted violently toward the slaves. Their fate may reflect the persecution experienced by the early church. The king’s harsh response, especially his destruction of their city (v. 7), results from the fact the parable in its present form has been related to the
Roman destruction of Jerusalem under Titus in 70 A.D., which is interpreted as punishment for the rejection of Jesus by the religious establishment.

The king’s next invitation is all-inclusive—“all whom they found, both good and bad.” “Good and bad” may mean everyone on whatever byway, or it may be an anticipation of the mixed character of the church, which requires appropriate discipline. The effective invitation to the new clientele is similar to the generosity toward those hired late in the day in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16).

The second episode, or parable, in vv. 11-13 indicates the need for discipline within the church. While entry into the church is by gracious invitation, a high ethical response, symbolized by the wedding garment, is expected (cf. Rev. 19:8; the necessity for high ethical conduct in the church is also attested in Mt. 7:21-23). Matthew ignores the complication that those invited at the last minute would not have time to secure an appropriate garment. “Friend” (v. 12) is sarcastic. Readers are warned not to in their calling self-righteously lest they are later proven not to belong to the elect because of their own conduct. A person’s behavior indicates whether he or she is among the elect, and there is to be harsh punishment for those who lack righteousness or faithfulness (cf. 8:12).

Meaning and Response

The first two reasons given for refusing the king’s invitation to a wedding banquet in v. 5 have a familiar, contemporary ring today. People who are too busy for God’s call today may simply be too busy, but they also offer just as clear a refusal to God’s invitation as
those who act much more confrontationally and violently in saying no to God. Claiming to be too busy is often a rationalization or a subterfuge and not really an honest excuse. Preachers would be wise to use this text for diagnosing modern responses to the gospel rather than using its historical, polemical meaning within early Jewish-Christian recriminations.

The king’s “Plan B” actually corresponds to what many see as the mission imperative today, namely, the call to reach out to outsiders and become a more inclusive church. The gospel’s invitation should go out to all, without preconditions, both to the good and the bad. The primary task of the church in the foreseeable future is not “chaplaincy” among those who are already insiders, but an earnest search for those who are not yet part of the Christian movement. Congregations must be in mission, and the primary task of clergy in the next years will be to “gather together a new group of the faithful” or to equip and empower laity to gather or invite them. “Good and bad” could be taken in the sense of a merism, that is, everyone, or it may hint that not all those within the church are loyal and true.

Church discipline, which is the subject matter of vv. 11-13, has fallen on hard times in many parts of Western Christianity, for a variety of reasons, and there surely is no need for us to return to the tough old days when sinners were branded with a Scarlet Letter. Still Dietrich Bonhoeffer did write about the “cost” of discipleship and the indifference with which many hear God’s invitation. The recent revival of the word “discipleship” in Christian circles prods us to remember that accepting God’s gracious invitation means something more or deeper than “joining” a church. It means practicing righteousness, or taking up Christ’s cross and following.
When Matthew writes earlier in his gospel about disciplining members of the church (in 18:15-18), he should not be understood on a baseball analogy—three strikes and you are out. Individual admonition, taking others along to discuss with the erring brother or sister, and appealing to the whole church are serious strategies designed to help gain the sister or brother.

The final epigram in v. 14 (Many are called, but few are chosen) fits both vv. 1-10 and vv. 11-13. Those who rejected the king’s invitation made light of it and assumed that, come what may, they were in no danger. Jesus, in Matthew’s gospel, indicates that deeds, not just words, disclose whether a person is or is not among the elect. In vv. 11-13, Jesus criticizes those who have said yes to God’s gracious invitation, at least with their lips, but their deeds do not back up their words. In the Gospel of Thomas, logion 23, Jesus also indicates that not all who hear the gospel will be among the elect: “I shall choose you, one out of a thousand, and two out of ten thousand.” The doctrine of the “two ways” makes a similar distinction between the wider group that has been called and the narrower group that has been elected: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Matt 7:13-14)
Ex. 33:12-23

The intercession by Moses in these verses comes in the wake of the incident with the golden calf. In 33:1-6 God ordered Israel to resume its march toward the Holy Land, but threatened not to go with them lest he consume them. Since God has shown his approval of Moses personally (by knowing his name and by showing him favor), Moses asks to see God’s “ways” (actions), and he reminds God that the nation with whom he is angry is his own people.

God promises that his presence (literally, his face) will be with Moses. Moses remarks that if God’s presence would not go with them, it would be better if they not start for the Holy Land at all. God’s presence is what makes Israel different from all the other nations.

After God reiterates once more his promise to accompany the people because of his approval of Moses and the intimacy of their knowledge of one another (v. 17), Moses asks to see God’s glory. What God is in himself is called “holiness” in the Old Testament; what we actually see of God is called his “glory” (see Isa. 6:3). God’s self-revelation consists of his pronouncing his own name, Yahweh, and showing grace and mercy to whomever he chooses. God’s transcendence is preserved by his refusal to let Moses see his face. God hides Moses in a hollow of a rock and puts his hand over the rock so that Moses cannot see God’s glory directly when he passes by. When God lifts his hand, Moses sees God’s back, but he is not allowed to see God’s face.

Meaning and Response
Moses exemplifies great intercessory prayer in which he holds God to his promises. Every time he offers a reason for God to act he reminds readers of why they may expect God to act. Despite God’s distancing himself from Israel in vv. 1-3, Moses reminds God (and the readers) that this disobedient nation is still God’s people. This relationship is often summed up in the covenant formula: “I am your God; you are my people.”

In v. 3 God had threatened not to go up with Israel, but in v. 14 God reverses himself and promises to be with Israel. Moses underscores the importance of that promise in vv. 15-16 and witnesses to Israel that God’s presence requires their being distinct from all other peoples precisely because of this presence.

God knows each of us by name (v. 17). This affirmation is followed by three additional words of assurance that respond to the request to see God’s glory. Moses does not get to see God directly, but only in God’s gracious condescension to human need. God pronounces his own name, the name that was first disclosed in the context of the Exodus from Egypt. God’s central identity and reputation—his name—have everything to do with liberation and freedom. God’s sovereign and benevolent freedom is affirmed in a tautological sentence: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” Grace is not seen as caprice or threat, but as God’s ability to break through the web of retribution and contradict anger with grace.

In a stirring metaphor, God affirms once more that his face dare not be seen directly, but we do get to see God’s back as he passes by. Whether God appears in nature or through other people, he indeed is present with his people even if not always in the exact way in which we might demand or even expect the presence to occur. Moses knew
the importance of God’s presence; he and we must learn to accept the presence where it comes to us, often through weakness and from strangers. We may only get to see God’s back, but it is always God’s back.

Is. 45:1-7

The prophet known as Second Isaiah designates Cyrus, king of Persia, as the agent through whom God will liberate the Jewish exiles in Babylon and bring them home to Jerusalem. God even calls Cyrus “anointed” or “messiah.” God promises to go before Cyrus and to give him hidden riches and treasures to support his liberation efforts. The prophet expects Cyrus to acknowledge the God of Israel, whose election of Cyrus is signified by his knowing the king’s name. God’s selection of Cyrus is for the sole benefit of his servant Jacob/Israel.

Yahweh is an incomparable God and he alone is the one to be worshiped. His arming of Cyrus will not finally effect a personal transformation in Cyrus, but God does expect that all nations—those in the east and west—will acknowledge him. As the only God in the universe, God creates light and darkness, weal and woe, good and evil. Persian religion, by way of contrast, was dualistic, with separate deities responsible for light and darkness.

Meaning and Response
Verse one is one of the most astonishing texts in the whole Old Testament. Yahweh announces that his anointed agent (messiah) who will set Israel free and bring them home will be none other than Cyrus, king of Persia. It would almost be like saying that the Ayatollah would be our deliverer. We often how difficulty in accepting the way in which God’s help reaches us—sometimes it seems to reach us at the wrong time and through the wrong people.

God chose Cyrus for two reasons: so that his servant Jacob or Israel might be helped and so that other nations would recognize how truly incomparable Yahweh is. God’s mission is both toward Israel and toward the world.

In certain contexts, verse 7 might present a problem. How can we explain evil if there are no evil deities to wreak havoc on earth, but only the one God Yahweh, who is responsible for everything? Monotheism may not be able to explain the origin of evil, but it also guarantees that nothing is outside God’s interest or responsibility. This passage affirms that salvation lies only in Yahweh and not in the gods of Babylon. Israel in exile was tempted follow “other” gods, who had won the most recent war, and to conform to the ethos of its captor society. God’s almighty power is seen in his gracious choice to use an able Persian king to set Israel free and in God’s emphatic and simultaneous testimony to himself throughout this passage.

Ps. 99

Psalms 96-99 celebrate the kingship of Yahweh. In Ps. 99, God’s kingship is hailed because of his invisible enthronement above the cherubim (v. 1) and his exalted presence
in Jerusalem (v. 2). His greatness evokes praise from all the nations, who acknowledge his holiness. God’s power manifests itself concretely in his pursuit of justice and equity. The first stanza closes with an exhortation for all peoples to praise Yahweh and with a confession of his holiness. God’s “footstool” may be an indirect reference to the ark, even as the earth itself is hailed as God’s footstool in Is. 66:1. Moses, Aaron, and Samuel are identified by the Psalmist as great intercessors. For Moses see Exod. 32:10-14, 33:12-23 and Deut. 9:26-29; for Aaron see Num. 6:26-29; and for Samuel see 1 Sam 7:9; 12:19-25; Jer. 15:1. The Psalmist hails the obedience of these intercessors (v. 7), and God’s willingness to forgive them when they erred. A final call to praise is based on God’s unique “holiness.”

Meaning and Response

God as “king” has been a controversial topic in recent years because this term tends to emphasize “maleness” and even “hierarchy.” God’s kingship in Psalm 99, however, locates the significance of his rule in a love for justice and equity. Praising Yahweh for justice commits the one praying to a similar agenda.

The Psalmist also lays out the characteristics of great human leadership in Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. They interceded with God, listened to his revelation, and followed his laws. But their leadership was also human-sized: they sinned, were punished, and forgiven.
The Psalmist also alternates between referring to God in the third person when he calls on others to praise, but also addressing God directly as the Psalmist expresses her own praise and commitment. God’s holiness is affirmed in vv. 3, 5, and 9.

Ps. 96:1-9 (10-13)

This Psalm is the first of the series of Psalms dedicated to the kingship of Yahweh. The newness of Yahweh’s actions requires a new song of praise. God’s deeds are designated as salvation (or victory), glory, and marvelous works. Yahweh is compared to all the gods of the nations, who are dismissed as idols. Yahweh’s unique power is known in his creation of the heavens. The Psalmist identifies four attributes of God: honor, majesty, strength, and beauty. God’s “sanctuary” (v. 6) may be a reference to his heavenly house, of which the Jerusalem temple was thought to be a copy.

Verses 6-9 are an appeal for all nations to praise Yahweh, and they are arranged in what has been called stair-like parallelism (see Ps. 29:1-2). Those who praise Yahweh are also expected to bring a sacrifice (v. 8). “Holy splendor” in v. 9 may refer to God’s radiance or to the condition of the worshiper (traditionally, “the beauty of holiness”). Others would translate: “Worship the LORD when he appears in his holiness.”

The optional verses (in parentheses) hail the present kingship of the Lord and anticipate his coming to judge the entire world.

Meaning and Response
The Psalmist hails God as a deity who does things. God creates whereas all the gods of the peoples are dismissed as idols. Therefore, the Psalmist also calls all nations and, indeed, the entire natural world to praise God. Nature gives God a standing ovation as he comes to exercise his kingship as a judge, who follows the principles of righteousness, equity, and truth.

1Thes. 1:1-10

This first chapter of this oldest book in the New Testament celebrates the way in which the Thessalonians had received the gospel. Paul was writing from Corinth in Achaia, and the other senders are Silvanus (cf. Silas in Acts 17:4) and Timothy, Paul’s chief aid. Verses 2-5 and 6-8 are each one verse in length in the Greek text. Jesus’ messianic identity is confirmed by the title Christ; he is called Lord because God raised him from the dead. Verse 3 contains Paul’s first use of faith, hope, and love in one context. Hope is patient waiting for the return of the Lord Jesus despite the tribulations of the age. The term “brothers and sisters” (v. 4) is used nineteen times in 1 Thessalonians to show Paul’s affection for the church in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians’ reception of the gospel confirms their elect status. The proclamation of the gospel is a demonstration of God’s power, just as miracles are (v. 5).

The Thessalonians became imitators of Paul and Jesus both by sharing in eschatological affliction and by proclaiming the gospel. Joy, which a person experiences in the presence of God (3:9), was inspired in them by the Holy Spirit. The Thessalonians became examples to believers in the province of Macedonia, in which Thessalonica was
located, and in Achaia, where Corinth was located. Even people outside these provinces had heard about the success of Paul at Thessalonica. The people had shown him hospitality and they had truly repented, turning from idols and toward the living and true God. God lives in history and in nature, and God has been faithful to his covenantal promises (5:24).

By raising Jesus from the dead (v. 10) God identified Jesus as the one by whom God will bring about salvation. The use of the present participle in v. 10 ("rescues") indicates that deliverance has already begun though the final manifestation of God’s saving work has not yet appeared. The “wrath that is coming” refers to God’s final judgment.

Meaning and Response

Faith, hope, and love in this passage are depicted as active virtues, producing work, labor, and steadfastness. Paul affirms that his message to the church at Thessalonika came with words that were reinforced by miracles and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul recognizes that faith is engendered by God and cannot be sidetracked by minor things, such as persecution.

Paul and the Thessalonians lived with eschatological expectation. “Waiting for the Son” (v. 10) is one important way in which Paul calls for faith among his readers. Paul is absolutely convinced that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that this Jesus already is delivering the faithful from the “judgment day wrath” that is coming.
Paul does not fear judgment day since he knows that God is already delivering him from the end-time acts of judgment. This faith is already present also in the Thessalonians!

Everything at this point seems right among the Thessalonians. In 1993, my wife and I, who were on sabbatical in Berlin at the time, took a trip to Greece and Turkey to visit the spots of Paul. It only took me a few hours to realize that today there is virtually no trace of Christianity in Turkey at all although Paul’s and the Thessalonians’ witness has been effective throughout the world. The absence of Christianity in Paul’s original mission field reminds us that faith is always a fragile enterprise since it comes to us from the Holy Spirit, but it faces persecution, indifference, and apathy. This takes nothing away from Paul’s accomplishments, but it reminds us all to treasure our election, to praise the ways in which God’s faithfulness has been manifested in our lives, and to remember that the whole world is avidly watching us to see how we respond to the gospel.

Mt. 22:15-22

This is the first of four controversy stories in vv. 15-46, three of which will appear in the Gospel readings. Matthew displays antipathy toward the Pharisees throughout his Gospel because they posed a threat to the church of his day. The Pharisees disliked the Romans, but eschewed revolution since they thought it showed a lack of faith in God’s power to save. The Herodians were pro-Roman. These two groups tried to entrap Jesus on a highly-disputed political question, but began the conversation with words of flattery (v.
16). They said Jesus was sincere or faithful and that he showed no partiality, that is, he did not cater to people who were wealthy or powerful.

On the basis of this flattery, they posed a dilemma with regard to the payment of Roman taxes. If he would say they should not pay taxes, he could be accused of being treasonous toward Rome. If he endorsed the paying of taxes, he would become unpopular with the people, who thought paying taxes acknowledged as legitimate a foreign power that was exercising sovereignty over Israel.

Jesus saw through the flattery of his opponents, called them hypocrites, and accused them of trying to put him to the test. Thirteen of the seventeen uses of “hypocrites” in the New Testament are in Matthew. When Jesus asked them for a coin used for the payment of taxes, they gave him a denarius, which amounted to a day’s wages and was the standard coin used for taxes (contrast 17:24-27). These coins often showed a glorified likeness of the Caesar and some kind of inscription with religious or cultic overtones. A coin of Tiberius, a contemporary of Jesus read “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great high priest.”

Jesus told them to give the emperor the things that belonged to the emperor, that is, money, with the emperor’s own image on it. Jesus thus appears to support the state, perhaps reckoning it as the lesser of two evils—anarchy would be even worse. His answer got him off the horns of the dilemma, without offending either the empire or the common people. Later, the political implications of what Jesus did and said were deemed revolutionary by the Romans, who sentenced him to death.

But Jesus also ordered his followers to give God what belongs to God. In the next chapter Jesus indicates that love of God and neighbor are the two greatest divine
commandments (23:37-39). This may be “what belongs to God.” Or one could argue that we, who are created in God’s image and bear his image, ought to give ourselves back to God. The “things that are God’s,” however, are not identified specifically, and they may be interpreted in different ways by different interpreters. Jesus’ opponents were amazed (cf. 8:27; 9:33; 15:31; 21:20; and 27:14) at his answer and left him alone.

Meaning and Response

Paying taxes in our society does not have the potentially bad connotations it had in the time of Jesus. Our government has been chosen by us and it has the full legal right to tax us. We often complain about the taxes we pay, and we rightly criticize waste in government or the excessive proportion of our taxes that goes toward the military industrial complex. We need to be careful, however, lest we participate in the cheap and trivializing joking that goes on about taxes. Taxes are a part of the social contract that holds us together as a people, and they are a recognition that some social problems or public works are so immense that they can only be approached by all of us together working for the common good. We need to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

Jesus also urges us to give to God the things that are God’s. All that we are and have comes from God and is entrusted to our stewardship. Our intellect, our energy, our compassion, our artistic abilities, and our money are gifts bestowed by God in order to enable us to use them for the greater good of all. Genesis 1 affirms that we are created in God’s image, that we are in some crucial ways like God. According to Genesis, our stewardship of these gifts is demonstrated particularly by the way we exercise God’s rule,
in his stead, over the entirety of creation. Ancient Assyrian emperors often erected statues, also in Palestine, to remain captured peoples who was in charge. We human beings, therefore, are signs and agents of God’s rule on earth. The way we conduct ourselves as human beings, as church members, and as citizens should demonstrate the passion of God for justice and righteousness throughout creation. We give ourselves to God as we serve our fellow human beings and as we attend to the protection of the entire created order that has been entrusted to our care. We give ourselves to God as we use our minds and our talents to think new thoughts, raise wholistic families, witness to Christ in our daily life, and enjoy that which is beautiful and true in God’s creation.

Using wisely and well the gifts God has given us is one way of returning these gifts to God. Another is to dedicate these gifts and ourselves directly to God. Financial support of the church in its global, national, and local expressions and contributing to benevolences and social ministries responds to Jesus’ command. Committing one’s whole being to ministry in daily life or to one of the church’s rostered ministries is to heed the call to give to God what is God’s.

We are God’s because of God’s creation of the universe and because of God’s gift of life to each one of us. We are born anew to a living hope by Christ’s death and his rising from the grave. Each morning as we remember our baptism we remind ourselves who we are and whose we are. Whenever I went out as a teenager, my parents would always say, “Remember whose son you are.” I resented that then, thinking that in some ways they were criticizing or restricting me, excessively concerned about what other people might think of me and our family. As I have grown older, I have come to treasure their admonition, which was also full of love and promise. Yes, I am the son of George
and Pauline Klein, but I am also God’s child by creation and rebirth. I am created in God’s image with the awesome assignment of exercising God’s rule. Since I am God’s, why not live for God?

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – (Sunday, October 24) Proper 25 (30)

Deut. 34:1-12

Surprisingly, Moses died in Trans-Jordan and did not enter the Holy Land. The reason for this was said to be his lack of trust (Num. 20:12) or God’s anger with the whole people of Israel that required the punishment of Moses (Deut. 1:37; 3:25-26; 4:21). God did, however, show him the whole promised land, from north to south, and indicated that this was the land promised to Israel’s ancestors and their descendants. A second surprise is that Moses was placed in an unknown grave site. Whatever the historical reason for this, the “founder” of Israel’s religion lies buried somewhere in obscurity. Despite his age, Moses still had good eyesight and (sexual?) vigor at his death (v. 7). Israel mourned for him for thirty days (see Num. 20:29). Joshua succeeded Moses. He had a wise spirit because Moses had placed his hands on him and Joshua kept Israel obedient during his entire lifetime (see Judg. 2:7, 11-15).

The writer hails Moses as an incomparable prophet because of his intimate knowledge of God (v. 10). While such “face to face” knowledge is recorded in Ex. 33:11, the following pericope says that Moses only saw God’s back, but could not see his
face (Ex. 33:23). Verse 10 is a modification of Deut. 18:15-18 where the LORD promised that he would raise up again and again a prophet like Moses, who would receive a word from Yahweh and deliver it to the people. While Deuteronomy 18 sees the whole line of prophets as a continuation of the charisma once granted to Moses, the writer of Deut. 34:10 believed that no subsequent prophet was the equal of Moses, and he therefore expected an eschatological prophet to come. This expectation of an end-time prophet was seen as fulfilled in Jesus by some in the New Testament period (John 6:14; Acts 2:30-32). God’s power had manifested itself through Moses in the plagues and the Exodus itself (vv. 11-12; cf. Deut. 4:34, 37; 26:8).

Meaning and Response

Moses saw the promised land, but never entered it himself. All of us remember how Martin Luther King, Jr., on the night before his assassination, saw himself in this Mosaic role. It is a very provocative image and one that typifies Christian hope. We know, and have even seen, what God promises his children, but we never get there in this life even if we are energized and strengthened by the sight itself.

Verse 10 is a good example of how the word of God sometimes has to change in order to remain the same. God’s promise in Deut. 18:15 to raise up a long line of prophets, who would be like Moses, gave credibility to people like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Deuteronomy suggested that their controversial messages were what Moses would have said if he were still alive. The implication of this promise is that people ought to listen to the prophets.
And yet, none of these prophets—Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah or any other—was quite the equal of Moses. A later writer noted this in Deut. 34:10, and later believers drew the appropriate consequence. If God had promised that there would be a prophet like Moses, and that prophet had not yet appeared, then that prophet was still to be expected. God’s future fulfillment of his promise would be better than anything he had accomplished so far. What had originally been a promise of a long line of prophets became the promise of one, final, climactic prophet.

The last verses in the book of Deuteronomy heap lavish praise on Moses, but only because he was the channel of the God whose unfulfilled promise of a prophet like Moses was still to be cashed in. We are all like Moses, catching a vision of the promised land, but also placed in positions of expectant hope, trusting that the God who finally took Israel into the land will fulfill all of his promises to us. Sometimes the fulfillment turns out to be better than the promise itself, for Jesus, who gives us the bread of life, was the promised prophet, and God raised him up, not just as a prophet, but from the dark grave itself (Acts 2:24).

Lev. 19:1-2, 15-18

This passage from the Holiness Code contains the saying that gives this code its name: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” The Holiness Code probably reached its present form no earlier than the sixth century B. C. Verse 15 advocates even-handed justice, neither yielding to the poor out of sympathy, or favoring the rich because of their influence. People are not to profit by or ignore the violence done to their
neighbors. A person is supposed to correct his neighbor when he errs, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (18). Jesus links this passage with a citation from Deut 6:5 (You shall love the LORD your God) as the two greatest commandments in the law (Matt. 22:37-39).

Meaning and Response

God is holy; what we see of God is God’s glory. This text commands and invites us to be like God in his holiness. Avoidance of sin is a part of holiness, but surely does not comprehend its total meaning. We can always ask ourselves, “What would God do in these challenging circumstances that we face?”

Verses 15-18 give some concrete examples of holiness. Justice in the courts is a proper exercise of holiness, but so is refusal to slander our neighbor or refusing to stand by idly when the neighbor is harmed (v. 16). Hate and vengeance are the opposite of loving one’s neighbor as oneself (vv. 17-18). People do not seek to harm themselves or their best interests unless they are emotionally or mentally ill. God asserts that he is Yahweh, the one who made his name known in the context of the Exodus from Egypt. That identity is his authority for calling us to justice; that identity is also the power that makes it possible for us to be just—and holy.

Ex. 22:21-27 or 20-26
These lessons are from the Covenant Code or Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20.22-23:33), generally held to be the oldest legislation in the Bible. Verse 20 indicates that public worship of other gods was a capital crime. Israel was to treat kindly foreigners since that was what it was itself in Egypt. Widows and orphans were the poor people in the Bible, and mistreatment of them exposes the perpetrator to capital punishment, which would make a widow and orphans out of his own family. The prohibition against interest stems from the fact that loans were seen as a means of offering relief to the poor. In our society they have become the way one “gets ahead.” The gist of this law is that one is to help the poor. Finally, a person was not to take a neighbor’s cloak as a guarantee for repayment of a loan, especially if the neighbor owned only one cloak. God indeed has a preferential option for the weak, the poor, and the oppressed.

Meaning and Response

It is interesting to note that all of these legal injunctions are apodictic or categorical. Extenuating circumstances are not considered since the lawgiver has the needs of the neighbor in mind. Israel’s attitude toward those less well off was motivated by memory of their liberation from their own slavery in Egypt, which would make them refrain from imposing such hardship on others. But it was also motivated by pity for those in harsh circumstances (v. 27).

The words about God in this passage note God’s swift and sure judgment against those who mistreat the weak and the poor. God also promises to hear—and thus to help—
all those who cry out in need. God is “compassionate,” or as the Hebrew might more literally be translated “gracious.”

Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17

The first two verses begin with the word LORD and end with the word God. This envelope surrounds other words that affirm that God was God long before there was a world and that he will still be God into the endless future. Human beings on the other hand are mortal (vv. 3-6); they flourish like grass in the morning and wither like grass by the evening. A long human lifetime may be seventy or eighty years; a thousand years for God are inconsequential.

In vv. 13-17 the Psalmists pray for God to have compassion on them and make their days of happiness at least as long as their days of affliction. God is seen as the source of both conditions. They pray that God’s work, or power, will be known to them. By identifying themselves as God’s servants (v. 16), they are pledging themselves to do God’s will. God’s favor can make whatever they undertake successful.

Meaning and Response

I was a graduate student at Harvard in November, 1963. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, my fellow students and I found our way, numbly, to Memorial Chapel, where the chaplain tried to put our shock and grief into perspective. I still remember singing, “O God, our help in ages past,” on that day, accompanied by the mighty roar of
the organ. That hymn is based on the first five verses of Psalm 90. The Psalm assures us that God has been God even before creation, before any of the tangible things all around us ever came into existence. Recent studies have pointed out what a fitting sequel Psalm 90 is to Psalm 89, where those who prayed lamented the fact that their king, the descendant of David, was being taunted by the enemies. At a time of national disaster, one needs to cling to the old truths about God’s faithfulness, reported by no one less than Moses himself.

One of those old truths is the word “work” in v. 16. Many of us have resumes that sum up our education and our various accomplishments. God’s work is often expressed in the Bible as singular; there is only one thing that God is really up to—loving people, helping people, serving people, comforting and challenging people. People in trouble need this work, power, and favor.

Ps. 1

This first Psalm introduces the whole Psalter. Those who meditate on God’s law or instruction (v. 2) may be those who study the Pentateuch or reflect on God’s commandments. But God’s instruction is also the 149 Psalms which follow, and this Psalmist invites the reader to meditate on these day and night.

The writer compares the righteous to a tree that flourishes by a river bank while the wicked are like the dried chaff on the threshing floor, and he asks implicitly, “Which would you rather be, a lively tree or dead chaff?” Progressive yielding to temptation is
graphically described in v. 1: the righteous are those who don’t walk (follow) in the
advice of the wicked, stand in (take) the path of the sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers.

In v. 6 the righteous are depicted as dependent, as objects of God’s gaze. The
autonomy of the wicked is not all it is cracked up to be; they perish.

Meaning and Response

Psalm 1 provides wonderful educational guidance. It shows that God rewards the
righteous, and that one of the real choices in life is that of being like a tree rather than like
chaff. It makes the faithful life attractive and alluring. God knows the way of the
righteous. Why would one not want to be righteous?

But a person also needs to be careful in reading Psalm 1. The choices between
right and wrong are usually not so clear or easy as this Psalm implies, nor is the fate of
the believer always superior to the faithless person. Success does not necessarily reflect
a life of faithfulness; bad fortune is surely not always a consequence of infidelity.

Both interpretations of this Psalm need to be conveyed to God’s people—the
invitation to be righteous and the fact that not all faithful people are materially blessed.
People might be asked to reflect on these two ways of viewing this Psalm in order to
discover when this Psalm is useful and under what circumstances.

Ps. 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51 [2-3, 4-5, 46, 50?]
This royal psalm of thanksgiving also appears in 2 Samuel 22. The Psalm begins with several natural and military images that convey God’s strength and give the Psalmist reason to believe in his ultimate deliverance from the threat of death. God appeared as a divine warrior to deliver the king (vv. 7-19), who portrays himself as a model of moral virtue (vv. 20-24). The king praises God for enabling him to defeat his enemies (vv. 30-45). The Psalm ends with praise for the living Lord, who delivers the king (v. 46), and in general shows great loyalty to him and to the whole royal line (v. 50).

1 Thes. 2:1-8

Paul offers in these verses an autobiographical confession, somewhat like the confessions in the book of Jeremiah, and defends himself against criticisms from outside the church. His visit to Thessalonica had not been in vain, and it had lacked neither power nor substance. In v. 2 he refers to trying events in Philippi, when he and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned despite the fact that they were Roman citizens. In the wake of these reverses, Paul had shown prophetic boldness when there had been efforts in Thessalonica to keep him from preaching or the readers from accepting the gospel (v. 2).

Paul defends himself against the charge of basing his message on error or compromising it by moral impurity, and he affirms that he had not used dishonest methods to trick people into believing his message. Just as his credentials have been based on divine approval, so it has been his duty and goal to please his divine master (v. 4). He also disavows the use of flattery and denies that he was a missionary for the sake of money or praise from other human beings. He and Silas (Timothy is not to be
considered an apostle) had also not used their status as apostles to make extraordinary demands. Rather, their ministry was gentle, much like a mother who takes care of her own children rather than entrusting them to others.

Verse 8 demonstrates the deep affection of Paul and his companions for the Thessalonians. Their first goal was to share the gospel of God, but they also were willing to give their very lives in an act of self-giving for the sake of the congregation at Thessalonica.

Meaning and Response

Ministry means responding to the context appropriately. Occasionally one hears about the “alligators” that are out there in the church. I know first hand that church people can be cruel and unloving, but the term “alligators” seems to write off such opponents as beyond hope and surely beyond respect. Paul reacted to such a potentially hostile context by being gentle among the Thessalonians, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. She would never call these children “brats” or “alligators.” Paul notes how deeply he cared for the Thessalonians and how dear they are to him.

Paul and his companions were determined to share the gospel amidst the conflicts of Thessalonica. Each of us has his or her shorthand for the gospel, but all of these expressions somehow circle back to the confession that God has acted decisively for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God has said yes to us when he could have more justifiably said no. God is free to contradict his own anger over human evil, to forgive, to trust people, to raise the lowly and put down the haughty.
And Paul and his companions also gave of themselves for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the Thessalonians. Paul did not manipulate people with his words nor did he pull rank as an apostle. Rather, like his Lord, he was willing to lay down his life for the sake of his Thessalonian friends. Paul rings the changes on traits that might damage ministry. He has avoided deceit, impure motives, trickery, flattery, greed, or even praise for himself. Clearly, he was in ministry for the sake of others.

With such high standards Paul’s ministry was not, and our ministry dare not be in vain (v. 1).

1 Thes. 1:1-5 These verses were discussed for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost. According to the handout given me by Fortress, Roman Catholics have the same Second Lesson for the Twenty-first and Twenty-second Sundays after Pentecost.

Mat. 22:34-46

The Pharisees were satisfied with the way Jesus had bested the Sadducees with regard to the resurrection (22:23-33, omitted in the lectionary). In the next controversy saying (vv. 34-40; cf. Mk. 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28), a person skilled in the law of Moses (a lawyer) asked Jesus which commandment in the law is the greatest. That is, what is the center or summary of the law? Jesus quoted Deut. 6:5 in v. 37, part of the ancient Shema or creed of Judaism that is contained in Deut 6:4-9. But he linked to this commandment a second commandment from Lev 19:18, and put love of neighbor on the same plane as love for God. The bringing together of these two passages is also found in the
pseudepigraphic Jewish book called the Testament of Issachar (5:2), and the lawyer himself, presumably reflecting Jewish tradition, put these two commandments together in Lk. 10:27. Jesus insisted that the essence of the divine demand lies in these two commandments. They are the center of the Pentateuch and the Prophets (Joshua-2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve). This pericope may imply that the Pharisaic concentration on the development of minor laws might lead them to miss the law’s true center.

In the next saying (vv. 41-46; cf. Mk. 12:35-37 and Lk. 20:41-44), Jesus takes the initiative and poses a question to the Pharisees about the messiah. They respond that the messiah is the son of David. This answer would be expected from the data in the Old Testament and even the book of Matthew itself (Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5; and Mat. 1:1). Perhaps the best contemporary explication of what this son of David might do is in Psalms of Solomon 17. But Jesus throws the adequacy of this response into doubt by posing a question about the interpretation of Ps 110:1: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’” Jesus assumes that the author of this Psalm was David himself and that he was gifted by the Spirit with prophetic insight. In this reading, David would mean: The Lord (= God) said to my Lord (= the messiah). Since a father (superior) does not call his son (an inferior) “Lord,” Jesus is raising a question about the appropriateness or sufficiency of calling the messiah the son of David. Modern exegetical understanding of the Psalm in its original context assumes that the speaker is a court theologian whose thought might be summarized in this way: “The LORD (= Yahweh) said to my Lord (= the current king). The Psalm, therefore, is talking about the power or prestige given to the king by God at his coronation. The
author of the book of Matthew may have preferred titles like Son of God, son of Man, or Lord for Jesus rather than the title Son of David. In any case, this argument of Jesus effectively ended his discussion with the Pharisees.

Meaning and Response

While neither of the issues discussed in these two controversy stories is debated in the church today, the central saying of Jesus in each case is most useful for the life of Christians today.

“Love” of God is a rather late development in Old Testament theology. Hosea, in fact, in the eighth century, was the first canonical writer to use “love” to describe God’s attitude toward human beings, but even he did not dare to talk about human love for God. The biblical writers do not discuss why they avoided the term love, but it may have had something to do with the way in which fertility rites were common among their neighbors, and so “love” for—or by—God might be easily misconstrued. “Love” has its own dangers in our culture where it can be easily sentimentalized, or where it can add to our already rampant individualism.

In the Old Testament world, “love” had legal or political connotations. When the Bible says Hiram, king of Tyre, was a lover of David (1 Kgs. 5:1; NRSV friend), it meant that these two neighboring kings were loyal allies or trading partners. The Deuteronomist, in the seventh century, was the first writer to use “love” to describe the human attitude toward God, and he clearly implied loyalty, faithfulness, and obedience
by this verb. Hence he called on his readers to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind.

Jesus was probably not the first Jew, and certainly not the last to link love of God with selfless love of neighbor. This linkage is central to Jewish and Christian ethics. Most biblical ethical injunctions rule out certain behaviors or, occasionally, urge people to follow certain courses of actions. But there could never be enough laws to fit all the ethical decisions you and I need to make every day of our lives. In our freedom we are called to love. Christian freedom is not Christian license. Rather, those who love God and the neighbor possess the basis for making appropriate ethical decisions. Augustine once said, “Love God, and then do whatever you want.” This double-barreled love ethic preserves freedom and flexibility, but it is always an invitation to move beyond mere legal compliance to the deepest possible ethics.

The term “Christ” (that is, messiah) has become central in Christian self-understanding. But how is the one we proclaim as Lord and Savior related to the ideal royal person Israel expected. How is Jesus the son of David? How is he the messiah?

Christians believe that the fulfillment of the messianic promise in Jesus goes well beyond the original promise. We confess that God sent not only an ideal son of David, but actually God’s own dear son. Christians also confess that the most important thing about this messiah is his atoning death on the cross. This is a dramatic shift from earlier thinking. Before the time of Jesus, Jews did not believe in the salvific nature of the messiah’s death and even his death is nowhere expected in the Old Testament. Even Paul said that the confession of Christ (messiah) crucified would be a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23).
But Christians also need to concede that their messiah, or at least their activities in the messiah’s name, have not lived up to the transforming power that was expected with the messiah’s advent. The Christian era has not seen a wave of egalitarian prosperity or even of unmitigated peace. On the contrary, the Christian church has often retarded the quest for justice, become a divisive power itself, and contributed as individuals and as a corporate entity to anti-Semitism and racial bigotry.

When we ask, therefore, how Christ is the son of David it should cause us to ponder how God often fulfills his promises beyond all expectations and how our bearing the name of Christ (as in our naming ourselves “Christian”) frequently calls us to repentance and renewal.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST—(Sunday, October 31) Proper 26 (31)

Jos. 3.7-17

The crossing of the Jordan River mirrors the crossing of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14-15, and both events bracket Israel’s formative phase in the wilderness (cf. Jos. 4.23). The Canaanite God Baal defeated an enemy called Prince Sea and Judge River, and his reputation is now outdone by Yahweh, who “defeats” the Reed Sea and the Jordan River. Yahweh promises to use the crossing of the Jordan as a way to underscore the authority of Joshua and to indicate that God is also with him. God is referred to as the “living God” whose promises were made manifest in his gift of the land. The pre-Israelite nations in v. 10 come from a conventional list that appears twenty-eight times in the
Bible. The ark contained the Ten Commandments and therefore was called the ark of the covenant by some writers. The ark also signified God’s presence, especially in holy war (cf. Num. 10.35-36). The long divine title connected with the ark in v. 11 indicates in this context Yahweh’s power over the realm of nature. When the feet of the priests carrying the ark touched the waters, the river piled up in a heap upstream at Adam, 16 miles north of the ford near Jericho. Zarethan is an additional eleven miles north of Adam. The remaining part of the river drained off into the Dead Sea. In the world of the text, not the same as the world of history, the priests remained standing in the river bottom until all two million Israelites had crossed over.

The twelve men selected in v. 12 gathered twelve stones from the river bottom in chap. 4 and set them up as a memorial to help instruct children of a future generation about Israel’s miraculous crossing of the Jordan on dry ground.

Meaning and Response

It is hard to imagine a more reassuring word from God than “I am with you,” or “I will be with you.” In two short Hebrew words Joshua is told that God accepts him and that God empowers him. At the time of his own call, Moses was filled with self doubt and said: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” God’s good news for this bad situation was, “I will be with you.” (Ex. 3:11-12). When Moses protested that he was not a good speaker, God once more reassured him, “I will be with your mouth.” (Ex. 4:10-12). The reader of the biblical story knows the glorious outcome of God’s acceptance of and empowerment of Moses—the successful battle with Pharaoh
in the story of the plagues, the Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law on Sinai and Moses’ steady, if somewhat flawed, leadership of the people during their forty years in the wilderness. Who would want to contest that God had been with Moses? Just as God had been with Moses, so he would be with Joshua in the great new adventure in the land.

The ark also plays an important symbolic role in this story. The ark in the Old Testament sometimes represented God’s presence in holy war. But it could also be the place where God was invisibly enthroned, and its lid was the place where the central rite at the Day of Atonement was performed. The Ten Commandments were kept in the ark and so here it is fittingly called the ark of the covenant. The ark in the middle of the Jordan might convey any one of these connotations to different people or groups as they observed it, but the writer argued that it showed above all that God was alive and would carry through on his promise to give Israel the land. The twelve men who carried the ark represented all of Israel, that is, one man for each of the tribes. While each of us is called to bear witness to our faith, this story reminds us that the church as a whole also bears witness. That witness is often clouded by the foibles of the church, and by its divisions. This story calls the church to reflect on how it as a body can bear witness to the living God, and to the God who died and lives anew.

Mi. 3:5-12

The “peace prophets” were those who assured the people everything was going to be alright and there was no need to repent. Micah accuses them of selling their services and putting those who refused to pay them under a curse. On the other hand, Micah feels
himself empowered to tell Jacob and Israel about their sins. The prophet’s indictment of the political and religious leaders is particularly strong. After selling their services to the highest bidder, they outwardly lean on (= have faith in) the LORD and trust that God’s presence will protect them from all danger. Because of their infidelity Micah foresees the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

Meaning and Response

None of us in church leadership would be so craven as to sell out to the highest bidder, but every church leader stands in danger of setting sails to match prevailing congregational or community winds. It is especially difficult to call individuals away from their sins. Micah’s four-fold endowment—with power, spirit, justice, and might—made him bold to tell Jacob and Israel their transgressions and sins. Such courage in the abstract or at the distance of many centuries is easier than when dealing with people who know and love you, and who pay one’s salary.

Verse 11 demonstrates how the slogan “I am with you” (see the discussion of Jos. 3:7-17) can be perverted into complacency and false security. The corrupt leadership of Judah brazenly shouted, “Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.” The corruption of the community’s leadership is the very reason why Micah thought Jerusalem had to be destroyed. Leaders are persons to whom much has been given, and from whom much is expected.

Mal. 1:14-2:2, 8-10
Malachi lived sometime after the dedication of the Second Temple in 515 B.C. and before the work of Nehemiah in the second half of the 5th century. The prophet criticizes the people for lack of piety and announces the coming of a messenger, who will purify Israel prior to the day of the Lord (3:1-4).

In the verses selected from Malachi for the First Lesson, the prophet chastises those who sacrifice blemished animals to Yahweh (1:14). The priests were especially culpable in this regard (1:6-13), and God promises to turn their blessings of the people into curses (2:1-2). The priests are also criticized for the way they give instruction (= Torah, vv. 8-9), and contrasts are drawn between them and their ancestor Levi (vv. 4-6) and with the reputation of priests in general, who are called the “messenger of the Lord of hosts” (v. 7). Verse 10 considers Israelites as an extended family with God as divine parent. Verse 11, not included in the lesson, criticizes citizens of Judah for marrying outside this family to a “daughter of a foreign god.”

Meaning and response

Many of the issues discussed by Malachi are unique to his day and are no longer concerns in the church. Since many congregations have stewardship emphases in late fall, the words of this text may serve to remind us how miserly we often are in our gifts to God. The indictment of the priests may cause contemporary members of the clergy to reflect on ways they might be accused of corruption or of giving instruction that is not faithful to the church’s tradition.
Verse 10 is one of the few references to God as father in the Old Testament. While that idea has become increasingly problematic in our time, this verse does provide occasion to reflect on the oneness of the human, created family, and to reflect on the need to be much more loyal to fellow members of the Christian community.

Ps. 107.1-7, 33-37

The initial call to give thanks in this Psalm names the Yahweh’s goodness and his everlasting loyalty to his people. The word “redeem” in the Bible refers to faithful or saving actions taken by a person on behalf of members of the family. When used of God’s actions, therefore, this word has an especially warm and intimate connotation. The actions referred to in vv. 2-3 may allude to the return from the Babylonian exile. God’s actions came in response to the people’s prayer. The Psalm also thanks God for deliverance from prison (vv. 10-16), from illness (vv. 17-22), and from the perils of the sea (vv. 23-32).

God’s judgment on the wicked dries up water supplies and makes good land unprofitable (vv. 33-34), but he blesses the righteous by giving them water, establishing them in a town, and increasing the yield of their agriculture. The final verse of the Psalm (v. 43) calls for wise reflection. Those who read this Psalm need to ponder the implications of God’s loyalty or steadfast love for their own life of discipleship.

Meaning and Response
The first verse of this Psalm has been a common table prayer in my tradition, “Oh, give thanks unto the Lord for he is good, for his mercy endureth forever.” It really is a beautiful prayer even if frequent use has robbed it of its original power. The one addressed as Lord is the one who disclosed his own name Yahweh to his people as he led them from slavery to freedom (Exodus 3 and 6). This Lord is “good.” This adjective is an understatement, but it allows the one praying to bring to divine attention the four crises listed in this Psalm or whatever other needs have been experienced. During my lifetime translators have moved from “mercy” to “steadfast love” and, most recently to “loyalty” as the preferred rendition for that attribute of God that lasts forever. God’s loyalty to his human children invites and empowers them to similar loyalty to the covenantal relationship God has established with them. God’s loyalty has shown itself in God’s being the best father or mother we could ever know. That’s why those who pray this Psalm name themselves “the redeemed.”

Ps. 43

It is generally agreed that Psalms 42-43 are really a single Psalm of Lament. There is no superscription for Psalm 43, and a similar refrain appears in 42.5 and 11 and 43.5. The Psalmist is beset by wicked enemies and seeks refuge in God even though God himself seems to reject the Psalmist. Despite depression over present circumstances, the Psalmist urges his or her innermost being to hope in God. The Psalmist confidently expects to praise God for help (salvation) received. Whatever the present circumstances, God is still “my God.” He or she prays that God would send out light and truth in order to lead the Psalmist to the sanctuary where the Psalmist will praise God with music and the offering
of sacrifices for deliverance received. The Psalmist remembers fondly such joyful celebrations in God's house in the past.

Meaning and Response

A local congregation is handing out bumper stickers that say, “I’m too blessed to be depressed.” The refrain in 42:5 and 11 and 43:5 flows from similar theology, which has dared to ask harder questions, such as, “Why have you cast me off?” (43:2). The Psalmist questions herself on the reasons for her discouragement and then preaches to herself: “Hope in God.” Good preaching always begins at home. The defiant confession at the end of the refrain remains the Psalmist of our only refuge. The one who helps is—one says with confident astonishment—my God.

Ps. 131

In this brief psalm of trust, the Psalmist rejects an attitude of arrogance and compares his or her own contentment with that of a weaned child lying on the bosom of its mother. The Psalm concludes with an exhortation for all Israel to hope in the Lord. (Cf. Ps. 25:22 on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost).

1 Thes 2:9-13
Paul reminds the Thessalonians that he was not a burden to them financially, but worked to provide his own income, untiringly and with some pain, presumably as a leather worker or tent maker (Acts 18:3). The gospel he preached came from God and proclaimed what God had done. Paul believed that the good conduct of the apostles could be attested not only by the experience of the Thessalonians with them, but also by God, who cannot be deceived. His righteous conduct met the standards of justice, and he could not be accused of falling short of that standard. Paul compares his role as an ethical instructor to that of a father (v. 11), just as he claimed to be a nurse (v. 7) in his role as nourisher. The purpose of his preaching and his ethical conduct was to encourage and even demand that the Thessalonians themselves lead lives worthy of God. God’s holiness requires corresponding human holiness: “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:45). God’s kingdom (v. 12) is the future realm in which God’s full salvation will be manifest “Glory” has a similar, eschatological meaning. The word spoken by the mouth of Paul and heard by Thessalonian ears was in fact the very word of God. This word also operated powerfully in the lives of the believers in Thessalonica.

Meaning and Response

What Paul did for the Thessalonians made him an ideal father, but there is no gender stereotyping here. Urging, encouraging, and pleading are what parents of any sex would do if they could help their spiritual—or physical—children to lead a life worthy of God. To urge is to command or exhort, to call people to transcend what they would naturally do. To encourage is to help, to show gentleness like a nurse (v. 7), to call attention to
God’s promises to help, to recognize the difficulty faced by the other, to stand with and for the other person. To plead might at first seem to be excessive, but not when we reflect on the goal of it all: to lead a life worthy of God.

Paul had proclaimed the gospel of God (v. 9). This might be taken as the good news that comes from God (subjective genitive), with all the connotations that might mean in terms of reinforcing Paul’s urging, encouraging, and pleading. Or it could also be taken as good news about God (objective genitive), telling the Thessalonians and all who would hear of God’s saving and reconciling work in Jesus Christ.

Verse 13 describes the miracle of preaching. After a week of study, participation in pericope groups, living our own lives and participating in the lives of our congregations and communities, we finally sit down to draft a speech for Sunday morning. And, more often than not, the listeners look expectantly to us to hear our exposition of God’s word. What’s more, they accept our preaching as the word of God. They are right in this conclusion, Paul says, and this word accomplishes much among them.

Mt. 23:1-12

This chapter begins the fifth discourse in Matthew and is directed primarily to the public (v. 1) whereas chaps. 24-25 are addressed to the disciples or the church of Matthew’s day. There are parallels to this pericope in Mk. 12:38-40 and Lk. 11:37-52 and 20:45-47. “Moses’ seat” (v. 2) was a place in the contemporary synagogue where authorized teachers sat. Jesus does not contest the teaching or doctrine of the Pharisees, but he
accuses them of hypocrisy. By the time of the Didache (8:1), “hypocrites” had become interchangeable with “Jews” in polemical speech. The religious duties they imposed on others would be difficult to practice by people in the trades or other forms of business, but were not a particular burden for themselves (v. 4). The Dead Sea Scrolls describe the Pharisees as “expounders of smooth things.” Phylacteries were small leather cases that contained specific biblical passages (Deut. 11:13-22; 6:4-9; Ex. 13:11-16; 13:2-10) and could be attached to the hand or forehead. Fringes were attached to the corners of Jewish garments in accordance with Num. 15:38-39 and Deut. 22:12. Jesus also wore them (Mt. 9:20; 14:36). In addition to such showy use of religious symbols, the leaders also coveted the best and most honorable seats at banquets and in the synagogues. In vv. 8-10 Jesus expresses criticism of a number of religious titles which may have only become current in the Judaism of Matthew’s time. These verses are addressed to the disciples, that is, the Matthean church, and they fit an ethos of humility in the church. Christian leaders are not to call themselves Rabbi because Jesus alone is their teacher and they are all equal brothers and sisters (NRSV: students). Jesus also forbids the use of the title father for a religious leader and reserves that title for the heavenly Father. Saul ben Batnith (80-120) is the first known Jewish sage to bear the title “father.” Paul describes his own role as father in 1 Thes. 2:11. Some scholars interpret v. 10 as a duplicate of v. 8, but others contend that to call Jesus/the Messiah “instructor” may have contrasted him as the Teacher with the Teacher of Righteousness in the Qumran community. Verse 11 has a parallel in Mt. 20:20-28, where Jesus describes the role of the Son of Man as that of a servant who gives his life as a ransom for many. Verse 12, a passage taken from Q (Lk. 14:11), advocates service more than self-negation.
Meaning and Response

Practice what you preach! That has always been a sobering sentence for pastors to hear since it is one thing to preach about forgiveness and quite another to forgive, or to advocate trust in God and to be able to express that trust oneself. Pastors are people just like everyone else in the congregation, but in the ordination rite in my church they are called to adorn the gospel with a godly life. Since the clergy are the primary preachers, they are often the primary practitioners. The command to practice what one preaches can be excessive, but in this era of widespread clergy sexual misconduct it is a commandment whose importance can hardly be overestimated.

Jesus criticizes his opponents for loading burdens on others and not lifting a finger themselves, for a religiosity that is all for show, and for their claiming titles of honor in the community. Titles themselves are not so much a problem today. Everyone at the seminary calls me, my colleagues, and even our president by our first names. If anything, I have the feeling we have overdone avoidance of titles. Whether we call ourselves Ralph or Dr. Klein, however, it is still all too easy for us to bask in any attention paid to ourselves and to consider those around us beneath us. We compare ourselves to others in the number of friends or church members we have, in our publications, in our earned degrees, in our cars or computers, and in hundreds of other categories. Clerical vestments were once intended to downplay the role of the individual, but stoles, albs, chasubles, and clerical collars—very good in and of themselves!—have a way of drawing lines between laity and clergy, to the disadvantage of the former.
Verse 9 was not problematic for most of my ministry. Clergy in my denomination are rarely called father, and it seemed so natural to address God as Father. In the last generation a number of women have told us how God as Father tends to emphasize the maleness of God and the hierarchical structures in the church and in the family. I’m not at all sure that “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” is altogether adequate as a Trinitarian formula, but isn’t it ironic that a word from Jesus meant to undercut all hierarchy in the community now seems to reinforce it? The preacher’s task is to undercut all hierarchies in the present community with new words and images.

The greatest among you will be your servant. This is the topsy-turvy economy of God, who brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. The one called the Messiah did not hesitate to go all the way to the depths of the cross for us and therefore is hailed as Lord. Of course, even this word can be misunderstood today if it is used to perpetuate the role of men over women or of white people over people of color. We need to practice the greatness of being servants in our own lives before we dare ask anyone to follow us.

The final verse in this pericope offers eschatological judgment or eschatological exaltation to the proud and the humble respectively. To the proud this verse offers an urgent invitation to repent before it is too late; to the humble it offers grace appropriate to the situation. That’s the wonder of the task of preaching. How can we make the gospel as liberating today as it was in the first century? We err in focusing on the scribes and Pharisees. Rather, we need to hear Jesus calling the religious leaders of every generation to seek the greatness of servanthood.
ALL SAINTS’ DAY

Rv. 7.9-17

Chapter 7 consists of two visions inserted between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals. The multitude of saints in vv. 9-17 is innumerable while the group in vv. 1-8 numbered 144,000, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes. This second group represents all the faithful who remained loyal to the end. The expression “palm branches” in v. 9 connotes victory. “Victory” is probably also a better translation for the first word of their song in v. 10. Victory belongs to God and the Lamb. One of the twenty-four elders assumes the role of the interpreting angel and strikes up a conversation with John in vv. 13-17. He interprets the innumerable group as those who have survived the persecution at the end-time. Since garments symbolize the inner state of the people involved, we learn that these faithful have been inwardly cleansed through the blood of the Lamb. Behind the symbolism lie the actions of repentance, conversion, and baptism. These faithful will enjoy life in God’s presence. All their physical needs will be met (no hunger or thirst), and they will be freed from every kind of sorrow. The Lamb becomes the shepherd (cf. Ps. 23), who gives them water and protects them.

Meaning and Response
All Saints Day allows us to look behind the veil of death and gaze on the victory celebration of those who have gone before us. The one who said at the beginning that everything that he had made was “very good” (Gen. 1:31) promises to restore human life to its pristine condition at the end. No more hunger, thirst, sunburn and, above all, no more tears. Some of the dead in Revelation are survivors of “the great ordeal,” the time of tribulation that was expected before the end of the world. But all who die are products of ordeals of some sort—disappointments, pain, aging, separation, and terminal illness. On All Saints Day we the living listen in on the seven-fold cheer of those who offer God blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might.

The saints wear white garments and wave victory palms. The Lamb’s shedding of blood on the cross is the detergent that turns all their garments sparkling white. Strange alchemy. Blood normally stains and makes things ritually impure. Christ’s sacrifice, on the other hand, cleanses, purifies, and transforms. St. Paul writes, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom 5:8).

In our urbanized, North-American setting everyone automatically understands a sacrificial lamb, but this lamb—in God’s topsy-turvy economy—is at the same time a shepherd who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters. All Saints’ Day is a time for all saints to shout defiantly, “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (Ps. 23:6).

Ecc. 44.1-10, 13-14
God gave recognition to great people in the past (v. 2) who achieved success in variety of tasks (vv. 3-6). While all were honored in their lifetime, the reputation of some of them has endured, but others have been completely forgotten. The writer hails the righteousness of these former leaders, noting that their descendants will always continue. Though their bodies have died, their name, or reputation, will endure forever. The list of the great heroes of the past begins at v. 16 and continues through chap. 51.

Meaning and Response

I enjoy walking through cemeteries and studying the names, dates, pictures, and Bible verses on the tombstones, especially the older ones. Occasionally one sees an old grave that is quite neatly kept. A grandson or granddaughter cares enough to come by and plant a few flowers or pull a few weeds. When I visited Germany some years ago, I learned that people only rented their burial space for thirty years. It’s legal for your descendants to buy you another term, but I understand that few do. After thirty years, there’s better use for the money.

All Saints’ Day gives us a chance to remember those mothers and fathers who kept the faith going, by teaching their children, participating in the congregation and the community, caring for the sick, sitting in a back pew, praying unannounced for all members of the congregation, and living out their lives in obscure faithfulness. They perished as if they never existed (v. 9).
These people live in their descendants, in God who remembers their righteous deeds, and by our congregations who declare their (anonymous) wisdom and proclaim their (anonymous) praise.

Ecc. 2.(1-6) 7-11

God’s merciful compassion is a theme spelled out in Ex. 34.6-7. On the basis of this divine characteristic, the author calls on readers to withstand the trials they must inevitably go through, knowing that God will help them and that in the end their piety will be rewarded. To the rhetorical questions in v. 10, one is tempted to ask, “What about Job?” The author of Ps. 22 also felt that he had been abandoned by God, at least for at time.

Meaning and Response

The wisdom writers knew that not every exception can be explained. In general, God stands by the righteous—Job and the author of Psalm 22 are exceptions that prove the rule. We remind ourselves as we worship together that the Lord is compassionate and merciful, that he forgives sins and saves in time of distress. All Saints’ Day can get the whole people of God ready for the great ordeal. When Cardinal Bernadin announced to the press that he had terminal cancer, the Chicago reporters wanted to know if he was afraid. “I have been helping people die for forty years,” he replied. “Now it’s my turn to believe what I preached.”
Ps. 34.1-10, 22

This Psalm is an acrostic, with each verse beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It blends thanksgiving and wisdom. On the basis of his own experience (vv. 4, 6), the Psalmist knows that God delivers those who call upon him in time of trouble. He therefore praises God, urges other worshippers to do the same (v. 3), and then offers advice to his fellow believers, who will no doubt experience many trials in life (vv. 11-22). The Psalmist recognizes that peace never comes easily (v. 14). We must seek peace and pursue it. The “angel of the LORD” (v. 7) is an expression often used to talk about God’s own actions (cf. Jos. 5.13-15). This angel, or God himself, watches over all who have faith in him (v. 7). Early Christians understood v. 8a eucharistically (“O taste and see that the Lord is good”). I would translate v. 8b as follows: “How to be emulated are those who take refuge in him.” In addition to this admonition, the Psalmist also affirms that none of those taking refuge in God will ever be condemned (v. 22). Those who fear the Lord may have the wherewithal to undergo adversity, but it does not mean that they will escape being brokenhearted or crushed in spirit.

Meaning and Response

All of us like to tell our story—how we rolled up our fender, enjoyed our grandchild, or relaxed on vacation. The Psalmist tells about another story—he had prayed in a time of trouble and God answered him by delivering him. “Fear” in the Old Testament usually
means trust rather than terror. The angel of the Lord is like a whole army protecting those who trust in God. At the Eucharist we taste the Lord’s goodness in the past and in the present.

The term “holy ones” in v. 9 reminds us that God’s people alive today are as much his saints as those who have gone before us. The Psalmist reassures us that we will lack nothing good, and he invites us to emulate others who trust in God. In our society victory often goes to the strong, young, and powerful. But while these self-reliant people can suffer want and hunger, we know, as the Psalmist knew, that the Lord is our shepherd and therefore we will not want.

Ps. 149

The Psalmist urges Israel to offer a new song (v. 1) in recognition of the newness of Yahweh’s impending actions for his people. This praise is to be rendered in the public assembly and with accompanying musical instruments and dancing. The parallelism of the Hebrew poetry is especially instructive in v. 4: The Lord’s taking pleasure in his people is balanced by his adorning them with victory (salvation). God’s people are placed in juxtaposition with the “humble” or with the “oppressed.” The service of praise turns into a military liturgy in v. 6. Symbolically the people execute punishment on the nations and their kings, who have mistreated Israel. Their ritual actions anticipate God’s final deliverance. God’s judgment will mean honor for all those who remain loyal to
God. This Psalm has an eschatological overtone—people are called to praise God for his judgment against the nations, judgment which still lies in the future. This Psalm begins and ends with the word Hallelujah, Praise the LORD.

Meaning and Response

Worship of God is always surrounded by a Hallelujah at its beginning and at its end. We saints gather together to remember how God made us, rules us, and takes pleasure in us. The Psalmist knows that those who have experienced God’s goodness cannot sit still—they need to dance and sing and play musical instruments. Verse 6 announces a strange (to us) liturgy. The same people who praise God march around with weapons in their hands. They know that God usually works mediately, that is, through people. They also know that our small victories now are but a foretaste of the great victory to come. The preacher may want to translate the enemy nations into those present and persistent habits and predilections that keep us from trusting God. Armed with praise for God’s ultimate victory over those powers, we use every means at our disposal to put them behind us now.

Ps. 24:1-6

This Psalm is an entrance liturgy to the temple, pledging the Psalmists to an obedient life (cf. Ps. 15). The creation themes in vv. 1-2 echo the divine conquest of chaos in the religion of Israel’s neighbors. A priest asks a question about who may enter the
sanctuary in v. 3. The response in vv. 4-6 by those seeking admittance to the sanctuary rejects idolatry and false oaths. Verse 6 expresses acceptance of these conditions by those desiring to enter the temple area. Verses 7-11 describe the entrance of the Lord of hosts to the sanctuary.

1 John 3:1-3

1 John was written about 100 A.D., probably from Ephesus. The author criticizes those who had departed from the community’s traditional beliefs about Jesus. The opponents held a docetic christology, believing that Jesus was a spirit and not fully human. The author, however, affirmed the identity of the human Jesus with the divine Son of God and believed in the saving value of his death. He urged his readers to love one another and to obey Christ’s commandments. One cannot believe in Jesus without loving other believers.

The verses from the Second Lesson affirm that we are already children of God, but recognize that we will be transformed further after the return of Christ. In the Old Testament, “children of God” is a term used to refer to the members of God’s council, often called angels. In Job 1:6, for example, the children of God (NRSV heavenly beings) came together to present themselves before the Lord. Hosea promised that in the future Israel would be called “children of the living God.” (1:10). In 1 John identity as God’s (adopted) children is a central part of the community’s confession. God is love (4:8), and God shows this love to us by designating us as his children. Those who do not recognize us as God’s children also do not recognize him (the Father? Christ?).
The author’s hope is clear and simple: we shall be like him. He believes this because he is assured we will see Christ face to face. The consequence of our present identity as God’s children is a desire to purify oneself, just as Christ is pure. In the following verses (vv. 4-10) the author urges readers to seek sinlessness in practice, and he warns against persisting in sin.

Meaning and Response

We do not know much about the life to come, what happens between our death and our resurrection, how we will relate, if at all, to former family and friends. Streets of gold and gates of pearl are metaphors; even the prospect of harp music does not particularly thrill me. Would someone with a glorified body really be me?

There’s a story about an old theologian, who had written a two-volume work on the resurrection. When his children gathered at his deathbed, they asked: “Is there anything else you wish you had said about the resurrection?” “I know I will be safe,” he replied.

The reason we all know we will be safe is because God designates us his children right now. In our baptism, in God’s daily assurance of forgiveness, and in the gathering together on Sundays of all of God’s children, God reinforces the message and so we confess: “God’s children—that is what we already are!”

In some ways we will be like God because in some way we will see God. In this time and space no one can see God and live. Even Moses only got to see God’s “back parts.” How can we see one who is immortal, invisible, and all the rest? Faith is enough
for now; sight can wait until then. Even saints do not comprehend what it means to be like God although they all can understand being “safe.”

Saints of God with this hope are called to respond and to purify themselves, just as God is pure. In v. 10 the author identifies two impurities: people who do not do what is right (I’ll let you fill in the details) and—here’s the concrete hard part—those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

Eph. 1:(11-14) 15-23 See the Last Sunday after Pentecost

Mt. 5:1-12

There are nine beatitudes in Matthew, but only four in Luke (6:20b-23), where they are cast in the second person and followed by a series of woes (6:24-26). The beatitude form is based on precedents in the Psalms and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (e.g. Ps. 1). In the Old Testament it might best be translated as “Oh, how to be emulated is the person who….” Some scholars detect a connotation of congratulations addressed to the recipients of the Beatitudes since those presently suffering will experience eschatological reversal. Note the exhortation to rejoice and be glad in v. 12. We might speak of the “theological passives” in vv. 4, 6, and 9 since they imply that God himself will comfort the mourners, fill the hungry, and call the peacemakers children of God. The Beatitudes reinforce the promises of the kingdom and at the same time call for deeper ethical behavior.
The poor in spirit (v. 3; Lk. 6:20: poor) are those who have confidence only in God because of their long social and economic distress. The “poor” designated a special piety in Judaism, marked by humility, detachment from wealth, and even voluntary poverty. God shows special care for them. The mourners (v. 4) may be lamenting the condition of humiliated Israel (cf. Lk. 2:25). The meek (v. 5) are humble or powerless people who will inherit the new promised land of the kingdom (cf. Ps. 37:11). Whereas Luke included the physically hungry in his beatitudes (6:21), Matthew reapplied this term to those who hunger and thirst after righteousness (v. 6). These hungry and thirsty people could denote those who desire to conform themselves to God’s will, while “righteousness” itself might refer to the coming vindication of God’s people, which would be eagerly anticipated by the disciples. The pure in heart (v. 8) are told they will see God (cf. Ps. 17:15; 42:3). Such sight is a synonym for the final bliss of the kingdom (cf. Rv. 22:4).

Jesus refers to the non militant character of true disciples when he urges them to be peace makers (v. 9). He also offers specific rewards for those who have undergone persecution (v. 10; note the perfect tense of the verb). Suffering for righteousness’ sake refers to faithfulness to God’s law. No doubt some in Matthew’s audience were presently being persecuted (cf. 23:34). Oral abuse (v. 11: revile; utter all kinds of evil against you) can be as serious as physical harm. The promise of reward (v. 12) occurs fairly frequently in Matthew (5:19, 46; 6:1; 19:29; 20:8). The reward here is not identified with a share in the kingdom, but a more specific reward for those who have undergone persecution. Persecution of the prophets is not attested within the Old Testament canon, but it is a tradition from early Judaism that is assumed in the New Testament (cf. 23:30).
Jesus may refer to some of his early disciples as prophets. If so, they would be the predecessors of the audience of Matthew.

Meaning and Response

The Beatitudes call the living saints to new obedience and promise them what they will become in God’s new age. This might be expressed by the following alternate translations. “How to be emulated are the poor in spirit” puts the emphasis on ethics. “Congratulations to those who are poor in spirit” would suggest the ultimate role reversal that awaits people blessed in the Beatitudes.

Each person preaching on the Beatitudes will need to make some kind of selection among the nine. The following comments refer to vv. 3, 6, and 9.

The blessing spoken on the poor in spirit calls the listener to an attitude of dependence on God. It is a piety expressed in thanksgiving for what God has given and in prayer for daily needs. The publican’s prayer, “God, be merciful to me a sinner,” provides an appropriate role model. This salutary emphasis might well be contrasted with the similar beatitude in Luke (6:20) where the (economically) poor are made the special object of God’s care. Whether or not the economic poor are in the worshipping congregation, they are the concern of contemporary Christians, who will be generous to them and support those societal changes that work for the eradication of poverty. Luke’s emphasis on economic poverty prevents discussion of the “poor in spirit” from romanticizing poverty by focusing too much on the piety expressed by the poor. Real poverty kills, or, at least, it makes life meaner and harder than God wants it to be.
The blessing spoken on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness urges the saints today to show passion for the doing of God’s will. The proper ethical question is not what can we get away with or what is permitted, but rather how can we in each and every situation maximize love for God and for the neighbor. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls for a higher righteousness. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.” (5:17). Specific examples of “righteousness” might be gleaned by a reading of the entire Sermon on the Mount. If hungering and thirsting for righteousness mean a strong desire for God’s righteousness to become real, for God to vindicate his people, this beatitude might be related to “Your kingdom come” from the Lord’s prayer. A comparison with Luke 6:21 might prevent any easy acceptance of or rationalization of physical hunger.

The blessing spoken on the peacemakers recalls the famous speech to Congress by President Jimmy Carter after the Camp David accords. Carter, a Christian, referred to the Muslim Anwar Sadat and the Jewish Menahem Begin as peacemaking children of God for the courage they exhibited in reaching that historic accord. How those three ought to be emulated! As the leading power in the world, the United States has the opportunity to be a great peacemaker. Reflecting on this beatitude might sort out the differences between enforcing our self-interest and truly seeking peace and justice (or peace through justice) throughout the world. The preacher may want to address a particular current international issue with Christian reflections. Finally, this beatitude calls all in our violence-obsessed society, where domestic violence and abuse are prevalent, to remember that peace and non-violence begin at home. Peacemaking in the home might prevent family breakups. And parents who refrain from violence toward
their children exhibit a profound role model for children who will have to face the many conflicts in an adult world.

The power to emulate these virtues, as well as the power to effect eschatological reversals, comes from one whose power or authority was exercised in the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the paralytic, or the sending of his followers into the world to make disciples of all nations.

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST –(Sunday, November 7) Proper 27 (32)

Jos. 24:1-3a, 14-25

In this second farewell address (cf. chap. 23), Joshua begins by reciting the call of Sarah and Abraham. After a rehearsal of God’s saving acts through the time of the conquest (omitted in the lectionary), Joshua poses an either-or challenge to the people: either worship the gods whom your ancestors served in Mesopotamia or worship Yahweh. Joshua, with whom the reader is expected to identify, pledges his own whole household to the worship of Yahweh. Clearly the writer who recorded these words saw the principal threat in his time to be idolatry. The people eagerly chose Yahweh because of his track record in the Exodus from Egypt, his care in the wilderness, and his gift of the land in the conquest of Canaan.

Joshua did not immediately accept the people’s choice and reminded them of Yahweh’s character as a holy and jealous God, who would brook no disobedience or
hesitate to enter into acts of judgment, even if he had shown great favor in the past. This challenge evoked an even stronger pledge to serve Yahweh. Joshua then transformed the scene to a courtroom and identified the people as witnesses against themselves that they had made this pledge. As a result the people gladly accepted their new identity. In a subsequent speech, Joshua made clear that the sin of idolatry is indeed a present reality, demanding repentance of present, and not just former, sins. The covenant he struck with them indicated that the faithful are to live in obedience.

Meaning and Response

“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (v. 15). Joshua presupposes a social system in which the father of the family could commit the whole family to a specific religious action. While we no longer live in such a society, it is incumbent upon parents to help their children know the gospel and to urge them to accept it. “Serving” can connote obedience, but it also can refer to worship. This ambivalence in the Hebrew verb “serve” might suggest both a greater devotion to obedience and a deeper resolve to worship the Lord.

Our choice is not between the Lord and the gods our ancestors served beyond the River, but between the Lord and the idols of our own devising—anything that we fear, love, and trust more than we fear, love, and trust the Lord. In making this choice the people reminded themselves of what God had done in the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, and the entrance into the land. That is, they preached the gospel to themselves for it is the good news of God’s actions that enables people to make such a
choice. In helping contemporary people to make this choice, we need to tell them how
God proved himself to be their God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, how God
made them his own in Holy Baptism, and how God has cared for them in a variety of
ways throughout their life. “Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”
We do not believe in God in general or in the abstract, but in the God who has come very
near to each one of us.

Joshua reminded the people that this is no idle choice. God is holy (entirely
other) and he is jealous, that is, God brooks no rivals, no divided loyalties. Choosing
God is much more than opting for church membership. Deciding for God has
consequences in the way we serve, that is, in the way we worship and the way we live.
Jesus calls us to discipleship. While Joshua makes a stone serve as a witness against the
people in v. 27, in v. 22 he calls the people themselves to be witnesses against themselves
that they have chosen the Lord. To choose the God made known to us through Jesus
Christ involves a real decision, which puts our whole life at stake.

Wis. 6:12-16

The Wisdom of Solomon was composed in Egypt shortly before the turn of the era.
“Wisdom,” which has many meanings in the Bible, is related to creation, and wisdom can
stand for the “order” that is inherent in the entire created world. Wisdom is gained by
experience, and those who love wisdom can easily find her. Wise people are carefree.
Because wisdom is omnipresent and available outside strictly religious realms (graciously
appearing to people in their paths, v. 16), it formed an important element in early christology.

Meaning and Response

This lesson from Wisdom invites us to reflect on the relationship between nature and grace, and on how God can be known through or in the realm of creation. What is it that makes sense in life, that reveals its true meaning? Is it not natural to worship God? Do not our highest ethical principles often echo those of other people of good will? Wisdom is as hospitable as Jesus himself, seeking us out where we are, not being distant from our cares or troubles. Wisdom meets us in our every thought. Christianity demands no sacrifice of the intellect. A faith worth believing is a faith worth thinking about and exploring.

Amos 5:18-24

Amos warns that God’s presence can mean judgment as well as grace. Those who desire God to be present need to recognize that he can be present in anger as well as in love, and that God’s leadership in holy war can as easily be against Israel as it can be against the nations. In vv. 21-24 Amos rings the changes on the public worship of his day, not because he was against liturgy or worship, but because he recognized that religious words can be contradicted by unjust deeds. “Righteousness” in v. 24 connotes fidelity to the relationships in which one stands, whether those relationships are with God or with
fellow human beings. “Justice” denotes those concrete actions done by those who live in a faithful relationship with God.

Meaning and Response

God wants more than lip service. To say that we want God to have his “day” may mask real indifference on our part. If our lives are not lived in God’s presence and in obedience to God, God’s day will bring terror and not joy. Our worship is or can be the greatest service we offer God. But it can also mean going through the motions or repeating pious talk that shuts out the realities of the world. The God who is not anti-intellectual is also not anti-liturgical. It is not “smells and bells” and sacraments that turn God off, but worship that does not promote faithful living or worship that does not celebrate, or plead for, God’s justice. Justice and righteousness are to be as constant as the water in a waterfall.

Ps. 78:1-7

The Psalmist is a wisdom teacher who calls the reader to pay attention to his words. The basic premise of the faith in this Psalm is that wisdom is validated by the test of time and needs to be shared or passed on. Verse 7 outlines three foci in this tradition. We are to urge our children to hope in God or to exhort them to trust God’s promises. Secondly, we are not to forget God’s works. Those works in this Psalm range from the liberation
experience in the Exodus through the choice of David as king. Thirdly, we remember God’s works best by keeping his commandments and living a life of obedience.

Meaning and Response

The remaining portions of Psalm 78 recall ways in which Israel did in fact forget God in spite of his works. This culminated in the rejection of the Northern Kingdom and the choosing of Mt. Zion, where the temple was, and of David (vv. 67-72). The clear implication is that Jerusalem and the king are vulnerable if the people repeat the mistakes of their ancestors by forgetting the works of God and not keeping God’s commandments.

This Sunday’s lessons from Joshua and Amos also urge us not to presume upon the generosity of God by honoring him only with our mouth and by thinking God will always be on our side. I well remember a seminary chapel sermon of thirty years ago, which used as a text Isaiah 14, the account of the downfall of Babylon. The average reader on hearing this passage might nod in silent agreement with the decision that Babylon will be punished, but that creative chapel sermon reminded us that for most people in the world today the United States is Babylon. Seeing ourselves addressed in Isaiah 14 reminds us that God will not always give us perpetual victories over all our enemies, especially when we are a significant part of the problem. When we as a people oppress others, use an unfair portion of the world’s resources, or act violently, Psalm 78 would ask us to repent and change before it is too late. We are not to forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.
Wis. 6:17-20

This pericope describes an ascending chain of actions: wisdom begins by seeking instruction; concern for instruction means love of wisdom; love of wisdom leads to keeping God’s laws; keeping God’s laws results in immortality; and immortality ushers one into God’s presence. Hence the desire for wisdom leads to the kingdom.

Ps. 70

This Psalm, a duplicate of Ps. 40:13-17, is an individual lament, seeking relief from personal enemies. The Psalmist identifies God as “my help” and “my deliverer” and invites other believers to confess that God is great (v. 4). In asking for the defeat of the enemies, the Psalmist expresses urgency and even impatience.

Ps. 63:2-8

This beautiful Psalm of trust confesses that the steadfast or loyal love of God is better than life itself (v. 3). The final verses of the Psalm, not included in the lectionary, indicate that the royal Psalmist is threatened by enemies. The king confidently hopes in their defeat and praises God for his presence in the sanctuary and during the king’s insomnia (v. 6). Among the many rich images of God in this Psalm is that of a bird under whose wings the Psalmist seeks refuge (v. 7).
1 Thes. 4:13-18

The Second Lesson for the third last Sunday in the church year deals appropriately with issues of death and resurrection. Paul contrasts his readers with those who have no hope, that is, those who do not believe in the resurrection. Jesus’ own death and resurrection are the pattern and the promise for all those who believe (v. 14).

In v. 15 Paul claims to have experienced a special revelation (“by the word of the Lord”) that those who are still alive when Christ returns will have no advantage over those who have died in the meantime. He clearly expected Christ’s imminent return since he included himself among those who would still be alive on the last day. Elsewhere Paul considers the possibility of his own death before the return of Christ (2 Cor. 5:1-5; Phil. 1:20-23). The word “coming” in v. 15 is a translation for the word parousia, which was the technical term in the Greco-Roman world for a ruler’s state visit.

The Lord will come as a triumphant warrior, announced by the archangel’s call and the blast of the trumpet (v. 16). All who are still living will be “caught up” (the source of the notion of a “rapture”) in the clouds (cf. Dan. 7:13, where the Son of man comes with the clouds of heaven). Paul does not describe the afterlife in this passage. Rather, it is enough to say that we will be with the Lord forever. He exhorts the Thessalonians to keep on encouraging one another (present imperative) with the message of death and resurrection he has just shared with them.

Meaning and Response
Hopelessness has many forms. People find themselves caught in loveless marriages or relationships and see no way to extricate themselves without serious consequences and harm to all who are involved. Others suffer extreme financial loss, through their own mistakes or through no fault of their own, and are brought to the brink of despair. Death itself, or the process of dying, leads some people to give up all hope. When hope is gone, everything is gone.

Paul uses a specific issue at Thessalonika as an occasion to bear witness to his own hope in the resurrection. I suspect that there are not many worries among contemporary Christians about whether the advantage at the resurrection will lie with those who have already died or those who are still alive at the time of Christ’s return. But there are many in our time who live with no hope either because of the problems like those outlined above or because in general they have no faith in God that transcends this life. Hopeless people make too much of this life or too little. They either act as if the pursuit of this world’s goods is the only aim and purpose of life, or they find life meaningless because it finally goes nowhere.

Paul had the advantage of a direct revelation from God about resurrection (v. 15), but we have the advantage of sisters and brothers in the faith assuring us of their own confidence in the resurrection and the advantage of hearing Paul’s own words in 1 Corinthians 15 that in Jesus resurrection has started to happen.

“Keep on encouraging one another with these words,” Paul advises. Other words, such as “Keep a stiff upper lip,” or “Keep your chin up,” or “Things will get better sooner or later,” do not have the power of faith in the resurrection. That is a word that gives life a goal and a destiny and that suggests that God’s final word to each of us will be yes and
not no. The command to “keep on” recognizes the spiritual health of the people in our congregations and it acknowledges the constant need to tell the old story one more time.

Mt. 25:1-13

The parable of the ten bridesmaids in its present form has a number of allegorical details, and some scholars attempt to reconstruct an earlier form of the parable lacking these allegorical overtones. As an allegory, the groom represents Christ, the ten bridesmaids stand for the expectant Christian community, the delay of the groom points to the postponement of the parousia, the shout in v. 6 expresses the church’s longing for the consummation of the kingdom, the wedding dinner alludes to the messianic banquet, and the rejection of the foolish maidens foreshadows the final judgment. The extra flasks of oil probably show the wise bridesmaids’ preparation for unexpected circumstances. It seems unlikely that the extra oil represents allegorically the amount of good works done by the bridesmaids. The last verses in chap. 24 are parallel in thought to this parable and describe a man who also foolishly miscalculated the significance of the delay of Christ’s return (vv. 45-51).

While most parables of the kingdom compare it to some present reality (e.g. 13:24), the word “then” in v. 1 and the future tense relate this parable to eschatological events. The bridesmaids were supposed to welcome the bride and groom into their new household, but the bride goes unmentioned in this parable. Already in v. 2 the bridesmaids are categorized in advance as foolish and wise, and the wise show their intelligence by doing careful planning for the groom’s homecoming. Since all ten fall
asleep, the lesson of the parable has more to do with readiness than absolute vigilance. The wise bridesmaids could sleep securely knowing that they were ready for every eventuality. The delay of the parousia is also alluded to in 24:36-51 and 25:19.

When the groom approaches unexpectedly at midnight, the bridesmaids start to prepare their lamps to greet him. The wise bridesmaids refuse to share their extra oil with the foolish women, who then scurry to the nearest shops in a desperate attempt to find additional oil. In their absence the groom arrived, and he and the five wise bridesmaids went to the wedding banquet and locked the door (cf. Lk. 13:25; Mt. 7:22,23, where there are other harsh sayings about foolish latecomers). The groom’s sharp rejection of the foolish bridesmaids indicates the seriousness of the command to be prepared for the coming kingdom (cf. 22:11-14). The admonition to keep awake in v. 13, echoing 24:36, 42, 44, and 50, implies in this context the need for readiness and not necessarily for absolute, unsleeping vigilance.

Meaning and Response

Philipp Nicolai saw in this parable a positive encouragement for the faithful and built his hymn, “Wake, Awake for Night is Flying” around it:

Midnight hears the welcome voices,
And at the thrilling cry rejoices:
“Come forth, you maidens! Night is past.
The bridegroom comes! Awake;
Your lamps with gladness take!"

…

Prepare yourselves to meet the Lord,

Whose light has stirred the waiting guard.

Nicolai adds two ideas to the parable. First, he mentions the gracious invitation of the Lord for the maidens to come forth and the good news that the night is past. This world may not seem so night-like to us, but in comparison to God’s future the point is well taken. Whatever its good parts, life is also a place for tears, pain, separation, grief, and disappointment. Though we are often tempted to hold onto it with all our might, its importance pales and fades in comparison with the life that is to come.

Secondly, Nicolai also adds that the Lord’s light—and not just the shouts or the trumpets—has stirred the waiting guard. Jesus is the light of the world who shines into the darkness of our lives. The people walking in darkness will indeed see great light (Isa. 9:2). We love light rather than darkness and therefore our Lord’s return holds little terror for us. Light, dazzling light, is one metaphorical way of signalling God’s presence.

How are we, almost two thousand years after Matthew, to assess the importance of the delay of the *parousia*? We might begin by noting the importance of this world as the arena for carrying out our Christian calling. We must use this world and the gifts God has given us as part of our responsibility as people created by God. But we also need to remind ourselves that even if the world were to last for thousands of years, God’s impending advent calls all our assumptions into question and urges us to take with renewed seriousness how we live our lives in readiness. For whether our end comes by
parousia or car wreck or heart attack, we may soon be ushered into God’s presence to give account of how we lived our lives. How will it be with our “lamps”? How will we be “ready”? Luther’s catechism reminds us that people are ready for communion and, I would add, for the life to come, who have faith in these words: “[Christ’s body and blood] are given to you for the forgiveness of sins.” We face the end of the world with confidence because Jesus has promised to be with us until the end of the age.

Nicolai threw all care to the wind in his final stanza:

Now let all the heav’ns adore you,
And saints and angels sing before you.
The harps and cymbals all unite.
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where, dwelling with the choir immortal,
We gather round your dazzling light.
No eye has seen, no ear
Has yet been trained to hear.
What joy is ours!
Crescendos rise;
Your halls resound;
Hosannas blend in cosmic sound.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – (Sunday, Nov. 14) Proper 28 (33)

Jgs. 4:1-7
Most of the book of Judges, including this pericope, is dominated by a recurring pattern: the people sinned, God judged them by handing them over to an enemy, they prayed to the Lord, and God delivered them. This sequence shows not only the consequences of sin, but the ever-urgent need for repentance. Jabin was a king who ruled Hazor, a very large city in north Israel; his commander Sisera would meet a violent and dramatic death through the hands of a heroic woman named Jael (vv. 17-22). Early Israel lived during the Iron Age, and Jabin’s army made use of the latest technology in lording it over the Israelites.

The hero of this account, in addition to Jael, is Deborah, who is hailed as both a prophetess and a judge; the poem in Judges 5 is generally known as the Song of Deborah. She was famous enough to have a palm tree named after her, and the Israelites came to her for help in resolving disputes. As a prophetess, Deborah received divine revelation, and she gave orders to Barak to marshal troops against Jabin and Sisera. More important than even Deborah and Barak in this crisis is God’s promise to lure Sisera into an indefensible position and turn him over to Israel’s control.

Meaning and Response

The pattern in the book of Judges—sin, punishment, cry to the Lord, deliverance—is characteristic also of the Christian life, both individually and collectively. The end of the church year provides an opportunity for taking assessment of our own lives and acting appropriately, through contrition and repentance, to amend our way of life. The pattern
should lead to the expectation that God answers repentant sinners, repeatedly and with power. While we should never presume upon the goodness of God, the demonstration of his commitment to the human family through Christ reinforces the expectation of his readiness to save.

The texts of Judges 4 and 5 also provide strong women as role models for the community of faith. Deborah is a prophetess who passes on the word of God that had been revealed to her (vv. 6-7). She also served as an agent of justice in her office as judge. Deborah’s song (chap 5) is one of the oldest poems in the entire Bible. Jael also is an assertive woman in her courageous action to deliver Israel from the threats of Sisera (4:21-22). The church does well to point out exemplary actions of women on the contemporary scene as well as in antiquity.

All human actions, however, male or female, depend for their effectiveness on God’s own intervention. His promise to give Sisera into the hands of the Israelites reminds us that we have no power or authority except that given to us by God. The threatening power of our enemies, whether they are today’s nuclear nations or the iron chariots of Sisera, have not power against God.

Zep. 1:7, 12-18

The day of the Lord announced by Zephaniah in the reign of Josiah consists of a holy war directed against Israel. God’s devastating judgment is described as a ruthless divine search of Jerusalem, looking for those who think that faith and discipleship make no
difference. For them God has become irrelevant. Those who are rich and complacent are sentenced with frustration oracles: they will build houses and plant vineyards in vain.

Verse 14 is a clear reminder that God’s future moves toward us and not we toward it. God’s day is closer than anyone could imagine and the prophet exhausts himself in seeking nouns to define it—wrath, distress, anguish, ruin, devastation, darkness, gloom, clouds, thick darkness, trumpet blast, and battle cry (vv. 15-16). No amount of military protection offers safety on Yahweh’s day. Sin is identified as the cause of these catastrophes in v. 17, and the coming judgment becomes comprehensive, covering all the earth, in v. 18.

Meaning and Response

The Day of the Lord in Christianity refers to the day when Jesus will return in final victory. That day picks up the notion of the Lord’s day from the Old Testament, which was either his day of victory for Israel or his day of judgment against Israel.

God’s expected coming/return calls for each of us to examine our sins of commission or indifference. Our secular age cannot be frightened into the faith. Many have discounted the possibility of God to act: “The Lord will not do good, nor will God do harm.” The only effective counter proposal is to report what God has done and still continues to do in our own lives.

Even Christians have perhaps denied the coming of Christ in the very near future. Verse 14 highlights what is meant by Advent: “The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast.”
The Ode to a Capable Wife in vv. 10-31 gives high praise to a woman who is at once energetic and resourceful, and who has notable managerial and entrepreneurial gifts. The poem is an acrostic, that is, every verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Verses 19-20 focus on her hands. They are great assets in weaving, but the hands of this capable woman set an example for all people of good will by demonstrating generosity to the poor and the needy.

The poet may demonstrate his own chauvinism by referring to the deceitful charms and vain beauty of women, but he also acknowledges that for women as well as men the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (v. 30). Women deserve to participate in the wealth their labor generates and their personified accomplishments build their reputation in public places (v. 31).

Meaning and Response

1. The church needs to take every opportunity to recognize and acknowledge the gifts of women, especially because of its long defective record in this regard.

2. The piecemeal way in which this passage is included in the lectionary may need to be remedied by reading and reflecting on the entire passage.
3. While this is one of the best passages on women in the Old Testament, it also values this ideal woman primarily for the benefits she brings her husband. Any contemporary reflection will need to value women for their own sake.

4. What gives a person worth, whether male or female, finally transcends issues of gender. God’s goal for all is to create fear/trust in all members of the human family.

Ps. 123

In this communal lament, verse 1 is spoken by an individual on behalf of the whole community. “Eyes” form the central image in vv. 1-3, eyes that look longingly from positions of weakness to the person in power, eyes that give God no peace until he relents and has mercy. The metaphorical use of the imagery of servant and master, mistress and maid in v. 2 is echoed ironically in the second half of the Psalm where such class distinctions are the cause of the Psalmists’ distress. The needy people who cry to God in this Psalm envision a God with cosmic power, enthroned in the heavens and not just on the cherubim. Only a God with power enough to save will do.

Verses 3-4 seek to motivate God’s mercy out of compassion for the wretched state of those who pray. Their suffering stems directly from the arrogance of those who are in power. The Psalmists’ expect God to find this situation unfair and intolerable.

Meaning and Response
This Psalm graphically describes the intensity of prayer by comparing the people’s prayer to the way servants look at the “hand” of their master or mistress. Do they look at the hand as the means of punishment, or do they think of it as the source of pay and food? Or do they expect that hand to deliver them from all those who mistreat or harass them? The Psalmist may be calling on those who pray to endure to the end and even to imporune God. Those who hold God to his promises remind themselves of the promises God has made to them. The Psalmist knows that sooner or later God will have to relent from inactivity and come to save.

The community of the faithful needs to become sensitive to the fact that there are people in each of our locations who are as desperate as those described in vv. 3-4 and then develop plans to offer relief to the poor and weak, or to change the oppressive system. Perhaps the sermon can highlight local injustices that are perceived by those lacking power as outrageous scorn and contempt by their enemies. Do the “truly desperate,” whether in the Two Thirds World or in our own towns, consider the church and/or its members as those who scorn and offer contempt? Can worship publicly process such pain?

Ps. 90:1-8, (9-11),12

See the discussion under the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost.

Ps. 128
This wisdom Psalm presents an idyllic picture of home life and has a number of parallels with Ps. 127. The first verse might be translated: “How to be emulated is everyone who fears….” Faith and obedience are followed by success in one’s occupation and a happy family life. The final blessings come from Jerusalem and redound to Jerusalem. Here, as in Ps. 125:5, the Psalmist concludes with a benediction of peace for all Israel.

1 Thes. 5:1-11

Paul refuses to indulge in speculation about signs of the end time lest that lead the Thessalonians to let down their guard. The “day of the Lord” may once have referred to Yahweh’s victory in battle for Israel, but by the time of Amos (5:18-20) that day might also mean impending judgment for God’s people. While the wicked might comfort themselves and become complacent because of the relative tranquility of their lives, their final destruction could also come as suddenly as a woman’s labor pains.

In Paul’s view the Thessalonians were children of the light and of the day and, therefore, they should live like day-time people. The contrast between the faithful children of light and the unfaithful children of darkness is also known in the Dead Sea scrolls. Two metaphors are used for lack of preparation—getting drunk and falling asleep. These activities are what is expected of children of the night. Children of the day, however, will show their preparedness by putting on military garments—faith, love, and hope. Paul uses this metaphor of the well-armed/dressed soldier elsewhere (Rom 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4; Eph 6:13-17; Phil. 1:27-30). It is used of God in Isa. 59:17.
God’s choice of the Thessalonians (cf. 1:4) should lead them to live in a way appropriate to their future salvation (v. 9). Salvation, not condemnation, at the final judgment, however, depends on the atoning death of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24-26; 2 Cor 5:19-21). Just as in 4:13, Paul insists in v. 10 that there is no difference in regard to salvation whether one is dead (asleep) or alive (awake). He urges his Thessalonian readers to keep on encouraging one another to live like people of the day. Believers can be built up by the encouragement of other believers.

Meaning and Response

Why is it that we consider ourselves “people of the day”? The first reason is that God has in Christ called us from darkness into God’s own marvelous light. Light stands for God’s presence and help; darkness connotes the nefarious behavior of those who cowardly use the cover of darkness to deprive fellow beings of their property, their rights, or even their safety. Hence, counting oneself a person of the day also requires a commitment to God’s agenda and to all that is good, true, just, and beautiful. The difference between night and day is the difference between drunkenness and sobriety.

Commitment to the “agenda of the day-time” involves believers in full-scale warfare against evil. Yet their uniforms consist of breastplates of faith and love and helmets of the hope of salvation. The best offense, in short, is a good defense. Radical faith, Paul reminds readers in 1 Corinthians 13, may be able to move mountains with God’s help, but without love the person of faith is worth absolutely nothing. Lavish
generosity and willingness for martyrdom are contradicted by the absence of love. Faith can and must be active in love.

The best defense against sliding (back) into darkness is to set one’s attention on God’s coming vindication of his people, on eschatological salvation. Hope for such deliverance becomes available through the ministry and mediation of Jesus. Faith, love, and hope are no abstractions or bars over which the individual must jump. They are the daily pulse of the faithful and are nurtured by individuals’ support of one another in the community. That’s why Paul admonishes the community to mutual encouragement and congratulates the community for already practicing it. In radical discontinuity to the ethos of the western world, the Christian community rejoices in the success of others and goes out of its way to support the development in others of faith, love, and hope.

Mt. 25:14-30

In this parable of the talents, Jesus offers instruction for the Christian life and urges preparedness for the Parousia. The parallel passage in Lk. 19:11-27 refutes any expectation that the kingdom of God would appear immediately (v. 11). The master, about to leave on a journey, assigns a certain amount of money to each servant and appropriate, corresponding responsibilities (v. 15). Each of the servants was given a substantial amount of money since a talent was the equivalent of 15 years of wages (see note m in NRSV). The slave with five talents “worked” with them in trading or investing
and earned an additional five. The slave with two talents acted similarly, but the person with only one talent settled for hiding his master’s money in a hole in the ground.

Verse 19 notes that a long time had passed during the master’s absence, perhaps referring to the delay of the Parousia; “settling accounts” denotes the final judgment. When the first two slaves make their reports, the master calls them good and trustworthy, promises to put them in charge of many things, and invites them to enter their master’s joy. Their faithfulness consisted in their acting in a trustworthy way that included some risk taking. St. Paul notes that the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

The person entrusted with one talent admitted he had acted out of fear since his master was a harsh man, reaping where he had not sown. The master actually confirms that the slave had accurately understood his master’s character—he was the kind of person who could turn a profit out of nothing—although he significantly omits the slave’s use of the adjective harsh. He scolds the slave for his inaction and laziness. The least the slave could have done was to turn the investment over to the bankers, who could have brought him a profit without any effort on his own part. The passive construction in v. 29 suggests that it is God who will give more to those who have something and will take away what little they have from those who have nothing. Jesus makes the same point in 13:12. If a person is open to God’s plan of salvation (the secrets of the kingdom), he or she will make great progress in understanding it, but if one closes oneself to this plan, one can lose the offer itself (cf. Mk. 4:25; Lk. 8:16). There may be a criticism of contemporary Jewish leaders in this proverbial saying. The inaction of the slave, in any
case, earns him damnation, where people will weep and gnash their teeth (cf. Mt. 8:12, 13:42. 50; 22:13, and 24:51).

Meaning and Response

The Gospel for this Sunday follows and builds on the parable of the ten bridesmaids from the previous Sunday. The parable explicates Mt. 25:13: “Keep awake therefore for you know neither the day nor the hour.” How does one keep awake? How does one become like the wise bridesmaids?

At the end of the church year we often speak of the nearness of Christ’s return, but this parable presupposes his delay and provides guidance on how to live responsibly in Christ’s absence. The fear of the slave with one talent led him to excessive caution—he did not keep awake. Verse 29 comments more generally on God’s retribution. All those who have [talents or whatever], such as the disciples, will receive even more; those who don’t have much or don’t understand the significance of what they have will lose even their small possessions. Jesus seems to be referring to the scribes or others among the religious leaders of his day.

Clearly, this is not a lesson on investing nor even necessarily about money. The translation “talents” may tempt us to concentrate too closely on individual abilities. What are we to do with everything God has given us? One way to focus a sermon would be to ask how the picture of God’s rule in the Scriptures might be translated into a day-to-day lifestyle. When we read that God favors the poor, desires to offer forgiveness, or seeks to
transform lives, how might we implement this as Christians in our families, our work place, or our communities?

Another way to organize a sermon would be to ask about the responsibility of those who have heard, understood, and accepted the good news about Jesus. Are we not to tell that story to those who have never heard the gospel or who have misheard it as something judging and legalistic? Both of these proposals put more stress on the faithful servants, who were entrusted with ten and five talents respectively.

How might the attitude of the rich master be translated into Christian proclamation? He was a person who reaped where he did not sow, and gathered where he had not scattered seed. Is the only response to inactivity terror? Or might one try to emulate this master by loving where there was little thought of return or forgiving when the other party would continue in hostility? Might we learn to see in others God’s creation when the culture would despise such persons as ignorant, poor, handicapped, and of no economic worth? These questions are not asking so much what Jesus or Matthew might have meant, but what sort of response does a modern reader have to this most unique image? And cannot this characterization be used fruitfully to understand the significance of Jesus. He did not go to the rich and powerful and pious. He called a rag tag group of disciples and made them the basis of his church. He takes sinners and makes them saints.

Keeping awake is “as if” (v. 14). Jesus offers a comparison that may have understood first of all as encouragement to his disciples and as criticism of the scribes. Twin dangers attend the preparation of a sermon on this text: either we too quickly identify ourselves or other prominent people in the church as the persons with ten or five
talents, or we congratulate ourselves on our own achievement without recognizing that we are what we are because Jesus made something out of our nothingness.

LAST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – (Sunday, November 21)

Ez. 34:11-16, 20-24

The first part of this chapter indicts the shepherds (the kings of Israel) for aggrandizing themselves at the expense of their sheep (the people of Israel). In vv. 11-16, Yahweh, the good shepherd, promises to seek out those sheep who have been scattered or exiled on the Lord’s day against Israel (a day of clouds and thick darkness v. 12). The new Exodus announced by Ezekiel will have many starting points in different countries, but one destination, the land of Israel. In that land God will feed the people, give them rest and security, and provide special protection and help to all who are weak or injured.

Verses 17-19 indict bad sheep (people), who make it difficult for other sheep (people) to get decent food and drinking water. Yahweh particularly indicts the fat sheep (rich and powerful people) who throw their weight around to the great disadvantage of the weak. In saving the flock, Yahweh will also sort out the bad sheep from the good (vv. 20-22; cf. Ez. 20:35-38).

In the final two verses of this pericope, Yahweh promises to set up a shepherd-messiah, a new David, who will provide food for the people and serve as their shepherd in God’s stead. In addition to citing the first part of the so-called covenant formula, “I will be their God” (often followed by “you shall be my people”), Ezekiel’s God promises
that the new David will serve as “prince” among the people. Ezekiel has very little use for his contemporary Israelite kings and has great difficulty identifying the messiah as a king in the line of David. Instead, picking up an old word from Israel’s traditions, he calls this future heir of David a “prince,” that is, a “king” in quotation marks, a monarch with built-in checks and balances. The messiah will have a role as the prime worshipper in Israel (46:11-12), but he also will be effectively blocked from the schemes his predecessors used to exploit people financially and in other ways.

Meaning and Response

In the midst of Israel’s exile, Ezekiel focuses on the kingship of Yahweh. Yahweh’s royal role is not one of domination, but of protecting all the weak and injured sheep who have suffered in Israel’s wars. As king, Yahweh will also bring about a new Exodus (cf. Ex. 15:18) and will provide food for all the people. This royal Yahweh is the exact opposite of all the earthly kings who ruled over Judah and who used their power only to exploit the people.

God’s rule over the world often takes place mediately, through human agents. At the end of Genesis 1 God establishes men and women as the vice presidents of his earthly estate, created in his image, and charged with ruling the world wisely. Yahweh had promised to serve as father to David, and designated him as God’s son. Ezekiel’s Davidic and messianic prince will reign in God’s name and in God’s stead. He is the sign of the covenant that continues to exist between God and Israel.
God’s word is the guarantee of this future according to Ezekiel (“I the Lord, have spoken,” v. 24). According to Christian belief, Jesus plays the role of Davidic king. He fed people through his many miraculous feedings, and he was present with the people not as a prince, but as a servant. Not only did his word demonstrate God’s promise, but he himself was that word of God that took up its presence in our midst. This king-crowned—with-thorns also takes care of all the spiritual and physical needs of his people. Just like king Yahweh in Ezekiel, Jesus brought back those who had gone astray, bound up the injured, and strengthened the weak, but he also brought down the strong (v. 16).

Ps. 100

This hymn of praise and thanksgiving adds to the shepherd/sheep imagery that is abundant in the lessons for this Sunday. In v. 3 the Psalmist asserts an interesting doctrine of creation: God has made us and therefore we belong to him. We are God’s people, or the sheep of his own pasture. Using a creation theology, the Psalmist includes all people and all things in an invitation to praise (v. 1). God’s goodness (v. 5) is defined or made clear by two other characteristics. God’s loyalty to his people and the reliability of his promises can be counted on, now and forever.

Meaning and Response

The king hailed in this Psalm rules over all nations, and the whole earth is invited to worship and fall down before him. While the term king itself is not used of Yahweh in
this Psalm, the people identify themselves as God’s sheep and therefore God is the divine
shepherd king. It is often stated that the word translated “thanks” in the Psalter should
usually be translated “praise.” I can thank a person by just saying, “Thank you.” But
when I praise someone I have to say it in a whole sentence and a third party is almost
always involved. Praise of Yahweh takes place because of his steadfast love and
faithfulness, and that testimony is given to all of us readers so that we can both believe
and join the praise.

Ps. 95:1-7

The familiar words of the Venite (vv. 1-7) are followed by words of admonition (vv. 8-
11). God’s kingship puts everything under divine control: depths and heights, sea and
dry ground. Verse 6 hails God as creator. The metaphor in v. 7 is curiously ambivalent
about seeing ourselves as people and as sheep. While one would expect sheep to be
associated with pastures and people with God’s hand, the poet mixes the metaphor and
therefore provides new opportunities for reflection.

Meaning and Response

As king, Yahweh is greater than any of the other gods. As preserver of the world, he
literally has the whole world in his hands, and his ownership is certified by his creation of
the totality of this cosmos, both its sea and its dry land. Bowing and kneeling before
Yahweh the king, the Psalmists confess God as our maker.
This Psalm is used in Morning Prayer and elsewhere without vv. 7b-11. The remaining Psalm makes eminent sense by itself, but the church in singing a truncated version tends to de-emphasize the transformative power that God intends to exert on his people. The very ones who shout Yahweh’s praises need to be warned about the consequences of having one’s heart go astray and of not paying attention to God’s ethical ways. The first Exodus generation did not get to enter the land of rest (v. 11), but the Book of Hebrews, in commenting on this Psalm, affirms that there still remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God (4:9). Through the kingship of Jesus, the way into Yahweh’s promised rest has been reopened.

Ps. 23

See under Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Eph. 1:15-23

The writer of the Second Lesson gives thanks for the two great virtues of the Ephesians: their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for one another. He prays that God will give them in addition a spirit of wisdom, that is, a humble knowledge of God and a sense of how to live appropriately. Such knowledge will enlighten the readers and raise their sights by the glorious expectation of things to come. These expectations include the hope to which they have been called, the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,
and the greatness of God’s power for us. The inheritance among the “saints” probably refers in this verse to life among the angels, whereas the writer uses “saints” elsewhere to refer to members of the earthly congregation in (1:1, 15).

God’s power was demonstrated when God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to his present seat at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:1). Whereas Paul refers to the church as Christ’s body made up of diverse members, here the writer exalts Christ as the head of the church, a concept which is never mentioned in unquestionably authentic Pauline letters. The last clause in v. 23—“the fullness of him who fills all in all”—is highly debated. It may mean that Christ is incomplete until the church provides for him that which is lacking. Or it may mean that Christ is the source and goal of the body’s growth.

Meaning and Response

It would be hard to give someone a better compliment than the one the author extends to the Ephesians. He has heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love toward one another. But he prays in addition that they may come to know the hope to which Christ has called them.

Faith, love, and hope (cf. 1 Corinthians 13)! Hope includes the knowledge that Christ now enjoys a glorious inheritance among the angels (v. 18). Life is sometimes meaningless or humdrum, going nowhere. But the present exaltation of Christ is at the same time a promise for what we shall all become. In 4:1 the author begs his readers to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called. He could have added that they—and we—should lead a life worthy of the hope to which we have been called.
That would include dissatisfaction with the many compromises of life and a joy in doing the good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (2:10). We are all called to equip the saints for their work of ministry until we all come to the unity of faith and to maturity in Christ (4:12-13).

Hope also means that we know that God has put great power into action for us, just as he demonstrated great power in raising Christ from the dead. Many people feel powerless because of their social location in life, their work, their family, or their lack of success. Hope recognizes that God has used great power for us so that we indeed can view ourselves as power-filled.

Christ’s lordship over all things is for the sake of the church. The whole cosmos, therefore, works efficiently for the benefit of the church, and the church needs to see that it is also responsible for the care of the whole cosmos. Power is not an end in itself, but power is utilized for the sake of God’s people. Later the author concludes: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend…what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:18-19).

1 Cor. 15:20-28

All the Jews at the time of Jesus believed in the resurrection, with the notable exception of the Sadducees. What was new about Christ is that he was the first human being who was in fact raised, and with his resurrection the new age has begun to dawn. Paul’s Adam-Christ typology means that through Adam death came to all just as through Christ
resurrection and life will come to all. We humans must wait for our time of resurrection until the second coming of Christ when he will have accomplished all of his remaining tasks, including especially his defeat of death itself. The personification of death is well known in the Old Testament (Ps. 33:19; Jer. 9:21). By putting all things under his feet, Christ will implicitly fulfill the words of Pss. 8:7 and 110:1. Only one thing is not included in the word “all,” namely God himself. Once Christ has subjected everything else to his rule, he will subject himself to God who then will be “all in all.”

Meaning and Response

While the Gospel reading for this day stresses human accountability at the second coming of Christ, this second reading from 1 Corinthians stresses the great hope that is part of the expectation of Christ’s coming. The return of Christ will mean resurrection for all who have died, and the guarantee of that is Christ’s own resurrection and subsequent rule, a rule that will lead to victory over death itself.

Since the resurrection of the dead is one of the signs of the new age, and since in Christ such resurrection has already started to happen, we Christians should expect and welcome other signs of the new age—the gift of the spirit, the inclusion of the nations, and even some signs of eschatological peace. The resurrection of Christ, therefore, fills believers with zeal for trying to implement these signs of God’s future in our present lives.

At Christ’s coming, the saving rule of Christ will be complete. Once again he will be able to say, “It is finished.” Until then Christ and we believers, too, struggle
against “rulers and authorities and powers” that are allied against Christ and the church (v. 24).

Mt. 25:31-46

In this description of the judgment of the nations, discipleship is characterized by care for the needy. This not a denial of the need for faith, but it shows that real faith is always active in love. The pericope deals with the behavior of disciples who are already in the church. It shows them how to live as they wait for Christ’s return.

All the nations, including Israel, will be gathered before the enthroned Son of man, who will separate them into two groups like a shepherd, who divides a flock between sheep and goats. The background for this motif lies in Ez. 34:17-22, where God makes a distinction between good and bad sheep, that is, between good and bad members of the nation of Israel. Those on the right hand side of the king are invited to enter the kingdom, while those on the left are ordered to go to the place of eternal punishment, prepared for the devil and his angels. According to the book of Revelation, the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will all be thrown into a lake of fire (Rv. 20:10). Six acts of mercy toward the needy are identified as marks of love for Christ. Too much emphasis should not be placed on the apparent surprise of the righteous. Rather, their questions allow the Son of man to reinforce the point that service to the needy equals love for Christ. In his earlier reply to John the Baptist, John identified his own similar miraculous acts of mercy as signs that he in fact was the one who was to come (Mt. 11:2-6).
The NRSV’s inclusive translation “who are members of my family” in v. 40 is not a completely satisfactory rendering for the Greek “brothers.” A brother or sister in Matthew may be a member of the Christian community (12:48-50; 18:15), but the term can also refer to any human being who is a potential object of our ethical duty to help the lowly (cf. Mt. 5:22-24; 7:3-5). The wider referent of the term brother/sister seems to be intended in this pericope. Note that the word “brothers” (“members of my family” is not used at all in the Son of man’s response to the wicked in v. 45). The two camps into which all people will be divided is characteristic of other (proto-) apocalyptic passages in the Bible (Isa. 66:24; Dan 12:2). The passage as a whole shows how seriously Jesus considered the ethical behavior of the disciples.

Meaning and Response

This text is very familiar, perhaps even in this age of relative biblical illiteracy. Such familiarity can prevent us from hearing it afresh, or we can succumb to the moralism and even self-righteousness that have so often accompanied its reading. Here are a few pointers on the way to a sermon that seeks fresh understandings.

1. This pericope is a call to life now rather than a clear picture of what Judgment day will be like. The social ministry of the church as a whole is also to characterize the ministry of individuals in their daily lives and citizenship. While support for the church as institution is important, we must never forget that the church exists primarily for the world and its welfare and transformation. The vivid concreteness of
the text needs to be matched by concrete diagnosis of the ministerial settings in which we find ourselves.

2. Service to Christ takes place indirectly through care for the least of his sisters and brothers. They are the members of Christ’s family only in so far as all human beings are members of that family. That is, human need is the focus, not just helping “our own kind.” Generous use of time and money for the most marginal in society must be balanced by attention to those social changes that will eliminate or reduce the causes of hunger, thirst, and imprisonment.

3. Jesus himself serves as the model of such ministry throughout the Gospel of Matthew, as well as the other gospels. His miracles of healing and feeding are signs of God’s preferential option for the dispossessed. His message to the disciples of John showed that his ministry was a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophetic expectations (Mt. 11:2-6).

4. A church that takes the Great Commission as its marching orders knows that evangelistic outreach must be balanced by a teaching ministry (Mt. 28:19-20). We are to create disciples, not just members. Teaching “everything that I have commanded you” would include prominently the words of Jesus in Mt. 25:31-46. All nations are the goal of the Christian mission, and the weak and disadvantaged of those nations need to be central in the church’s concern. North American Christians need to take more seriously the ways in which our lifestyle choices often have adverse effects on the rest of the people in the world.

5. As with many other texts in Matthew, this pericope on the last judgment could prove to be overwhelming, just as the Sermon on the Mount enunciates an ethic seemingly beyond our powers to realize it. But Jesus adds an important reminder at the end of
the Great Commission, that provides strength and empowerment for all disciples along the way: “I am always with you.” Jesus was “with” the disciples as we walked the streets of Palestine, as he dined with them at the last supper, as he hung on the cross, and as he rose triumphantly from the tomb. In being with them, he demonstrated that he did not let their failings alienate him. Jesus promised to remain as an abiding presence even after his earthly departure. Being with someone is often a way to empower that person. In Christ’s presence the church finds its resource to demonstrate a faith that is active in love and that hopes for—rather than fears—the final Judgment day.