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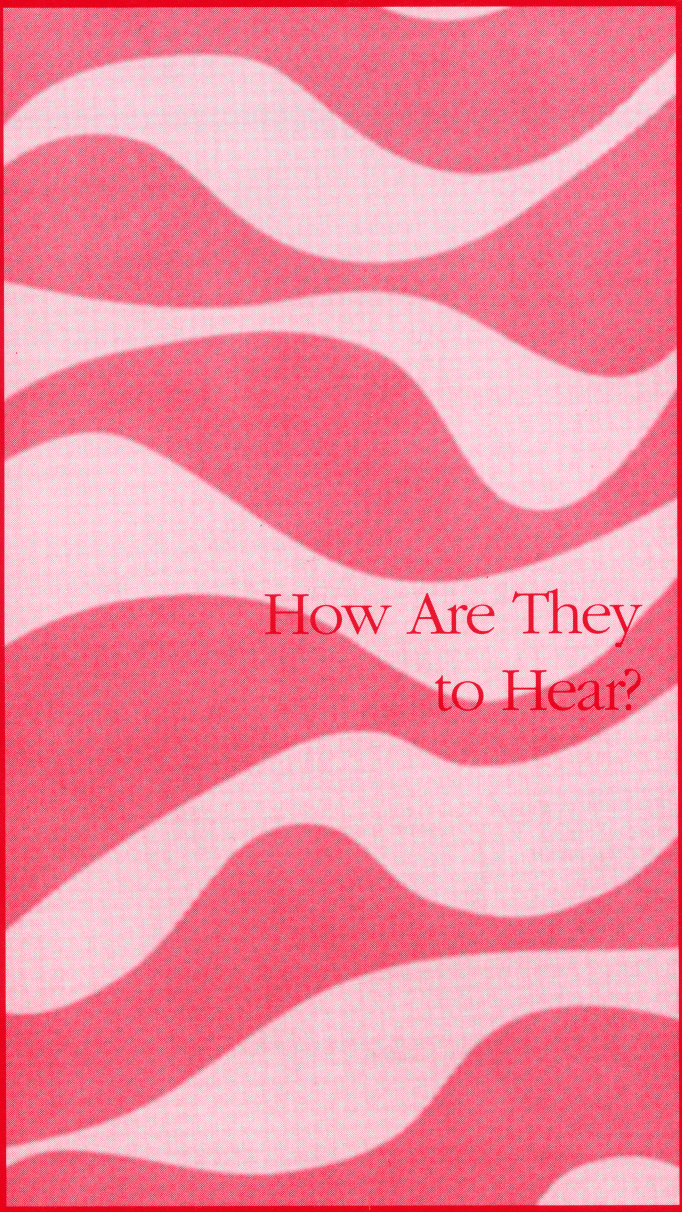

How Are They to Hear?

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Drawings by Sara Olson-Smith

How Are They to Hear?

Your assignment in the 2007 church year, should you choose to accept it, is primarily to proclaim the good news as presented in the Gospel of Matthew. Oh, there will be times, I hope, when you dip into the assigned Old Testament texts and the Second Readings, even occasional topical sermons or texts chosen for special occasions. But the lectionary expects you to find out what Matthew, a multilingual man, probably an Israelite, with a rather sophisticated command of Israelite traditions and scribal argumentation (HarperCollins Study Bible) had to say in the late first century—and then apply that to yourself and a diverse lot of twenty-first–century Christians.

The distinguished band of authors who wrote for this issue acknowledge that this assignment entails both promise and peril. What are the implications for preaching of a Gospel that is anti-Empire, opposed to the religious establishment, sharply critical of the Pharisees, morally stringent, and apocalyptically severe? What is the empire today? Who is the religious establishment? What about sharp criticism in an age of ecumenical hospitality? How can one be morally stringent in our culture? Or apocalyptically severe in a society fascinated by the "Left Behind" series? *Tolle et lege*—take and read—these articles and Matthew.

Amy-Jill Levine points out that the Gospel of Matthew has often been interpreted in ways that convey anti-Jewish messages. A number of common stereotypes about Judaism are simply not true. Judaism, for example, was not characterized by oppressive purity laws, xenophobia, and misogyny. Some apparent criticisms of the Jews are in fact criticism of certain specific Jewish leaders and not of Jews in general. Pastors and congregations need to weigh the pros and cons of participating in contemporary *seder* celebrations. The cry "His blood be on us and on our children" has caused much mischief in the history of Christianity. The correct answer to who killed Jesus is humanity. The church needs to confess its own sins, not the sins of "the Jews." There are, finally, good ways and bad ways to proselytize. Avoiding anti-Jewish preaching requires a concerted effort.

Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., identifies seven problems in preaching Matthew and suggests ways in which these problems can become opportunities to address positively issues that are at the heart of Christian life. The Jewish context in which Matthew places christological titles, for example, invites a special effort at appreciating their distinctive Jewish resonances in this Gospel.

Matthew's alleged anti-Judaism can be turned into an opportunity for better appreciating first-century Judaism and Matthew's place within it. While Matthew is patriarchal, his account of Jesus' dialogue with the Canaanite woman is the only case in the Gospels where Jesus seems to lose an argument. Preaching eschatology may seem easier on the basis of the Lord's prayer, in which the "you" petitions ask that God's sovereignty be celebrated by all creation and the "we" petitions beg for sustenance and protection in the dangerous process of its coming.

Warren Carter notes that the plot of Matthew involves conflict between Jesus and the Jerusalem-based leaders who were allied with Rome. At the heart of this article is the idea that much of the New Testament is highly critical of and subversive to the Roman Empire. Jesus manifests God's saving presence, the empire of God, by constituting a community of followers by preaching, healing, and exorcizing. Powerful elites conflict with Jesus over his societal vision and practices. Jesus teaches his followers that conflict with the elite will result in his crucifixion and resurrection, with numerous implications for their lives as his followers. At Jerusalem Jesus challenges the center of the elite's power in the temple and condemns their world as facing imminent destruction under God's judgment. God's saving purposes overcome the worst that the elite can do, and Jesus commissions his followers to worldwide mission, promising to be with them.

Richard Carlson observes that the lectionary does not have us read the Gospel of Matthew in a coherent order (the text for Advent 1 comes from chapter 24, but Advent 2 takes us back to chapter 2). The genealogy in chapter 1 shows that Jesus' origin is within the core history of God's dealing with Israel. The inclusion of four Gentile women in this genealogy demonstrates that Gentiles have had and will have an important place among God's people. The name Emmanuel demonstrates that Jesus personifies and embodies God's presence, and this theme continues until the very end of the book. The rapid succession of prophetic fulfillments in chapter 2 reveals that Jesus is fulfilling the prophetic agenda. Herod is emblematic of those in power in Matthew who use deception and violence to hold on to their power. The divine sonship of Jesus is explicitly announced already in 2:15. Before one begins to preach on subsequent chapters, one would do well to enter fully into the first two seminal chapters.

Fred Strickert studies the meaning of Rachel's lament from Jeremiah as cited in Matthew's Gospel. The background of Rachel's cry is found in her story in Genesis where she dies in childbirth on the way to the promised land. Rachel and her husband Jacob are the perfect example of homeless people who were constantly on the way to landedness. Rachel's crucial role in salvation

history is also celebrated in rabbinic midrash. The tears of Rachel foreshadow the tears of Mary, and Rachel's son, dubbed "the son of my sorrow," prefigures Mary's child, the man of sorrows. Rachel dies giving life, while Mary gives birth to one destined for death. The mothers weeping for their Bethlehem children would one day join those weeping along the streets of Jerusalem as Jesus made his way to the cross. Rachel in Jeremiah was told to dry her eyes and look forward to a new covenant, and Matthew's quotation of Rachel's lament is only a prelude to the unfolding of God's covenantal plan in Jesus.

Paul's questions in Rom 10:14–15 are haunting: How are they to call on one whom they have not believed, or believe in one whom they have not heard, or hear without someone to proclaim to them? And then: How are they (you!) to proclaim unless they (you!) are sent? This year, again, you are the local and official spokesperson for the apostolic faith, so designated by divine call.

Godspeed!

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

Matthew and Anti-Judaism

Amy-Jill Levine
Vanderbilt University Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion

Discussion of whether or not Matthew's Gospel is anti-Jewish flounders on such intractable questions as how to define "anti-Jewish," who gets to make the determination, and on what criteria the judgment can be made.[1] Yet regardless of whether the Gospel was initially anti-Jewish, however defined, it has certainly been interpreted in ways that convey anti-Jewish messages. Our task is to prevent this abuse of the text.

Most homilists realize the dangers of passages such as John 8:44, "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires," and 1 Thess 2:15, "[the Jews], who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets. . . ." Most recognize that congregations may associate the Pharisees with "the Jews," and so appropriately defuse this impression by reading Matthew 23, for example, as instructing the church: those who exalt themselves (23:12), neglect justice and mercy (23:23), and ignore the prophets (23:34) are the people in the pulpit and the pews. Yet even ministers who consciously avoid anti-Jewish sermons may convey anti-Jewish messages nonetheless. While completely preventing such slippage between what we intend and what others hear is impossible, being forewarned of potential problems helps eliminate numerous problems.

The following examples of anti-Jewish ideas come from student papers, sermons, and comments made by clergy and laity in numerous workshops.

Matthew 1

Following the Greek translation of Isaiah 7, Matthew 1:22–23 proclaims the fulfillment of "what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.'" Although the Hebrew text of Isaiah says nothing about a virgin—it presumes a normal conception—the Greek does. Matthew has, like other readers of Scripture then and now, understood the text to speak to his own situation.

Problems arise when congregants conclude that "the Jews" misread deliberately, a conclusion reinforced by 2 Cor 3:14, "to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there. . . ."

All texts have multiple meanings. In secular terms, we bring to texts our own questions, and we filter that text through our own experiences. In religious terms, new meanings can be the work of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah has multiple meanings: for

1. See Amy-Jill Levine, "Anti-Judaism and the Gospel of Matthew," in *Anti-Judaism and the Gospels*, ed. Wm. R. Farmer (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 9–36.

his original audience, for the church, for the synagogue, for any who hold his words sacred. Religious educators should explain how Jewish and Christian readings, although diverse, both point to Isaiah's meaning, fulfilled and unfulfilled.[2]

Matthew 2

Sermons highlighting the fact that the Gentile Magi anticipate the Gentile mission sometimes convey a countermessage: If the Magi represent the Gentiles, "Herod and all Jerusalem" represent the "Jews." Matthew does not divide the world into "good Gentiles" and "bad Jews." Joseph and Mary, along with slaughtered children and the grieving parents, are also "Jews." The principal division is not between Jew and Gentile but between those who bear good fruit and those who corrupt.

Matthew 3

Congregants may see Judaism as ethnocentric or xenophobic whereas Jesus represents "universalistic" Christianity. Matthew 3:7, 9, John's polemic against the Pharisees and Sadducees, can reinforce this impression: "You brood of vipers! . . . Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor.'"

While some Jews thought that only they were in God's good graces, others recognized the righteous among the nations (for example, the centurion in Luke 7 or Cornelius in Acts 15). Judaism welcomed converts (such as Nicolaus, the proselyte from Antioch of Acts 6:5), and the Jerusalem Temple's "Court of the Gentiles" was open to all. Jews did not engage in formalized proselytizing efforts because they did not believe Gentiles needed to convert to be in a right relationship with God. When Zechariah 8:23 envisions "ten men from the nations of every language" . . . saying [to Jews], 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you,'" he does not foresee them adding, "and please circumcise us when we get there." Christian educators might want to problematize the notions of "particularism" and "universalism" further by querying whether the church, with its proclamation of salvation only through the Christ, represented "particularism."

Matthew 5

The so-called "antitheses" (Matt 5:21–47) are poorly named. To those who heard "You shall not swear falsely" (5:33) Jesus does not say "but I say to you, lie all you want." The point is not antithesis but intensification: "Don't swear at all." It is what rabbinic sources call "building a fence about the law" (Mishnah, *Avot* 1:1) to insure that divine will is followed. To call these passages antitheses suggests that Jesus is against Mosaic Law, and, because congregants will associate Mosaic Law with "the Jews," the impression is doubly problematic.

Concerning Matt 5:38, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," this commandment is not put into practice. Rabbinic texts insist that it could not be, since no two eyes or two teeth are equivalent. Moreover, it would be inapplicable for perpetrators who lack teeth or are blind; thus it must have a nonliteral meaning (Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Kamma* 84a).

The point of not responding to violence with violence, as Jesus advises in the next verses, is known in Jewish thought; Jesus does not have to be unique in order to be profound. Such communal nonviolent

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2. An excellent example is Ralph W. Klein's "Promise and Fulfillment," in *Contesting Texts: Jews and Christians in Conversation about the Bible*, ed. M. Knowles et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 47–63.

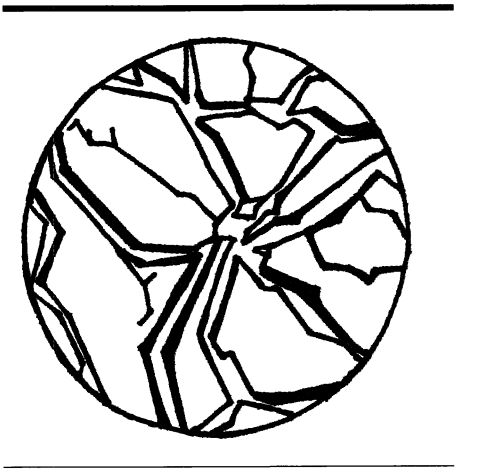
response in the first century surfaced most clearly in 41 when Caligula determined to put his statue in the Temple. The crowds did not rebel; instead, they left their fields and engaged in a sit-down strike.

Concerning 5:43, "love your neighbor and hate your enemy," biblically illiterate individuals (there are a few) conclude both that the Old Testament enjoins such hatred and that "the Jews"—whom they associate with the Old Testament—follow that law. Churches with missions in Palestine are especially prone to this view, because some congregants make facile connections between "Old Testament" violence, Matthew 5:43, certain Israeli policies such as "the fence" or military incursions, and what "Jews" think.

First, there is no such commandment. Scripture insists not only "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble" (Prov 24:17) but also "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat, and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink" (Prov 25:21). Second, congregants need to be reminded that the Old Testament is part of their Bibles and that the God of the Old Testament is the same God as the one in the New Testament. Third, each Testament has parts to celebrate, and each has texts of terror. Finally, there is no single "Jewish" view on anything, including politics in the Middle East.

Matthew 8

By proclaiming that Jesus came to welcome "outcasts and marginals" (the phrase has become axiomatic in sermons), pastors give the impression that "Judaism" is characterized by oppressive purity laws, xenophobia, and misogyny, which create those outcasts and marginals. Matthew 8 provides three common examples used to illustrate this impression. By healing a man



with leprosy (vv. 2–4), fulfilling the request of a Gentile centurion (vv. 5–13), and touching a woman (vv. 14–15), Jesus is seen, incorrectly, as challenging the oppressive Jewish system.

Nothing in Matthew's text suggests that Jesus contravenes purity codes or abrogates any law. To the contrary, Jesus commands that the healed man fulfill Torah: "Show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift" (v. 4). Nor, by the way, is this supplicant ostracized in Matthew; the image comes primarily from readers who presume that Leviticus accurately explains life in Second Temple and subsequent Judaism.

As for xenophobia, the centurion is living in Capernaum; in Luke's account, he not only built the synagogue, but also the Jewish elders supplicate on his behalf. He is rather a splendid example of good Jewish-Gentile relations. Finally, Peter's mother-in-law is not marginal, not outcast, and not impure. She is sick, and Jesus heals her.

Matthew 9

In Matthew 9:11, Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Some Christians

Concerning Jewish misogyny, no law forbids conversation between men and women.

believe that "sinners" means those who transgress "ritual law" such as eating non-kosher food or refusing to tithe. The connection of "sinners" to banqueting tax collectors, agents of the Roman government, indicates that the term has a more specific meaning—sinners are those who have removed themselves from the general welfare of the population. Today's "sinners" would be drug pushers and arms dealers. The issue is not ritual purity but moral action.

Preachers next announce that by touching the hemorrhaging woman and then a corpse (9:18–26) Jesus does away with the purity laws. This interpretation reinforces the view that Judaism is about law and Jesus is about grace; worse, it suggests that the law makes women into "outcasts and marginals."

Corrections begin by observing that Jesus does not touch the woman; she touches him. Indeed, she touches his "fringe," his *tzitzit*, which symbolizes the law (9:20). Second, there is no law forbidding such touch. Third, she does not convey impurity by touch (if she did, she and her sisters could pollute all Galilee in the amount of time it takes to read this article). Fourth, no version of this story (see also Mark 5:22–43 and Luke 8:41–56) says anything about purity laws. And fifth, to focus on purity takes the emphasis off the story's good news—a woman who takes initiative and the healing of a body.[3]

The same points apply to the ruler's daughter. To touch a corpse is not a sin; to bury a body is rather one of the most valued *mitzvot* (commandments), because it is one in which the person who benefits from it has no means of reciprocating (see Tobit). Touching a corpse does create impurity, but so what? John's disciples, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and others who touch corpses are not "marginal and outcast." There are, furthermore, means for restoring purity. Finally, purity does have numerous positive lessons from sanctification of the body to resistance to assimilation.

Concerning Jewish misogyny, no law forbids conversation between men and women. While Jewish society, like pagan and Christian society, was patriarchal, the Gospels themselves indicate that Jewish women owned homes (Luke 10:28), had freedom of travel (the women who follow Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem), could leave their husbands (e.g., Joanna, Mrs. Zebedee), participated in synagogue and Temple worship, etc. The single line that might suggest that Jesus' conversation with women is anomalous is John 4:27. But setting makes all the difference. The woman is a Samaritan, and she herself queries Jesus' comment to her. One could read the verse as suggesting that Jesus usually refused to speak with women, but that would be as uncharitable to Jesus as are those readings that see Judaism as misogynistic and Jesus as Hillary Clinton in homespun.

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3. Amy-Jill Levine, "Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman," in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2001), 70–87.

Matthew 12

In the first controversy story (12:1-8), the Pharisees—whom some congregants associate with "the Jews"—see the disciples plucking heads of grain and accuse them of violating the Sabbath. By arguing from both scriptural precedent (David) and current example (priests), Jesus shows his continuity with the Jewish tradition. In the second story, Jesus heals a man in the synagogue. His explanation, an argument from the lesser (the sheep in the pit) to the greater (the man in the synagogue), is called in Hebrew a *qal v'homer* argument, and it is found frequently in rabbinic literature. Nor does Jesus actually "practice medicine," for he does not touch the man. Jews then, and now, just like Christians, continue to debate how to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. The point is the sanctity of the day, not Mosaic Torah or Jewish Law vs. Jesus' compassion.

Matthew 15

In 15:21–28, Jesus ignores a desperate Canaanite woman, states that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24), and responds to her plea "Lord, help me" with "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (15:25–26). The woman, "turning the other cheek," responds not with violence but with cleverness. Problems begin when interpreters highlight Jesus' Jewish ethnocentrism; they increase when commentators include the idea that in heeding the woman Jesus also overcame his Jewish misogynism. A few critics even suggest that Matt 10:5b–6 and 15:24 are from a "Jewish-Christian" source; they cannot imagine either Jesus or a "full" Christian behaving this way.

None of this is helpful or necessary. The "Canaanite" woman (as opposed to Mark's "Syro-Phoenician Greek") reminds readers of Canaanite women in the genealogy, Tamar and Rahab, who proved more faithful than the men with whom they are associated (respectively, Judah and the spies sent to Jericho). She represents the faith of the outsider, a representation echoing the Jewish tradition of the "righteous Gentile." By initially refusing the woman, the Matthean Jesus follows a literary convention, known from both Roman and Jewish sources, in which someone in authority is humbled by his social inferior. Thus Matthew instructs ecclesial leaders to follow Jesus in attending to the "least," even if doing so is not part of their job description.[4] Finally, Matthew follows both the Old Testament and Paul in noting that Jesus did come "to the Jew first," as Paul puts it. The Gentile mission begins only with the "Great Commission" (28:16–20). The point is not Jewish exclusivism; it is rather history, and salvation history.

Matthew 18–19

When "little children were being brought to [Jesus] in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray," his "disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them" (19:13). Unfortunately, numerous Christians think that the unwelcoming disciples here represent the "Jewish" attitude to children, whereas the "Christian view" is Jesus' welcoming of them (18:2–5). This tendency to regard as "Jewish" anything the disciples or Jesus do that seems contrary to our moral values is the same argument that attributes 1 Cor 14:33b–36 to Paul's "rabbinic background." The argument is not only facile, it is wrong.

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4. Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew's Advice to a Divided Readership," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 22–41.

The concern for children is a Jewish value, not just a Christian one. It is seen throughout the Old Testament, and it carries through into rabbinic literature. As the Gospels themselves indicate, Jewish as well as pagan parents, from the "ruler" to the "Canaanite," advocate for their sons and daughters.

Matthew 21

I have heard numerous times how Jesus drove the "money-*lenders*" from the Temple (21:12–14). Money-lenders is Shakespeare, not Matthew. The phrase "den of robbers" (21:13) does not suggest that the Temple robbed the peasants or overcharged worshipers; the den is the place where thieves feel safe. The analogy would be criminals who put ten dollars in the collection plate and believe all is well.

Next, the Parable of the Vineyard (21:33–45) yields the common interpretation that Israel, the vineyard, is taken from the Jews, who "seize the son, throw him out of the vineyard, and kill him." The vineyard is then given to the Gentile church. To break this impression, homilists might move from the parable proper, which ends in v. 41, to v. 45, where Matthew states that "the chief priests and the Pharisees . . . realized that he [Jesus] was speaking about them." The conjoined leadership is precisely that: leadership. Like the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (25:32–46), judgment is based on action, not on confession.

Matthew 26

Many Christians who celebrate the Passover meal (the *seder*) on Holy Thursday (Matt 26:17–20) perceive that they are following Jesus in his final days: they eat with him, hold vigil with him in Gethsemane, follow him to the cross. A further incentive to celebrate the Passover is the desire to recover the church's Jewish roots; participation in this Jewish festival is even seen as a means of overcoming anti-Semitism.

While good reasons for Christian *seders* can be adduced, the practice creates several potential problems. First, historically, the Last Supper was probably not a Passover meal; John's chronology, which sets the crucifixion at the time when the paschal lambs are sacrificed in the Temple, is both theologically symbolic and historically credible. Next, the Passover then was comparable to what Christians now would call a "closed table." Those eating the Passover sacrifice had to be Jews (whether by birth or conversion). Third, John's Gospel combines Passover and sin-offering imagery to describe Jesus as the "lamb of God." Thus Jesus replaces the Passover. Fourth, the *seder* today is substantially a rabbinic tradition; it does not replicate what Jesus did. Finally, the Christian *seder*, whether done in a traditional Jewish manner or with Christian imagery (e.g., the *afikomen* is the Christ hidden in the tomb), risks a coopting of Jewish tradition. Pastors and congregations will need to weigh the pros and cons of participating in such a celebration.

Matthew 27

The idea that the crucifixion was the responsibility of all Jews in all times and places derives from Matt 27:25: "All the people (*pas ho laos*) cry, 'Crucify him, crucify him. His blood be on us and on our children.'" Pilate then washes his hands, frees Barabbas, and hands Jesus over to be crucified.

The scene make no sense historically. Roman governors did not give occupied populations a choice in freeing prisoners. If the point of this action were to free a prisoner for the feast, then for the Synoptics the act came too late: the *seder* was the night before. But the scene is theologically profound. Barabbas, whom Matthew calls

"Jesus Barabbas" (literally, Jesus son-of-the-father) is Jesus' mirror-image. The innocent man dies so that the guilty can go free; Jesus Son of the Father dies as a "ransom" (Matt 20:28) for every father's child.

Jesus died sometime between 26 and 36 C.E. The next generation, the "children" of the Jerusalem crowd, witnessed the devastation of their city in 70. Perhaps Matthew suggests that the defeat by Rome, and the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, was a direct result of the crucifixion. To preach this, however, would *inter alia* be tantamount to proclaiming a vengeful deity, blaming the victims, and refusing personal responsibility for the cross. The correct answer to "Who killed Jesus?" is "humanity" or "everyone." The church needs to confess its own sins, not the sins of the "Jews."

Matthew 28:15

Matthew 28:15 states that the story about the disciples having taken Jesus' body is "told among the Jews [*Ioudaioi*] to this day." Matthew thus defines "Jews" as those who reject the proclamation of the resurrection.

A few scholars suggest that *Ioudaioi* be translated as "Judeans." Although a legitimate translation, it does not resolve the potential anti-Judaism, because congregants will equate "Judeans" and "Jews." Moreover, a *judenrein* New Testament is not desirable.

Many Jews at the time of Jesus, and since, believed that a general resurrection would accompany the messianic age (see John 11:24). Because there has been no general resurrection, no peace on earth, and no end to war, disease, or poverty, most Jews at the time of Jesus, and since, concluded that the messiah had not come.

Rather than suggest that Easter formally marks the separation between "church" and "synagogue"—the separation took another several centuries—one might instead ask about the meaning of the resurrection. What difference does what happened to Jesus' body make? Does the gospel teach that bodies are important? Does the resurrection suggest people should care for their own bodies and those of others? Does it remind its hearers that bodies are in the divine image? Unless belief in the resurrection translates into some change in behavior, why not believe the counter-story?

Matthew 28:19

The resurrected Jesus commands his eleven male followers to "make disciples of all the nations" (*panta ta ethne*). Should Christians then proselytize Jews?

Panta ta ethne could be translated "all the Gentiles," but this still would still keep evangelism of Jews. The Great Commission is an extension of the mission, not an end to the old. Matthew 10:6 (see 15:24) insists that the mission is to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The resurrected Jesus does not say "Make disciples of all the Gentiles and forget those Israelite sheep."

Some Christians believe that the Jews are still under covenant with God and therefore do not need evangelizing. Others seek to bring Jews to "completion" or "fulfillment." In this Evangelical view, Jews who accept Jesus are not "Christians"; they are completed or fulfilled Jews. This approach might be compared to those who would proclaim to, say, Lutherans, "your faith is not complete unless you accept a new book into your canon" (e.g., the Book of Mormon; the writings of Mary Baker Eddy) "and a new conception of your deity" (e.g., a Trinity in three male bodies; a mother-father). Most Lutherans would not see such belief as a "fulfillment." But some would.

Similarly, most Jews would not accept the New Testament or the idea of the Trinity, but some would. Finally, some Jews who convert to Christianity still proclaim their identity as Jews; some Jews would accept their self-definition; others would see them as apostates, or simply as Christians.

If the Christian wishes to proselytize, there are good ways and bad ways of doing so. The bad way is to suggest that those who do not confess Jesus are damned. The Matthean Jesus precludes this view, commending "not those who say 'Lord Lord'" [7:21, 22; 25:11] but those who do the will of the Father." The good way to do it is by example: alleviate poverty; visit the sick and those in prison; make a public display of good works rather than pious proclamation. And when someone asks, "Why do you do this?" respond, "Because I am a Christian."

Conclusion

Anti-Jewish impressions show up where one might least expect them. In looking over the copy of *Currents* Ralph Klein sent me to help me prepare for this essay, I found the following note on Matt 6:1–6, 16–21: "Certainly, the strained relations with the synagogue in Matthew's world make this a bit of polemic against conventional Jewish piety as practiced in a Roman culture" (*Currents in Theology and Mission* 33 [December 2006]: 509). Despite the fact that the homilist goes on to state that "Matthew also aims the polemic at the constant temptation to this kind of heartless piety in his congregation (and ours)," the damage is already done. According to this article, bad practices are for Jews both conventional and heartless; the church only faces the "temptation" to act in conventionally heartless manners. The writer did not intend to be anti-Jewish. Anti-Judaism simply slipped in with the rhetoric.

Avoiding anti-Jewish preaching requires a concerted effort. There are more techniques and safeguards,[5] but perhaps this illustration will prove most effective. When he was younger, my son attended Nashville's Orthodox Jewish dayschool. I'd bring this adorable child, in *kippah* (yarmulka) and *tzitzit* (fringes), to my classes and say, "When you talk about Jews or Judaism, think about this child. Say nothing that will hurt him, and say nothing that will cause a member of your congregation to hurt him. Do not use Judaism as a foil, do not bear false witness against it, and do not make the Gospel of Love into a message of hate."

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5. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), chap. 7.

Problems and Opportunities in Matthew's Gospel

Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.
Professor of New Testament
Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Every problem is an opportunity. So says a business dictum that has made America great. I suggest that Christian teachers and preachers can apply this dictum to seven real or imagined problems that we face as we enter another year in the Sunday lectionary cycle when most Gospel texts are from Matthew. I hope to show that what on the surface may seem problematic in Matthew's Gospel can open up opportunities in which religious educators and preachers can address positively and constructively issues that are at the heart of Christian life.[1]

A pedestrian Christology?

On the surface Matthew's Gospel may seem an unlikely source for fresh insights in Christology, at least when compared with John and Paul. As the author of one of the three Synoptic Gospels, Matthew presents a "common vision" alongside Mark and Luke. He portrays Jesus as a wise teacher and a powerful healer. He adopts Mark's tripartite narrative structure: the Galilean mission; the journey narrative; and the Jerusalem ministry, and passion, death, and resurrection.

Without reflecting only on the elements common to all three Synoptic Gospels, teachers and preachers may also want to give special attention to how Matthew diverges from Mark's outline. The most obvious addition is the infancy narrative in chapters 1 and 2. By including a genealogy, the evangelist connects Jesus to Abraham, David, and the exile generation, thus firmly rooting Jesus in Jewish history. By clarifying Joseph's role with regard to Jesus, he shows how the virginally conceived Son of God became the legal Son of David. By tracing the movements of the Holy Family from Bethlehem to Nazareth by way of Egypt, he foreshadows the conflict and suffering that will culminate in the passion.

The other obvious addition occurs after the empty tomb narrative in Matthew 28. There the risen Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" and then to the eleven remaining apostles (minus Judas). In both cases he entrusts them with a mission, with an eye toward carrying on his own mission. Matthew also continues the apologetic motif of the guard at the tomb begun in chapter 27.

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1. See *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William J. Thompson, S.J.*, ed. David E. Aune (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001); Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Mark Powell, *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

Matthew's most massive additions, however, appear in the five great speeches: the Sermon on the Mount (chaps. 5–7), the Missionary Discourse (chap. 10), the Parables (chap. 13), the Community Discourse (chap. 18), and the Eschatological Discourse (chaps. 24–25). While Mark refers to Jesus as a new kind of teacher, he provides relatively few extended examples of Jesus' teachings. By use of materials from Mark, the Sayings Source Q, and traditions found only in Matthew (M), Matthew more than makes up for the lack of content that he found in Mark. Moreover, these speeches and other teachings elsewhere provide the basis for what is a very strong emphasis in Matthew Gospel: Jesus as the "one teacher" or the "one instructor" (23:8, 10). There is a rich mine of teaching and preaching material in Matthew's Gospel.

While Matthew shares the major christological titles with other New Testament writers, the Jewish context in which he places Jesus and in which he wrote should encourage Christian preachers and teachers to give special attention to their roots in the Old Testament and early Judaism. For example, in dealing with Jesus as the Messiah/Son of David they might survey not only the pertinent biblical passages but also texts like *Psalms of Solomon* 17 and the Qumran scrolls. Likewise, they might track down the texts that describe Israel as the Son of God and portray the Son of Man as human (Ezekiel) and heavenly (Daniel 7). These titles arose early in the Jesus movement. The Jewish context in which Matthew places them invites a special effort at appreciating their distinctive Jewish resonances in this Gospel.[2]

Moralism?

The Sermon on the Mount is the most famous part of Matthew's Gospel.[3] While often admired and praised for its high ethical standards, it is sometimes also regarded with suspicion as encouraging moralism and "works" righteousness. In some circles it is described as "the new law" or "the law of Christ," while others consider it as proposing an impossible ethic designed to throw one back upon the grace of God. I prefer to read it as an example of Christian virtue ethics. The keyword here is "Christian."

The Sermon on the Mount must never be detached from the narrative of Jesus as told by Matthew. It is neither a law code nor an ethical treatise. Rather, it is part of the story of Jesus the wise teacher. Its audience consists not only of Jesus' first disciples but also of the crowds who had converged upon him (see 5:1–2 and 7:28–29). It teaches at both the individual and the communal levels. Jesus instructs all those willing to listen and put his teachings into action. In literary form the Sermon is closest to the wisdom instructions that appear in Proverbs 1–9 and 22–24, Qoheleth, Sirach, and other Jewish wisdom books.

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2. See Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); Young S. Chae, *Jesus as the Eschatological Davidic Shepherd* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Celia M. Deutsch, *Lady Wisdom, Jesus and the Sages: Metaphor and Social Context in Matthew's Gospel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The One Who Is to Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); and Lidija Novakovic, *Messiah, the Healer of the Sick: A Study of Jesus as the Son of David in the Gospel of Matthew* (Tübingen, 2003).

3. See Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus: An Intermillennial Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

The Sermon addresses all who aspire to God's kingdom. The introductory section (5:1–20) describes the appropriate values and attitudes of the aspirants, their importance ("salt of the earth" and "light of the world"), and challenges them to strive for a righteousness (that is, living in accord with God's will) superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees. The six "antitheses" (5:21–48) illustrate Jesus' claim that he has come not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets. The section on acts of piety (6:1–18) stresses performing them to serve God rather than to gain public recognition for holiness. The instructions on various matters in 6:19–7:12 take up topics such as money, social relations, and "fear" (respect, awe) of the Lord that concerned other Jewish wisdom teachers. The concluding exhortations (7:13–27) use various images—gates, ways, trees, and houses—to stress that Jesus' teachings must be put into action and not merely admired or debated.

The term "virtue ethics" may conjure up associations of "works" righteousness and piling up "merits"—the kind of moralism that Martin Luther criticized. However, the adjective "Christian" places the morality proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount in the context of gospel rather than law.[4] The Sermon is a great document of Christian (and Jewish) spirituality. I understand "spirituality" to mean how one stands before God and relates to others (and oneself) in light of that relationship. The Sermon provides important insights about human conduct and guidelines for responding to God's initiatives. It illustrates how Scripture can shape Christian character and community.

The three great questions of Christian virtue ethics are Who am I? What is my goal in life? and How do I get there? In this context I am an aspirant to God's kingdom, my goal is eternal life with God, and "ethical" teachings are helps along the way. There are no sharp tensions between law and love or between individual and community. While entering God's kingdom is the primary motivation, other motives for good actions include going to the root of biblical commands, mutual self-interest, avoiding punishment, doing the right thing, and imitating God's example. Instead of providing laws to be observed literally and rigidly, Jesus the wise teacher offers principles, analogies, extreme examples, challenges, and other staples of Jewish wisdom instructions to help aspirants to God's kingdom reach their goal.

> The Sermon on the Mount must never be detached from the narrative of Jesus as told by Matthew.

Anti-Judaism?

Matthew's Gospel is sometimes accused of anti-Judaism. From his infancy narrative onward, Matthew frequently points out how the Jewish Scriptures have been fulfilled in Jesus, thus opening the door to the charge

4. See Daniel J. Harrington and James F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2002); and Joseph Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

of supersessionism. Moreover, the evangelist's critical remarks about "their synagogues" and the tirade against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 contribute to this impression. Also, the cry of "the people as a whole" in 27:25, "His blood be on us and on our children," would seem to clinch the case against Matthew as anti-Jewish.[5]

Christian teachers and preachers must admit at least the anti-Jewish potential of certain elements in Matthew's Gospel. However, whether Matthew himself was anti-Jewish is questionable. The evangelist and most (if not all) of his community seem to have been Jews by birth, knew a lot about Judaism, and identified with the biblical heritage of Israel. Indeed, they very likely regarded Jesus and themselves as the genuine heirs of the Jewish tradition.

Many scholars today find the life setting of Matthew's Gospel in the crisis precipitated by the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 C.E. They interpret the harsh language in this Gospel as directed to Jesus' fellow Jews and to the Jewish groups that were rivals of Matthew's Christian Jewish community. The opportunity here lies with helping Christians today to understand better the diversity within Judaism in the first century C.E. and what was at stake in a pivotal moment in Jewish history. Several Jewish groups regarded themselves as the heirs and guarantors of the Jewish tradition: the early rabbis, the Zealot insurgents, the apocalyptists, and the Christians. Moreover, in the Greco-Roman world, the representatives of various religions and philosophies (including Jewish movements) often expressed themselves in strongly polemical terms. While we need not imitate their example, we need at least to recognize their cultural context.[6]

The fulfillment quotations that are so frequent in Matthew's Gospel do not mean that the Old Testament can now be ignored or tossed away. Rather, they remind us concretely that Jesus cannot be understood without what Christians call the Old Testament. The early Christians did what other Jews of the time were doing: trying to discover the meaning and significance of biblical texts for their own day. Just as the Qumran people in the Dead Sea scrolls found the Hebrew Scriptures fulfilled in the life and history of their movement, so early Christians found in Jesus the interpretive key to many of Israel's Scriptures. Thus the problem of Matthew's alleged anti-Judaism can be turned into an opportunity for better appreciating first-century Judaism and Matthew's place within it.

Patriarchalism?

In comparison with Luke and John, women are not very prominent in Matthew. In the narratives about Jesus' birth and infancy, the focus is on Joseph rather than Mary. Women are not mentioned in the list of the twelve apostles, and we learn that women accompanied Jesus and the Twelve as almost an afterthought in 27:55–56, only after we learn about Jesus' death. Most outrageously of all, in 20:20–28 Matthew shifts the blame for foolish status seeking by the sons of Zebedee from James and John (Mark 10:35–40) to their mother (Matt 20:20).

It must be admitted that Matthew is patriarchal in perspective, perhaps more so than the other evangelists. Nevertheless,

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5. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

6. See J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

women are present at the beginning and end of Matthew's narrative of Jesus.[7] In the genealogy (1:1–17) Matthew interrupts the linear pattern of Jesus' male descendants by mentions of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. In various ways these unusual women prepare for the unusual and even miraculous birth of Jesus from the virgin Mary. In the account of Jesus' death and resurrection Mary Magdalene and other women are witnesses to his death and burial, as well as the empty tomb. Moreover, the first appearance of the risen Jesus is to Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (28:9–10), and they are commissioned to inform the remaining male apostles to prepare for the climactic appearance in Galilee. Thus Matthew contributes to Mary Magdalene's identity as "the apostle to the apostles."

Matthew's narrative about the Canaanite woman in 15:21–28 deserves special attention from teachers and preachers. In rewriting Mark 7:24–30, Matthew resolves any ambiguity about her ethnic identity (Jew or Gentile?) by specifiying her as a "Canaanite" and so clearly not a Jew. Furthermore, Matthew follows Mark in having her engage Jesus in a dialogue in which she emerges as the winner and is rewarded for her persistence by the healing of her daughter. This is the only case in Matthew or any other Gospel where Jesus seems to lose an argument. And here the victor is a pagan woman. This episode has significance not only for feminism but also for interreligious dialogue.

Legalism?

Of all the New Testament writers, Matthew seems to be the most positively disposed toward the Mosaic law. The Matthean Jesus insists that he came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets (5:17). He insists that not one letter or part of a letter in the law will pass away "until all is accomplished" and that whoever breaks or teaches others to break the least among the commandments will be called "least in the kingdom of heaven" (5:18–19). When Jesus defines love of God (Deut 6:4–5) and love of neighbor (Lev 19:18) as the greatest commandments, Matthew alone adds, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (22:40). The implication is that Matthew imagined that whoever observed the two greatest commandments would naturally observe all the others.

It is likely that Matthew and his community wanted to observe the whole Mosaic law and thought that they were doing so. They represented a Jewish form of Christianity and regarded themselves as still a sect within Judaism (though other Jews may have disagreed). His form of Christianity was in tension, if not contradiction, with Pauline Christianity.[8] In the history of Christianity Matthew represents to some extent a road not taken or even a dead end. This recognition can help Christians today acknowledge the variety of theological voices within early Christianity and within our biblical canon.

The difficulties inherent in Matthew's position on the Mosaic law are reflected in his own Gospel. When the "righteous" Joseph in 1:19 refuses to expose his pregnant fiancee to public disgrace in accord with Deut 22:23–27, he is regarded as display-

7. See *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), and Elaine Wainwright, *Toward a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1991).

8. David C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

ing a better righteousness. In 5:20 the Matthean Jesus challenges his followers to pursue a "righteousness" that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. In the six antitheses (5:21–48) the Matthean Jesus comes close (in the cases of divorce, oaths, and retaliation) to abrogating parts of the Mosaic law. And in the debate about the greatest commandment it is possible to regard the double love commandment as replacing the law and the prophets. At least Paul seems to have interpeted it in that way when he wrote, "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:10).

Matthew portrays Jesus as the authoritative interpreter of the Mosaic law. In the polemic against the scribes and Pharisees Jesus is called the "one instructor, the Messiah" (23:10) as opposed to other Jewish teachers. In rewriting various parts of Mark, Matthew is careful to keep Jesus within the boundaries of the Mosaic law on matters of Sabbath observance (12:1–4; cf. Mark 2:23–3:6) and ritual purity (15:1–20; cf. Mark 7:1–23). Nevertheless, as "Emmanuel" Jesus exercises an authority that transcends the letter of the Mosaic law. That sovereignty renders ambiguous the expression "these commandments" in 5:19, the thesis statement of the Sermon on the Mount. Are they Moses' commandments or Jesus' commandments? The words of the risen Jesus in 28:20 ("teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you") suggests the latter.

Irrelevant eschatology?

Eschatology is often a difficult topic for preachers and teachers. Many good Christians find the eschatological sections in Matthew to be foreign, irrelevant, or even embarrassing. This is ironic, since the media today assault us with disaster movies and alarming scenarios of future nuclear disaster and global warming.

Matthew's Gospel offers a sound balance between the present and the future dimensions of eschatology.[9] The Lord's Prayer (6:9–13) is the most familiar passage in Matthew's Gospel. Christians pray it frequently, but many do not notice that it is a prayer for the full coming of God's kingdom in the future—that is, eschatology. Its "you" petitions ask that God's sovereignty be celebrated by all creation, and its "we" petitions beg for sustenance and protection in the dangerous process of its coming.

The parables about God's kingdom in Matthew 13 strike a balance between present and future. Using agricultural and fishing images that would have been familiar to Jesus' original Galilean audiences, these parables promise an abundant harvest to be accompanied by a judgment in which the good will be separated from the bad. Meanwhile, something good has already begun with Jesus' preaching of God's kingdom. That something is the most precious thing imaginable, and deserves full commitment. Its growth in the present is both mysterious and real.

This balance is confirmed in the Eschatological Discourse in chapters 24–25 where Matthew takes over most of Mark 13 and supplements it with several parables that emphasize the need for constant fidelity and watchfulness in the present against the horizon of the coming judgment and with a judgment scene in 25:31–46 proposing that "all the nations" (Gentiles?) will be judged according to their acts of mercy toward "the least."

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9. See David C. Sim, *Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and Alistair I. Wilson, *When Will These Things Happen? A Study of Jesus as Judge in Matthew 21–25* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004).

Rather than an embarrassment, eschatology in Matthew's Gospel provides the framework for all of Christian life. We take as our goal eternal life with God, and so are aspirants to God's kingdom. If we hope to enjoy that goal we must in the present rely upon God's grace and live out our identity as Jesus' disciples with fidelity and watchfulness.

Jesus' final despair?

In his passion narrative (27:46) Matthew follows Mark 15:34 in making Jesus' last words the first words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These words have inspired many romantic and existentialist speculations about final despair on Jesus' part and much confusion among Christian believers. In order to grasp Matthew's point, teachers and preachers need to place these words in their context of the whole text of Psalm 22.

That Matthew (or Mark) thought that Jesus despaired at the moment of his death makes no sense in the context of his Gospel. Jesus remains the noble hero from birth to death. Moreover, one of Matthew's emphases in rewriting Mark's passion narrative was to expand the motif of scriptural fulfillment. Just as Jesus was fulfilling the Scriptures in his infancy and public ministry, so especially during his passion and death he was fulfilling the Scriptures, and Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 in particular.

Psalm 22 is an individual lament and thus belongs to the largest literary category in the book of Psalms. In the laments the psalmist addresses God directly ("My God, my God"), lays out (often in detail) the present sufferings, expresses trust and confidence in God, asks God to do something now, and expresses thanks (either before or after the rescue or restoration). Psalm 22 contains all these elements in abundance. After addressing God, the psalmist makes his complaints several times (vv. 1–2, 6–8, 12–18), expresses confidence in God on the basis of Israel's past (vv. 3–5) and his personal experience (vv. 9–11), asks God to intervene in the present situation (vv. 19–21), and describes (or looks forward to) an elaborate thanksgiving celebration of his vindication (vv. 22–31).[10]

In dealing with Matthew's passion narrative it is important to keep in mind the whole of Psalm 22. When we read the first part of it as spoken by Jesus (as some patristic and medieval interpreters did), we can glimpse his solidarity with suffering persons throughout the centuries and his membership in their fellowship. His example can and should inspire sufferers to feel free in complaining to God and petitioning for relief. This is the stuff of genuine biblical spirituality. But the second part—about the speaker's rescue, vindication, restoration, and thanksgiving (vv. 22–31)—should not be neglected. When read in the context of Matthew's passion narrative as a whole, these words (especially the admittedly enigmatic vv. 29–31) point toward his resurrection and his promise to be with the Christian community as Emmanuel (28:20). Every problem can be an opportunity in this Year of Matthew.

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10. See Daniel J. Harrington, *Why Do We Suffer? A Scriptural Approach to the Human Condition* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2000), 6–9.

Matthew's Gospel: An Anti-Imperial/Imperial Reading

Warren Carter
Professor of New Testament
Brite Divinity School, TCU, Fort Worth, Texas

Matthew's plot is an act of imperial negotiation. Unfolding through six stages, its central dynamic comprises conflict between Jesus and the Rome-allied (Jerusalem-based) leaders. It ends with God raising Jesus, crucified by the imperial elite.[1]

1. *1:1–4:16 God initiates the story in the conception and commissioning of Jesus to manifest God's saving presence. Jesus is threatened by Herod, witnessed to by John, sanctioned by God in baptism, tempted by the devil, and validated by Scripture.*

Matthew's opening genealogy ensures empire is center stage. The identification of Jesus as son of Abraham (1:1) evokes God's empire or purposes for the world, that in Abraham "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3). The naming of David evokes the multivalent face of this empire, both its task to manifest the life-giving purposes of God (outlined in the royal Psalm 72, for example) and the frequent failures of the human agents to perform this task (David, Uriah, and Bathsheba, 2 Sam 11–12). This ambivalent course is evident in the line of kings in Matt 1:6b–11. Solomon (1:7a), for instance, aggressively extends Israel's boundaries while taxing his subjects (1 Kgs 4:7–19, 22–28; 10:15) and conscripting labor (1 Kgs 5:13). Rehoboam increases the tax burden, provoking revolt, and dividing the kingdom (1 Kgs 12). Samuel had warned previously that with kings come such imperial ways (1 Sam 8:11–17).

Empires always encounter resistance. While God's empire is at work among human frailties and unlikely participants (the five women), the genealogy knows other empires. Babylonian exile in 587 B.C.E. is mentioned twice (1:11–12). The evoked Hebrew Bible traditions name two key perspectives on imperial power. God uses it to punish the unfaithful people (1 Kgs 9:6–9; 2 Kgs 24). Second, imperial

1. For elaboration of plot, see Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist,* rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 132–53. For verse-by-verse discussion of Matthew and the sections identified throughout, see the appropriate sections of Warren Carter's *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000) and *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001). For fifteen studies of Matthew that I have formulated employing this approach and designed for church use, see *The Pastor's Bible Study,* Vol. 1, ed. David Farmer (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 1–66. For wider discussion of imperial negotiation in the New Testament, see Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

power fails to enact God's lifegiving purposes, so God intervenes to judge Babylon and free the people from its rule (Isa 44:21; 45:1, 15). This pattern is highly subversive for disciples of Jesus, crucified by Rome but raised by God. Living post-70 C.E. when Rome has destroyed Jerusalem, the first part of the evoked pattern has taken place. The second part will certainly occur.

In this world Jesus is born with the mission to save his people from their sins, punished in Jerusalem's downfall of 70 C.E. (1:21). His name, Jesus, evokes Joshua's actions in securing the land from the displaced Canaanites, another ambivalent demonstration of God's empire at work. Verse 23 identifies Jesus as Emmanuel, evoking the imperial struggle of Judah with Syria, Israel, and Assyria in Isaiah 7–9 where a similar paradigm—divine opposition to imperial power (Syria and Israel will be rebuffed, Isa 7:16, 19; 8:1–4), divine use of it (Assyria will punish the people, Isa 7:17–25; 8:5–15), and divine saving from it (Isa 9:1–7)—is at work.[2]

These coded transcripts about empire are displayed in chapter 2. Herod, ally of Rome and "king of the Jews" because Rome allowed him the throne, hears the magi's news of the birth of another "king of the Jews" (Josephus *Ant* 15.387; 16.311). The announcement challenges the world as Herod and the Jerusalem leadership have structured it to be.[3] But the empire always fights back. Herod summons his allies, "the chief priests and scribes of the people," to inquire about messianic expectations (2:4–6). The interconnectedness of politics and religion is clear. These Jerusalem leaders headed by the Rome-appointed chief priests are, as Josephus declares, the rulers of Judea (along with the Roman governor) as local agents of Roman power (Josephus, *Ant* 20.249–51). Messianic expectations, though neither unitary nor universal, were anti-Roman at least in envisioning a new world without Rome's elite-benefiting societal structures. The chapter reveals standard strategies of sinful imperial power that protect its privileged world: allies (Jerusalem elite, 2:4–6), lies (false claims of worship, 2:8), spies (2:7–9, 12) and murderous violence that profoundly impacts the vulnerable Rachels (2:16). Echoes of Moses, the exodus, and the ever-vigilant and faithful Joseph recall another doomed imperial power thwarted by God. Three times the chapter mentions the death of Herod who seeks to kill God's anointed (2:15, 19, 20) while Jesus is protected—albeit at the expense of Bethlehem's male babies. From such violent and oppressive sinfulness Jesus is to save the world through his life, words, actions, death, resurrection, and return (1:21).

John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus' role and announces God's imminent judg-

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2. Other instances of this paradigm in the Hebrew Scriptures that saw various imperial powers as the agents of God's punishment include Assyria (Isa 10:1–7), Babylon (Deut 28–30; Jer 25:1–11), Persia (Isa 45:1–13), and the Seleucids under Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc 6:12–17). They were then subjected to God's punishment: Assyria (Isa 10:12–34), Babylon (Isa 25:12–14); Antiochus Epiphanes (2 Macc 7:32–36). On Matthew's evoking of this paradigm in quoting Isa 7–9 in 1:23 and 4:15–16, see Carter, "Evoking Isaiah: Why Summon Isaiah in Matthew 1:23 and 4:14–16?" in *Matthew and Empire*, 93–107.

3. On the structure of the Roman empire, see Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 189–296; John Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Dennis Duling, "Empire: Theories, Methods, Models," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context*, ed. John Riches and David Sim, JSNTSS 276 (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 49–74.

ment on other members of the Judean leadership alliance. Their leadership fails to produce "good fruit," a society embodying God's purposes (3:7–10). In baptism, God sanctions Jesus as agent of God's purposes (3:13–17). Immediately the devil tempts Jesus not to enact God's saving presence (1:21–23). The devil offers Jesus "all the empires (*basileias*) of the world . . . if you will fall down and worship me" (4:8–9). The word *basileia* refers to empires such as those of Babylon, the Medes, Persia and Greece (Dan 2:37–45), of Alexander the Great (1 Macc 1:16), the Seleucids (Josephus, *JW* 1.40), and of course Rome (Josephus, *JW* 5.409). The devil's claim to give "all the empires" to Jesus reveals the devil's claim to control the world's empires of which Rome is foremost. The Gospel reveals what is not obvious in the "normalcy" of daily imperial life. The opening section closes with a second evoking of Isaiah 7–9 (cf 1:23) and the imperial threats of and God's victory over Syria, Israel, and Assyria. As the dawning of light, an image of salvation from imperial power (Isaiah 7–9), Jesus' public ministry begins.

2. *4:17–11:1 Jesus manifests God's saving presence, the kingdom or empire of God, through constituting a community of followers, preaching, healing, and exorcizing.*

Jesus begins his public ministry by declaring that "the kingdom/empire (*basileia*) of the heavens has come near." In the context of the genealogy's references to Abraham and to the royal tradition, and of Jesus' commission in 1:21–23, this term denotes God's saving and lifegiving presence for all people. Following the devil's offer of all the world's empires, the two empires, God's and Rome's, are set in antithetical relationship. Yet, as is typical of imperial situations, the negotiation of imperial power by the powerless involves more than opposition.[4] Mimicry frequently operates among oppressed groups who know the hybridity of unequal power relations, yearn for the power that they despise, and imitate their oppressors, sometimes to ally with them but often to mock and menace them with visions of their violent downfall.[5] The use of empire language shows how deeply embedded the Gospel is in its imperial world.

What happens when God's empire is manifested among human beings? Jesus forms a new community by calling disciples to follow him (4:18–22). The community has priorities and practices that differ from Rome's as Jesus elaborates in the Sermon on the Mount (5–7).[6] The beatitudes identify God's agenda of eschatological transformation or justice (5:6) for the literal poor (97 percent of the population in varying degrees) including those whose very beings or spirits are destroyed by poverty (5:3). Land, the basis of life in an agrarian empire, will be returned to the powerless (5:5, citing Psalm 37). Practices of mercy, worship, and making peace (wholeness not submission under *Pax Romana*) embody this agenda (5:7–9). Persecution (5:10–12) always follows practices

4. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), and *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

5. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85–92.

6. Warren Carter, "Power and Identities: The Contexts of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount," and "Embodying God's Empire in Communal Practices," in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount: The World It Imagines*, ed. David Fleer and David Bland (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 8–35.

that enact God's transforming and threatening salvific presence (5:13–16). Relationships of integrity (5:21–37) accompany societal actions of active, nonviolent resistance (5:38–48) as strategies for negotiating the empire. Mercy, prayer (for God's will, empire, and daily bread), and fasting as acts of justice are further practices of this alternative community (6:1–18; cf. Isa 58: 5–8). Nor are disciples to mimic the obsession of the empire's wealthy elite; obsession with God's empire and justice will ensure adequate food and clothing for all (6:25–34). Doing to others as one wants to be treated is a radical, empire-transforming practice when 3 percent of the population control wealth, power, and status and consign the rest to varying degrees of poverty (7:12). In chapter 10 Jesus outlines the community's (empire-imitating) mission to proclaim the good news of the kingdom/empire of heaven and to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

In addition to creating an alternative community, God's empire manifested by Jesus repairs the damage of imperial power through Jesus' healings and exorcisms (4: 23–25; chaps. 8–9). Matthew's Gospel is peopled with the sick and physically damaged. Their constant presence reflects their high levels of visibility in the imperial world. Such sickness largely results from the social, economic, and political inequities of the imperial world. Taxes, frequently paid in kind, moved goods from the producing non-elite to elites. While this meant a constant supply of renewable wealth for elites, most non-elites lived around and below subsistence levels for periods of each year. For many, there was little margin to absorb low crop yields from poor soil, inclement weather, poor seed, taxation, high prices, limited supplies caused by elite hoarding, and market fluctuations.

Abundant or inadequate food supply reflects lines of power. Inadequate food supply means malnutrition. Diseases of deficiency and contagion from weakened immunity were widespread.[7] Jesus' healings engage and reverse the damage caused

by Rome's empire. They enact and anticipate the world of physical wholeness described by the prophets (cf. Isa 35:5–6 cited in Matt 11:2–6) when God's empire is fully established.

Similarly, paralysis and demon possession are commonly observed phenomena in contexts of political oppression, colonial domination, and social conflict.[8] The release effected by Jesus' exorcisms demonstrates God's invasion of Satan's reign and the recapture of sovereignty over human lives and societal structures (12:28). This link is clear when Jesus casts a demon out of two men into a herd of pigs who destroy themselves in the sea (8:26–34).

7. Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

8. Paul Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities," *JAAR* 49 (1981): 567–88.

The pig was the mascot of the Roman Tenth *Fretensis* legion stationed in Syria that played a leading role in destroying Jerusalem in 70. The scene reveals the demon-possessed nature of the empire and its military, as well as Jesus' power to liberate from and overcome the power "behind the throne." These acts of wholeness and release are necessary because Rome's empire enacts the devil's will.

3. *11:2–16:20 Jesus' actions and words continue to reveal his identity as God's agent and the lifegiving purposes of God's empire. He draws positive and negative responses. Powerful elites conflict with him over his societal vision and practices.*

Jesus continues to repair imperial damage and shape the alternative community of disciples. Twice in this section he feeds crowds with abundant food. This act embodies and anticipates the fertility and abundance that mark the fullness of God's reign in which all have resources to sustain life (14:13–21; 15:32–39; Isa 25:6–10; 2 Bar 73–74).

But especially to the fore is an emphasis on responses to Jesus' ministry. Jesus continues to invite people to experience his yoke which is kind or good, in contrast to Rome's destructive rule (11:28–30).[9] Some discern that God's empire is in their midst in part but yet to be completed, as various parables elucidate in chapter 13. These discerning people include John the Baptist (11:2–19; 14:1–12), the sick (14:34–36; 15:29–31), the Canaanite woman (15:21–28), and Peter (in part; 16:13–20). But others do not respond positively, especially the imperially allied elite (12:2, 14, 24, 38; 14:1–12; 15:1; 16:1, 6, 12). At 12:14 they begin to plan Jesus' death. At 16:12 Jesus warns against their teaching.

They have, of course, been active in the first ten chapters: allied with Herod, denounced by John the Baptist, and critical of Jesus' claim to forgive sin (9:2–8) and association with despised tax collectors and "sinners" (9:10–13). Jesus harshly denounced them in 9:36 for shaping a society contrary to God's just and lifegiving purposes.[10] Matthew describes the crowds under Rome's yoke as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."[11] In using the common metaphor of "shepherd" for rulers, Jesus evokes, for example, Ezekiel 34, which depicts Israel's leaders as shepherds who fail to represent God's just rule. They rule with "force and harshness," feeding and clothing themselves but not the sheep (Ezek 34:2–3, 8). They neglect the people and have not "strengthened the weak . . . healed the sick . . . bound up the injured . . . brought back the strayed . . . sought the lost . . . but with force and harshness you ruled them" (Ezek 34:4, 17–19). God replaces these leaders and cares for the sheep. Evoking this "intertext" reveals that the leaders allied with Rome enforce a society contrary to God's purposes. Their rule is illegitimate and their days are numbered.

Differing visions of society collide in the conflict between Jesus and these rulers in 11:2–16:20 (cf. 16:12). They conflict over doing mercy on the Sabbath, whether procuring food or healing (12:1–14), over his authority to manifest God's presence and purposes including against the devil (1:21–23; 9:1–8; 12:22–45), and over their depriving the elderly of material support (15:1–20). Herod Antipas, at an elite feast that excludes those whom God through

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9. For the "yoke" of 11:28–30 see Carter, *Matthew and Empire,* 108–29.

10. Correctly, Anthony Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 35–49.

11. Carter, *Matthew and the Margins,* 230–31.

Jesus supplies with abundant food (14:13–21; 15:32–29), silences the prophetic witness of John (14:1–12). Their leadership and the (unjust) social order that they oversee are contrary to God's purposes. Jesus describes them as "evil," a tree that produces "bad fruit" (12:33–37). God will "uproot" them (15:13), an image of judgment and condemnation (Jer 1:10; 12:17). Yet ironically in the district of Caesarea Philippi, whose name reflects dedications to the emperor Augustus and attests Rome's claims to be chosen by the gods to rule the world, Peter confesses Jesus, not the empire, to be anointed by God and the agent of God's purposes (16:16).

4. *16:21–20:34 Jesus teaches his followers that conflict with the elite will result in his crucifixion in Jerusalem and God's resurrection of him from the dead. This event has numerous implications for their lives as followers.*

The life-and-death nature of the conflict with the elite now comes to the fore. Three times in this section Jesus indicates his imminent death, explicitly naming the Jerusalem elite, allied with Rome, as those who will execute him (16:21; 17:22–23; 20:17–19). Jesus' repeated declaration reveals the extent to which the elite will go to defend the status quo against the threat of an alternative societal vision. The articulated thought that "the world does not have to be this way" is very threatening.

Jesus also indicates that his present threat anticipates the empire's demise. In exhorting disciples to be loyal (16:24–28) he declares that as the Son of Man he will return to establish God's empire/kingdom in full (16:27–28). This eschatological vision draws on Daniel 7 where God destroys all empires and gives the Son of Man "everlasting dominion . . . and kingship that will never be destroyed" (Dan 7:13–14).

Jesus' actions and words continue to reveal his identity as God's agent and the lifegiving purposes of God's empire.

This is not good news for Rome. The next scene sanctions Jesus' announcement of suffering and victory over Rome. For only the second time in the Gospel, God speaks, "listen to him" (17:5).

While Jesus continues to repair imperial damage in exorcisms and healings (17:14–21; 20:29–34), three scenes continue to shape the community of disciples in its imperial negotiation. First, given the central role of taxes in sustaining empires, not surprisingly the Gospel instructs Jesus' followers about negotiating tax payment. Rome regarded refusal to pay taxes as a denial of its sovereignty. Josephus has Agrippa declare that Jewish nonpayment of tribute to the governor Florus in 66 C.E. is an "act of war;" its payment would clear them of the "charge of insurrection" (*JW* 2.403–4). Refusal to pay often brought a military response (Tacitus, *Annals* 3.40–41; 6.41).

Jesus' instruction about taxes disguises yet expresses resistance. Jesus instructs Peter to pay the half-shekel tax with a coin found in a fish's mouth (Matt 17:24–27). The tax under discussion was paid, prior to 70 C.E., to the Jerusalem temple. But after Jerusalem's defeat in 70, the emperor Vespasian coopted it as a punitive tax on Jews paid to Rome (Josephus, *JW* 7.218;

Dio Cassius, 65.7.2). He used it, insultingly, to rebuild and maintain the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome, thereby reminding Jews not only of Rome's superior power but also of Jupiter's superiority to the God of Israel. Jesus' conversation with Peter in Matthew, written post–70 C.E., concerns this tax. Matthew's Jesus reframes an action intended to humiliate by attributing to it a different significance that dignifies the dominated and attests God's sovereignty, not Rome's.

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Jesus reminds Peter in verses 25–26 of the taxing ways of kings and emperors. Everyone pays taxes except the rulers' children. Not paying the tax is not an option because it will bring reprisals (Matt 17:27a). Instead Jesus instructs Peter to catch a fish and find there the coin to pay the tax.

The key to understanding Jesus' strange instruction lies in the Gospel's previous scenes involving fish. Twice in Matthew 14 and 15 Jesus has exerted God's sovereignty over fish, multiplying small fish to feed crowds. Contrary to Rome's claims that the emperor rules the sea and owns its creatures, expressed by taxing the fishing industry, the Gospel asserts that the sea and its creatures belong to God. They are subject to God's sovereignty. God supplies the fish with the coin in its mouth. Disciples are to pay the tax. It appears to Rome that they are submissive and compliant. But for disciples the tax coin has a special significance. Supplied by God, it testifies to God's sovereignty. The tax that is supposed to enact and acknowledge Rome's control is reframed to witness to God's reign. Paying the tax is an ambiguous act, an expression of hidden protest. Similar instruction on taxes follows in 22:15–22.

Second, chapter 18 emphasizes communal relations, accountability, and mutual care as a survival strategy (18:1–20). Community bonding includes forgiveness (18:21–35). The parable of the unforgiving king and servant employs an imperial scenario; a king collects tribute. While the point is clear (disciples are to forgive), the parable highlights "not forgiving," both the king (18:27, 32–34) and the servant (18:28–30). The parable raises the difficult question as to whether the king is God or not. If so, God mimics the ways of imperial tyrants. If not, the parable works by contrast until the surprise at the end. God is like rulers in one regard at least; God punishes those who do not forgive. Either way, the ready and unquestioning use of imperial ways to instruct disciples again illustrates the dynamic of imperial imitation yet resistance at work.

Third, in chapters 19–20 Jesus instructs disciples as they move from Galilee to Jerusalem about the type of households that constitute the empire/kingdom of God. The scenes are based on the four standard elements of elite patriarchal household structures in which husband rules over wife (19:3–12) and over children (19:13–15),

acquires wealth (19:16–30), and rules over slaves (20:17–28). Two further scenes provide reinforcement, a parable of a householder (20:1–16) and a healing scene (20:29–34). The chapters, though, contest this patriarchal and androcentric structure. Among disciples, one-flesh relationships replace male power, all disciples are children, wealth is used for the poor, and all disciples are slaves in lifegiving service. They are not to imitate imperial patterns of "ruling over" (20:25–26). The householder treats all equally (20:12).

5. *21:1–27:66 Jesus enters Jerusalem, challenges the center of the elite's power in the temple, conflicts with them over societal leadership, and condemns their world as temporary and facing imminent destruction under God's judgment. The alliance of Jerusalem leaders and the Roman governor crucifies him.*

This section opens with Jesus' antitriumphal entry to Jerusalem (21:1–11). Entry processions by an emperor, governor, or military commander into cities were carefully choreographed displays of imperial power and greatness involving processions, crowds, hymns, welcome speeches by elites, and a cultic act. All of these elements are present in this scene (except the elite speeches of welcome!) but are reframed to critique Roman power. Jesus has just finished speaking of greatness in terms of lifegiving service (20:20–28). He rides a lowly donkey, not a warhorse. No elites welcome him. Crowds shout "Hosanna!" meaning "Save us!" Jesus is a rival king enacting God's eschatological purposes that will end Roman power (21:5, citing an eschatological passage celebrating God's victory over the nations, Zechariah 14).

Jesus enacts God's condemnation of the Jerusalem leadership against Jerusalem's temple, the center of their power (21:12–17). As an instrument of societal control, the temple secured the elite's sociopolitical, economic, and religious domination through taxes, buying and selling sacrifices and supplies for temple ritual, administering landed estates, receiving and storing gifts (cf. Matt 15:5), and controlling ritual and festivals.[12]

Jesus condemns the temple order (21:12–13). He quotes Isa 56:7 ("a house of prayer") to contrast Isaiah's inclusionary vision incorporating "all peoples" with the elite's exclusionary practices. Jesus enacts this inclusionary vision by healing the blind and lame in the temple (Matt 21:14; cf. Lev 21:16–24; 2 Sam 5:8). He names their temple a "den for robbers/bandits" (Jer 7:11). The phrase evokes Jeremiah's condemnation of the powerful who seek the temple's protection but contravene God's will with exploitative social and economic actions: acting unjustly, oppressing the alien, orphan, and widow, shedding innocent blood, and pursuing other gods (Jer 7:5–6, also 7:9). Their actions meant judgment in 587 B.C.E. It is likewise for the temple, destroyed, ironically, by Rome in 70 C.E. (Matt 22:7).[13] Jesus elaborates the condemnation of the rulers in parables (21:28–22:14), foretelling their demise (21:41; 22:7), and besting them in debate (22:46).

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12. K. C. Hanson and D. E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 131–59.

13. Burning cities (22:7) is a common imperial tactic that subjugates and humiliates a defeated people, so God again imitates imperial tactics. Titus' troops burned Jerusalem and the temple in 70 C.E. (Josephus, *JW* 2.395–97; 6.249–408). With other Jewish writers (4 Ezra 3.24–36, 4:22–25; 2 Bar 1:1–5; Josephus, *JW* 6.96–110, 409–11), Matthew interprets Jerusalem's fall in 70 C.E. as God's judgment, especially on the Jerusalem leaders for rejecting Jesus.

His subsequent curses identify the leaders' failures in neglecting "the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness" (23:23). Matthew's Gospel resists their societal structure by depicting it as opposed to God's purposes.

Chapters 24–25 declare eschatological judgment on Rome's world and the establishment of God's purposes. God will destroy Rome's world and establish God's heaven and earth (24:35). In 24:27–31 Matthew presents Jesus' return as the end of all empires, especially Rome's.[14] Verse 28 makes an unambiguous reference to eagles (*aetoi*)—not to vultures as the term has been mistakenly translated. The verses describe the final battle in which Rome's army, represented by the symbolic eagle that legions carried into battle (Josephus, *JW* 3.123; 5.48), is destroyed. Verse 29 denotes judgment on the cosmic deities that Rome claimed sanctioned its power. Jesus the Son of Man returns to establish God's "everlasting dominion . . . and kingship that will never be destroyed" (Dan 7:13–14; cf. Matt 16:27–28). Until that takes place, disciples are to live watchfully while doing acts of mercy, imperial repair, and societal transformation (24:36–25:46).

In depicting God's empire in cosmic terms of overwhelming power, destroyed opponents, and imposed universal rule, this scene (24:27–31) imitates conventional assertions of imperial power. It reflects the Gospel's embeddedness in and accommodation to its imperial culture, along with its utilization of imperial biblical traditions like Daniel. This is yet another instance of the mimicry that frequently exists among oppressed groups who know the hybridity of unequal power relations, even while the scene mocks and menaces Rome with visions of its violent downfall. For Matthew, God's empire imperially outmuscles and countermasters Rome's empire.

The passion narrative narrates Jesus' death. The scene with Pilate has been much misunderstood (27:1–2, 11–26).[15] As governor, Pilate exercises enormous power as the representative of Roman interests. He rules in alliance with the Jerusalem elite and for their mutual interests in defending the status quo against perceived threats posed by a provincial kingly pretender like Jesus. Thus it is quite false to see the so-called "trial" scene along ethnic lines as a struggle between Jews and Gentiles, or along religious-secular lines in which "religious" Jews need the help of a "secular" ruler to remove a religious opponent. Such divisions are quite inappropriate for imperial dynamics. Oblivious to imperial dynamics, one interpreter remarkably designates Matthew's Pilate, Rome's representative and chief enforcer of life-and-death imperial power, "politically neutral"![16] Rather, Jerusalem leaders and the Roman governor work together in a tensive relationship to remove one who threatens their way of structuring the world (27:11). Pilate works to maintain the alliance, shows that he holds the upper hand, tests to see how much support Jesus has (27:23–24), skillfully manipulates the crowd and Jerusalem leaders to beg him (note verse 22, "all of them said") to crucify Jesus, and deceptively declares he will do *their* will, thereby dis-

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14. Warren Carter, "Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as 'Lights Out' Time for Imperial Rome (Matthew 24:27–31)," *JBL* 122 (2003): 467–87.

15. For elaboration see Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 1–54, 75–99; for Mark, 55–74.

16. Helen Bond, *Pontius Pilate in History and Interpretation.* MSSNTS 100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 120–37.

guising the elite's wishes and masking his control as the people's will (27:24–26). Matthew's scene exposes all the forces and strategies of the "washed-up" empire allied against Jesus, God's anointed agent.

6. *28:1–20 God's saving purposes overcome the worst that the elite can do and expose the limits of imperial power by raising Jesus. Jesus participates in God's authority over all creation. He commissions his followers to worldwide mission, promising to be with them.*

Rome's political, economic, cultural, and military power seems absolute. Jesus is dead. Yet the conclusion of Matthew's plot reveals the limits of this power. The empire cannot keep Jesus dead. With the soldiers "like dead men" in this place of life (28:4), the angel announces to the women that God has raised Jesus, and they encounter him (28:6–9). Resurrection evokes eschatological traditions (Dan 12:1–3; 2 Macc 6–7) whereby this act of justice vindicates faithful opponents of empire and reverses the damage inflicted by empires that act contrary to God's purposes. Acknowledging the missing body, the Jerusalem leaders, namely chief priests and elders, conspire with the soldiers to not tell the governor Pilate but to explain it as theft by the disciples (28:11–15). In the closing verses, Jesus announces to the gathered disciples that "all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (28:18) and commissions them to extend God's empire over all the world, imitating yet contesting Rome's hold on people's lives. God has shared with the risen Jesus lifegiving authority over all creation. Rome can not resist God's empire.

Matthew's plot is, in James Scott's terms, a "hidden transcript" that contests and dissents from the public transcript or official version of the empire's self-presentation, even while in places it imitates it. The story of a crucified provincial whom Rome is unable to keep dead denies ultimate power to Rome, exposes its death-bringing commitments, and celebrates God's greater lifegiving and salvific power manifested through Jesus' words, works, and resurrection. It is these transformative words and works that are to shape and norm the identity and alternative societal existence of Jesus-believers until the completion of God's purposes at Jesus' return.

For Matthew, God's empire imperially outmuscles and countermasters Rome's empire.

Reading and Interpreting Matthew from the Beginning

Richard Carlson
Philip H. and Amanda E. Gladfelter Professor of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg

At the dawn of Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary, the Gospel lessons return to Matthew.[1] Unfortunately, the manner in which the lectionary orders the forty-eight to fifty Matthean texts in Year A can prove to be a major interpretive challenge for people seeking to teach and preach those texts. Matthew was written to be read and interpreted accumulatively and in sequential order. Readers are expected to begin at the beginning and build up an ever-increasing interpretive framework as they progress through the narrative. The lectionary, however, refuses to follow its sequential ordering, so that from December to May it is virtually impossible to find, let alone follow, a coherent narrative and interpretive thread.

Consider, for example, the Matthean texts for the Sundays in Advent. On the first Sunday of Advent the lesson is Matthew 24:36–44, part of a scene that in Matthew's narrative takes place on Tuesday of Holy Week at the culmination of Jesus' public ministry. While this text may be entirely appropriate for introducing the season of Advent, it is entirely inappropriate to begin interpreting Matthew at this point in the narrative. Starting to interpret Matthew at 24:36 would be akin to starting to read a John Grisham novel at chapter 24 or to watch a DVD at the 85-minute mark. Such narratives are not constructed to be read, watched, or interpreted in such ways. On the Second Sunday of Advent the lectionary rewinds to Matthew 3:1–12, at which time Jesus is an adult but has not yet begun his ministry. On the Third Sunday of Advent we are suddenly propelled to 11:2–11, by which time Jesus has already carried out a third of his ministry. Then, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the lectionary whisks us back to the time immediately following Jesus' conception. In the course of a few weeks, the lectionary has taken us backward from the threshold of Jesus' passion to the threshold of his birth. In so doing, the

1. As is generally noted in commentaries and studies on Matthew, we do not know who wrote this Gospel. The earliest identification of Matthew as author comes to us from Irenaeus in the latter half of the second century. At the dawn of the fourth century Eusebius refers to a tradition stemming from the first half of the second century that refers to Matthew collecting sayings in Hebrew and interpreting them. For a discussion on the Gospel's authorship see Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 14–24. The majority of current scholars regard the author as an unknown Christian who has a strong Judaic background and is writing around 80 C.E., perhaps in the Syrian metropolis of Antioch.

lectionary hinders any attempt to establish and use Matthew's own narrative constructions as an interpretive framework for understanding Matthew.

This problem does not get any easier in the months of January through the middle of May, as there are only six Matthean texts appearing over the course of the nineteen Sundays spanning the Day of Epiphany to the Day of Pentecost, and these six texts range from Matthew 3 to Matthew 28. Hence, those who wish to preach and teach the Matthean texts of Year A need to resist the habit of letting the lectionary construct a framework for interpreting Matthew. Instead, to teach and preach Matthew faithfully one should begin at Matthew's intended beginning and build the proper interpretive framework that Matthew's own narrative provides.

To aid such an interpretive construction project, in this article I present ways in which Matthew's opening two chapters introduce themes, characters, and perspectives that are foundational for interpretation as one progresses through the narrative.

While Matthew's story begins at 1:1, the lectionary completely ignores the first seventeen verses of the narrative. This may be understandable in that these verses contain Jesus' lengthy genealogy, which congregants might find boring when read in public worship on a Sunday morning (not to mention the fact that someone would have to pronounce all those ancient names), but the narrative is using Jesus' genealogy to provide invaluable theological impressions and information that will guide interpretation for subsequent texts in Matthew. In the ancient world, genealogies were very important vehicles by which a character is rooted in a particular heritage and so legitimated by their ties within that heritage.[2] The Greek word in 1:1 that almost all English versions translate as "genealogy" is actually the Greek word *genesis* and, given its use here and again in 1:18, better rendered as "origin." From the very beginning of the story we are to understand that Jesus' origin is within the core history of God's dealings with God's chosen people, Israel. As the story progresses we will be shown how Jesus recapitulates, fulfills, and culminates this relational history and heritage. This Gospel is not a story about how the church came to replace Israel as God's people. Rather, from the start we are being told how God's promises to Israel are now being realized in Jesus' person and mission.

The opening line also discloses that Jesus' identity includes being messiah, son of David and son of Abraham.[3] As the narrative unfolds we see how the promises God gave to David and Abraham are realized in Jesus. He is the king, God's anointed son (recalling Ps 2:7) who will rule over the house of Israel forever (recalling 2 Sam 7:12–16). Thus from the start we are to view Jesus in royal terms and categories. As Abraham's son he is also the one through whom all the nations of the earth will receive God's blessing (recalling Gen 12:1–3). This important theme will be played out in the ways particular Gentiles will be blessed by Jesus' ministry and will find its culmination in 28:18–20, where Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations.[4]

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2. See the discussion on genealogies by Richard White in "Genealogy, Genealogies," *ABD* III:929–32.

3. At first glance it may seem strange that Matthew has reversed the chronological order by putting David before Abraham. This reversal actually serves two purposes within the wording of the text. First, it links the title "Messiah/Christ" more directly to "son of David." Second, it links "son of Abraham" more directly to the start of the genealogy in 1:2, as the name Abraham closes verse 1 and opens verse 2.

Jesus' genealogy also contains unsettling and even scandalous material. Four women are included within the core of his genealogy. In itself this is rather unusual, because genealogies are generally patriarchally oriented, but what is most unusual is that none of the cherished matriarchs of Israel such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, or even Leah are among the four. Instead, not only are the four foreigners, but all of them are tainted with some form of sexual scandal. Tamar (Matt 1:3) was a Canaanite woman through whom the line of Judah was continued when she dressed up as a cultic prostitute and had sexual intercourse with her father-in-law (Genesis 38). Rahab (Matt 1:5a) was the prostitute of Jericho who harbored the two spies sent to Jericho by Joshua and who was saved from Jericho's destruction (Josh 2:1–21). Ruth (Matt 1:5b) was the Moabite woman who positioned herself at the genitals (euphemistically labeled as his "feet") of the drunken Boaz (Ruth 3) in order to get a husband. The fourth woman, whom we would expect to be listed as Bathsheba, is not even named but only labeled as the wife of Uriah (Matt 1:6), thus highlighting the adulterous scandal and murder of Uriah the Hittite by David (2 Samuel 11).

The inclusion of these four women begins to condition us to the fact that God works in very strange, even seemingly scandalous, ways to achieve divine ends. It also sets up the fact that God is now including a fifth woman, Mary, who will become pregnant outside the bonds of marriage as God progresses the heritage of the Messiah (Matt 1:17–18). Throughout the narrative the religious leaders are regularly scandalized by Jesus' seemingly unreligious behavior,[5] and we see from the beginning of the story onward how such behavior is a regular component of divine activity achieving divine ends. The inclusion of the four Gentile women also reinforces to us that Gentiles have had and will continue to have an important place within God's people. While Jesus' origin is fully rooted in the heritage of Israel, it is not exclusive to Israel. By the end of the story we will discover that not only is Jesus Israel's messiah and king[6] but also that he has been given all authority in heaven and upon earth (28:18). Interpretation of the whole story therefore begins by understanding the beginning of the story.

The last portion of the genealogy in 1:16b breaks the consistent previous pattern of the genealogy by introducing a divine passive to point to God's direct, explicit action in Jesus' birth. In the previous genealogical listings of 1:2–16a, the text uses an active Greek verb (*egennēsen*) thirty-nine straight times to show that the human father was the primary agent who produced the human son. Most English translations obscure this by their translations "father of." The King James actually best captures the flow of the Greek verb throughout the text with its thirty-nine uses of the verb "begat." When it comes to Jesus, however, the same verb is used but in the passive voice (*egennēthē*) so that 1:16 reads "and Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus, the one called Messiah, was begotten." This direct, intentional switch to the divine passive verb after thirty-nine uses of the active verb shows that God, not any human father, was the primary agent whose activity produced

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4. Remember that the Greek word for "nations" (*ethnē*) is the very same word that means "Gentiles." Prior to 28:18–20, we see Gentiles benefiting through Jesus' ministry in 4:12–16; 8:5–13, 28–34; 15:21–28.

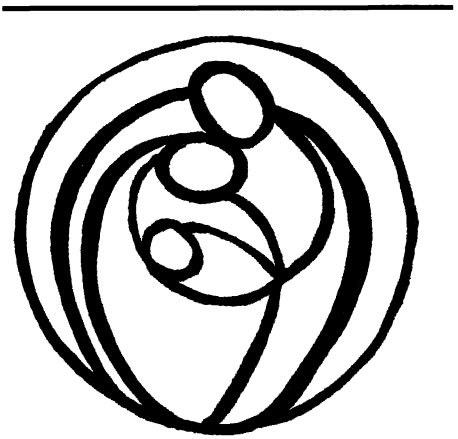
5. E.g., 9:2–8, 9–13; 12:1–8, 9–14, 22–37; 15:1–9; 21:14–17, 23–27.

6. Note the important uses of these terms in the passion narrative of 26:63, 68; 27:11, 17, 22, 29, 37, 42.

Jesus—a point that will be confirmed in 1:18–25. The crucial use of the divine passive here at the beginning of the story will be matched by the crucial use of the divine passive to describe Jesus being raised from the dead (16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; 26:32; 28:6, 7). As God, not a human father, is the prime, direct agent for Jesus' birth, so will God, not a human being, be the prime, direct agent of Jesus' resurrection.

In Matt 1:17 we are also shown how the advent of Jesus proceeds according to God's timeline as there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to the Messiah.[7] This intentional patterning shows us that Jesus' advent and subsequent mission unfold according to God's plans. The events of Israel's past and the events of Jesus' future mission are not random but are particular components within the divine design. This will especially be true of Jesus' passion, which occurs not because evil human tyrants are in control but because God is in control. Hence, although the lectionary overlooks the first seventeen verses of Matthew, a careful reading of them provides interpretive handles and theological impressions that are vital for rightly understanding the succeeding chapters.

In 1:18–25, major theological points involving Christology and righteousness are introduced upon which the narrative will continuously build. Here the central human character is a person named Joseph who receives a divine communique via a dream, recalling the Joseph narrative of Genesis 37–50 and so reminding us how God relentlessly accomplishes divine ends despite the evil designs of humans. Most English translations fail to capture a major thrust of the text when they render the Greek work *genesis* as "birth" in 1:18. As in 1:1, the focus here is not on Jesus' birth per se but on his origin.[8] In fact, note that in



Matthew's narrative the actual birth of Jesus is never directly reported. Jesus' origin is from the Holy Spirit, and to make sure we realize this thrust the text presents the phrase "from the Holy Spirit" twice (1:18, 20).[9] The twofold emphasis that Mary is pregnant from the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20) introduces us to Jesus' divine spirituality; that is, Jesus' reality is from the Holy Spirit. Similarly, in 3:16–4:1 we will discover that Jesus' mission is from the Holy Spirit. This helps explain why Matthew considers blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to be the

7. Two things should also be noted about this threefold, fourteen-block scheme. First, fourteen is twice the holy number of seven, which is a favorite number of the author (12:45; 15:34; 18:22; 22:25). Second, in order to make the fourteen-block scheme work the author has to fudge a bit in that there are actually fifteen generations named from David to the exile.

8. Especially see the discussion of this by Jack D. Kingsbury, "The Birth Narrative of Matthew," in *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study. Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson, S.J.*, ed. David Aune (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 155–57.

9. Note that the Greek passive "begotten," which was used in 1:16, is used again in 1:20 to reemphasize this divine activity.

only unforgivable sin (12:22–32), for it means that one is claiming that Jesus' origin and ministry are from a demonic spirit rather than the Holy Spirit.

In 1:19 Joseph, Mary's husband, is immediately described as being righteous. In this context, his righteousness explains why he feels legally obligated to divorce Mary: Being righteous initially entails being obedient to the law, so Joseph cannot marry a phony virgin (Deut 22:13–21). Righteousness, however, is immediately redefined in this story as the angel reveals to Joseph (and to us) what is transpiring in terms of Jesus' mission and identity. Joseph personifies righteousness not in his obedience to the law (which would have resulted in his divorce of Mary) but in his recognition of divine activity centered in Jesus. From this point of the story onward, righteousness is redefined in terms of understanding what God is doing through Jesus and being obedient to it.

Thus, when John the Baptist refuses to baptize Jesus, Jesus points out to him the fittingness of fulfilling all righteousness (3:13–17)—i.e., that Jesus' baptismal anointing with the Spirit is God's activity to which both John and Jesus are to be obedient even if outwardly it identifies Jesus with sinners who are in need of repentance (3:5–12). Hungering and thirsting for righteousness (5:6) as well as being persecuted because of righteousness (5:10) entail obediently pursuing the divine agenda revealed and enacted by Jesus. This is precisely why one's righteousness needs to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20), who do not recognize what God is doing through Jesus and who certainly refuse to be obedient to Jesus (cf. 9:9–13; 12:1–8). Their righteousness is all outward show (23:28).[10] True righteousness seeks to enact God's agenda (6:33) at whose heart is the love and compassionate mercy taught and personified by Jesus.[11] The redefinition of righteousness introduced via Joseph's character in 1:18–25 is an important theological theme repeated and expanded throughout the narrative.

As noted, these verses also introduce new and foundational components of Jesus' mission and identity. In 1:21 we discover that his name, Jesus, a derivation of the Hebrew name Joshua, is the moniker of his divine mission, for he will save his people from their sins. The fact that Jesus has his own people confirms for us his royal, messianic status introduced in 1:1,17. Interestingly, his royal mission entails not rescue or protection of his people from human enemies as might normally be expected of a king. In fact, throughout the text we will be reminded that being one of Jesus' people actually can make one a target for human powers.[12] Instead, Jesus' mission is to save his people from their sins, an agenda he will enact throughout the story and that typically will get him in trouble with the religious authorities. This text prepares us for properly understanding Jesus' missional behavior, which the religious leaders regularly and wrongly interpret as scandalous and unlawful.[13] As the story unfolds we

10. Note that in 6:1 Jesus is literally discussing the "doing of righteousness" (as rightly translated in NIV) and so is telling the disciples that doing righteousness is not play-acting in order to be seen and approved by people. Instead, doing righteousness by giving alms, praying, and fasting entails obediently living out one's relationship with God as taught by Jesus.

11. See the multiple accounts of Jesus' both teaching and enacting love and compassionate mercy in 5:7, 43–46; 9:9–13, 27–31, 35–36; 12:1–8; 14:13–21; 15:21–28, 32–39; 17:14–20; 18:23–35; 20:29–34; 22:34–40; 23:23; 25:31–46.

12. See his teachings on the dangers of discipleship in 5:10–12; 10:16–31; 24:9–14.

will discover that Jesus' ultimate fulfillment of his mission to save his people from their sins will come in his death as liberation from sin (20:28; 26:28), which the religious authorities regard as the proper punishment for his blasphemous perspective (26:57–67; 27:41–43, 62–66).

The other name that the angel presents to Joseph and to us (note that in the text itself there is no indication that the angel stopped speaking at the end of 1:21) is that of Emmanuel, which means "God with us." This introduces us to Jesus' ultimate identity. From this point on in the narrative we are to view and interpret Jesus as the one who personifies and embodies God's presence. Hence it will not be surprising to us when Jesus claims that something greater than the temple is here (12:6), for the divine presence is not localized in the temple but is embodied in Jesus. Forgiveness for sins is not realized in the temple cult overseen by the temple authorities but is enacted by Jesus the Emmanuel, whom the temple authorities will reject as a blasphemer. The prophesied destruction of the temple, which comes much later in the narrative (24:1–2), does not present an immense theological problem to the Matthean audience precisely because at the opening of the narrative they have discovered that Jesus' identity is God with us and his mission is to save them from their sins. The function of the temple is thus superseded by Jesus' own person and mission, which is especially significant because the religious authorities have converted the temple from a house of prayer to a bandits' lair (21:12–13).

This theme of Jesus' embodying the divine presence will also be played out in such key subsequent stories as his walking on the water, where Jesus is worshiped as God's son (14:22–33), and the community's binding/releasing authority confirmed in the promise of Jesus' presence when two or three are gathered in his name (18:18–20).[14] The ultimate expression of "God with us" comes in the very last line of the story when the risen Jesus, who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, promises his followers that he will be with them all the days until the close of the age (28:20). Ultimately, Jesus' Emmanuel identity bookends Matthew's entire story.

In Matt 2:1–23 six crucial themes are introduced and enacted within the immediate story that will be determinative for proper interpretation throughout the narrative. The first theme is that of fulfillment. Actually the series of fulfillments presented throughout Matthew 2 continue the enactment of this theme as introduced in the use of the Isa 7:14 Emmanuel passage (1:23) and the birth and naming of Jesus as the angel had prophesied (1:24–25). Jesus, the Messiah, is born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the Micah prophesy (Matt 2:5–6; Mic 5:1–3). Herod seeks to destroy the infant Jesus just as the angel had prophesied (2:13, 16), and the violence Herod unleashes fulfills a Jeremiah prophecy (Matt 2:16–18; Jer 31:15). Jesus' sojourn to Egypt fulfills a Hosea prophecy (Matt 2:15; Hos 11:1). The fact that Jesus ends up in Nazareth fulfills undesignated prophecies (Matt 2:23; cf. Judg 13:5; 16:17; Isa 11:1).

This rapid succession of prophetic fulfillments establishes two significant theological and narrative points. First, that which is transpiring in, by, and through Jesus is not random or happenstance. As in his planned advent (1:17), so in his life Jesus is

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13. Especially see the controversy stories of 9:1–8, 9–13; 11:16–19; 12:1–8, 9–14; 21:14–17.

14. The "with" theme will be stressed again and again in the passion story (26:18, 20, 23, 29, 35, 36, 38, 40, 47, 51; 27:38, 44). Indeed, that which Peter denies is being "with" Jesus (26:69, 71).

fulfilling the divine prophetic agenda as will be demonstrated regularly throughout the narrative.[15] Second, that which divine agents prophesy will be fulfilled. Here at the beginning of the story the divine agents are angels and scriptural prophets. In the very next chapter John the Baptist will be the divine agent who fulfills prophecies (3:1–4; 11:7–10) and whose prophecies will be fulfilled (3:11–12). The predominant, prophesying divine agent in the story is, of course, Jesus. Within the narrated plot of the story we will see his prophecies of his death (16:21; 17:12, 22–23; 20:17–19, 28; 21:33–45; 26:1–2, 26–28, 31), of his mount for his ride into Jerusalem (21:1–6), of Judas's treachery (26:21–25), and his reunion with the disciples in Galilee (26:32) all fulfilled. This succession of prophetic fulfillments introduced repeatedly at the beginning of the narrative also has the effect of vouchsafing prophetic fulfillments that stretch beyond the narrative itself, so that we can expect Jerusalem and the temple to be destroyed (23:37–38; 24:1–2), Jesus' religious opponents to be removed from their leadership over Israel (21:43–44), disciples of Jesus to experience hardships and persecutions (10:16–25; 23:34; 24:9–14), and Jesus' parousia and eschatological judgment to come to pass with the promise of eternal life for Jesus' people.[16]

> That which is transpiring in, by, and through Jesus is not random or happenstance. As in his planned advent, so in his life Jesus is fulfilling the divine prophetic agenda . . .

A second major theme introduced in chapter 2 is the invitation of outsiders who welcome God's activity unfolding in and through Jesus. The magi of 2:1–12 personify such a theme in that they are Gentiles (though not royal figures and not necessarily very wise)[17] who come to seek out what God is now doing for Israel even though they lack particular theological and scriptural insights. These are the little children who are recipients of divine revelation (11:25–27). Throughout the narrative such outsiders as the magi will flock to Jesus as the last whose openness to Jesus will be commended time and again. Note too how their worshipful homage to Jesus (2:2, 11) will be replicated by a leper (8:2), a synagogue leader (9:18), a Canaanite woman (15:25), the women at the tomb (28:9), and the disciples (14:33; 28:17).

A third significant theme, which is also the flip side of the previous theme,

15. On the theme of Jesus regularly and continuously fulfilling scriptural prophecies through his missional activity see 4:12–16; 5:17; 8:14–17; 12:15–21; 13:34–35; 21:1–11; 26:47–56.

16. On these negative and positive prophecies throughout Matthew see 5:12; 7:21–27; 10:26–33; 11:20–24; 12:33–42; 13:36–43; 16:27; 22:23–33; 23:29–36; 24:29–31; 25:31–46; 26:29, 64.

17. For a delightful and insightful analysis of the magi in the context of Matthew's story and throughout Christian history see Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 131–84.

involves the obliviousness of insiders who refuse to get it. Here the scribes and chief priests (who are among those troubled at the report of the magi in 2:3) demonstrate that they understand scripture as prophecy but completely fail to perceive how God is now in the process of fulfilling scripture in the person of Jesus (2:4–6). That they do not accompany the magi in seeking out the one born king of the Jews indicates a refusal on their part to be open to the possibility that God may be acting in ways they do not fully understand or cannot fully control. They personify the wise and intelligent from whom God has hidden such divine activity (11:25–25); they are the first who will end up being the last (19:30; 20:16). Although this theme is only introduced without further development here in chapter 2, beginning in chapter 9 it will play a major role in Matthew's story as a whole.

It is important to note the contours of the Matthean polemic here. He is not rejecting Judaism or Israel. Rather, he is intensely repudiating the established leadership of both the synagogue (as represented by Pharisees and scribes within Matthew's narrative) and the temple (as represented by the chief priests and elders within the narrative). It may well be the case that Matthew is writing to a post–70 C.E. community who feels that they have been pushed out of the synagogue system by its leadership, and so, in vilifying the religious leaders within the narrative, he is rejecting the legitimacy of contemporary synagogue leadership. As this theme develops in the story it becomes more and more vitriolic as the religious leadership groups expand from obliviousness to questioning, testing, repudiation, and violent plots against Jesus.[18]

A fourth significant theme is also interrelated to the third theme. In the person of King Herod, we are shown that those in power will use deception and violence on the innocent to hold on to their power. First-century readers, especially those encountering Matthew's Gospel in a post-70 setting, would have recognized that it was not apolitical. When a king uses first deception and then wholesale slaughter in an attempt to eradicate a threat to his rule (2:7–8, 13, 16–18), the reader is to recognize how political powers-that-be cannot be trusted but will use whatever means they deem necessary to retain power and control.[19] King Herod's actions recall the actions of Pharaoh in Exodus 1–2, which further reinforces the theme of the untrustworthiness of those in ruling power because they will resort to inhumane violence to maintain their rule, thus pitting themselves against God's chosen agents and against God's will. Subsequently in the story such tyrannical behavior will be exercised by Herod the tetrarch in his execution of the innocent John the Baptist in order to retain his honor (14:1–12) and Pilate in his sentencing of innocent Jesus in order to maintain favor and control of the crowd (27:11–26). Thus it is not surprising that Jesus warns the

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18. On their ongoing antagonism to Jesus see 9:3, 11; 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1–2, 12; 16:1; 21:16, 23, 45–46; 22:15–18, 23–29, 35; 26:3–5, 14–16, 47–68; 27:11–20, 41–43, 62–66; 28:11–15, as well as Jesus' excruciating indictment of the scribes and Pharisees in 23:1–36 as well as the chief priests and elders in 21:33–44. On the theme of Matthew's polemic against the religious authorities see such studies as Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller*, 202–14; Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 2d ed (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 115–28; and A. J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

19. Perhaps the most penetrating and thought-provoking scholarly study in this area is Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

disciples of their own oppressive encounters with such powers (10:18–25), because those who occupy such lofty positions of lordship use it for their own ends whereas disciples are called to adopt the divine ends of servanthood manifested by Jesus, particularly in his death (20:24–28).

A fifth significant theme is Jesus' identity as God's son. This identity had been implicitly embedded both in the use of the title "son of David" in 1:1 (as fulfillment of the 2 Sam 7:13–14 prophecy) and in the fact that Joseph was never described as Jesus' father or as begetting Jesus.[20] In 2:15 this identification of Jesus as God's son is made fully explicit. Henceforth, "Son of God" will stand as the crowning title and identity marker for Jesus in Matthew's story.[21] This is the title God uses to identify Jesus at his baptism (3:17) and transfiguration (17:5). This is the title by which the devil tempts Jesus (4:3, 6). This is the relational reality by which Jesus praises and prays to God (11:25; 26:39, 42). This is the identity that the disciples confess (14:33) and that Peter uses to further clarify his messianic confession (16:17). It is the title that the chief priest charges Jesus to account for under oath (26:63) and the one Jesus presents to his religious opponents in prophesying their complicity in his death (21:37–43). It is the title confessed by the Roman centurion and soldiers when they experience the events surrounding Jesus' death (27:54). Finally, it is the title that is part of the baptismal formula that marks discipleship in the final verses of the story (28:19).

To be God's son recalls and advances the Emmanuel theme. As God's son, Jesus lives in a unique relationship with God, has been invested with God's Spirit, enacts the divine agenda of the heavenly kingdom on earth, has received ultimate revelations from God that he passes on to those chosen by God and himself, and embodies the divine presence. Thus, for Matthew, to worship Jesus as God's son is not a violation of God's oneness but a recognition of God's unique manifestation in the person of Jesus.

This stress on Jesus' identity as God's son also demonstrates how "Jesus as new Moses" is not a major theme in Matthew. Although it is true that at some points Moses typologies are used to color Jesus (the slaughter of the innocents in 2:16–18 and the inclusion of five major discourses in Matthew 5:1–7:27; 10:5–42; 13:1–52; 18:1–35; 23:1–25:46), Jesus is never identified as a new Moses, nor does Jesus teach a new law. Rather, he has come to fulfill the law and prophets in such a way that he radically reinterprets some aspects of the Mosaic law (e.g., 5:21–48) to establish their ultimate meaning and expression as love and compassionate mercy. The opening and closing frame of the Sermon on the Mount parallel Moses' ascent/descent of Mt. Sinai Matt 5:1/Exod 24:15; Matt 8:1/Exod 32:15), but note that God, not Moses, is the one who does all of the speaking in Exod 25:1–32:17 just as it is Jesus, the son of God, who does all of the speaking in Matthew 5–7.[22]

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20. In contrast to this, note how the narrative regularly labels Mary as Jesus' mother (1:18; 2:11, 13, 14, 20, 21).

21. See what still stands as the seminal study on the use of the title Son of God in Matthew: Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 40–83, 161–67.

22. There is a wonderful theological claim being made in the introduction of the Sermon on the Mount (5:2) that is obscured by most contemporary English translations but is captured in KJV and RSV. Literally, the Greek of 5:2 reads, "And after opening his mouth he was teaching them saying." The reference to Jesus' mouth, which seems superfluous to contemporary translations, actually links

The sixth major theme introduced in chapter 2 is that God is the one who is actively and intentionally guiding Jesus' course. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, is taken to Egypt, returns from Egypt, and settles in Nazareth under the divine guidance of the angel and scripture (2:4–6, 13–15, 19–23). From the start we are being conditioned to recognize that Jesus' path is guided by God. He goes where he goes (and so does what he does) not on a whim but to carry out divine ends (3:13–15; 4:1, 12–16, 23; 16:21; 20:17–19). Therefore, when Jesus seems to cross the boundaries established by the law, it does not mean Jesus is violating the law, as the religious authorities conclude (9:1–8, 9–13; 12:1–8, 9–14). Instead it presents a fuller understanding of what Jesus' dual mission (to save his people from their sins and to fulfill the law and prophets) entails. In Matthew 2 the theme of divine guidance involves protecting Jesus from the evil designs of those in power, but as the story advances we will discover how just the opposite comes to pass. That is, Jesus' journey to the cross is also part of the divine path on which he is being guided and will not be detoured.[23] On this path, Jesus will not be protected from the evil designs of those in power, but ironically their evil, destructive designs will accomplish the divine agenda for which Jesus dies.

One begins to understand and interpret a narrative at the beginning of a narrative. This may seem like a literary no-brainer when it comes to novels, biographies, television presentations, plays, or films. Yet, probably because of the confines of the lectionary, preachers and teachers regularly ignore what seems obvious when it comes to scriptural interpretation. Matthew's Gospel presents a rich and complex theological narrative designed to be embraced and understood beginning with its tantalizing

One begins to understand and interpret a narrative at the beginning of a narrative.

opening line, "The book of the genesis of Jesus Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham." Matthew 1 and 2 present the formative materials for constructing a theological and literary framework by which astute readers, preachers, and teachers will be empowered to interpret the contours, designs, characters, and claims set forth in Matthew 3–28. Before one seeks to preach or teach on subsequent chapters of this Gospel, one would do well to enter fully and fruitfully into these seminal chapters.

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directly back to Jesus' quote of Deut 8:3 in Matt 4:4. This "mouth" link shows that the words by which a person will live are those coming from the mouth of God and the Son of God. Thus the entire Sermon on the Mount stands as the words by which a person will live in fulfillment of Deut 8:3 as taught by God's son.

23. See the multiple passion prophecies and prayers in 16:21; 17:9–13, 22–23; 20:17–19; 21:33–46; 26:1–2, 10–13, 18, 21–24, 26–28, 31–32, 39–46, 52–56. Even Jesus' so-called question of dereliction in Matt 27:46 functions in the narrative as a question that is to be answered by the readers in such a way as to affirm that Jesus' abandonment from divine protection at the moment of his death is an enactment of God's will. See Richard Carlson, "Matthew 27:46 and the Question of Dereliction: Narrative Probes into Expected Readings," paper presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, November 23, 2002.

Rachel on the Way: A Model of Faith in Times of Transition

Fred Strickert
Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa

In the Jewish calendar, the Lament of Rachel (Jer 31:15) is read on Rosh Hashanah 2, the beginning of the year. For Christians it is at the end of the year at the commemoration of the Holy Innocents on December 28 that the same words, as quoted in Matthew's Gospel, speak a poignant message:

> A voice was heard in Ramah,
> wailing and loud lamentation,
> Rachel weeping for her children;
> she refused to be consoled,
> because they are no more. (Matt 2:18)[1]

Rachel's Lament speaks to people at those transition times of life such as the turn of the year or a change of location or moments of loss and confusion.

Jeremiah's context was one of upheaval, the most drastic earth-shattering news imaginable: the destruction of Jerusalem, the end of the Jewish monarchy, and the loss of religious institutions like the temple and priesthood. Worst of all, masses of Jews were facing deportation, assembled at the city of Ramah north of Jerusalem, where Jeremiah too had once been incarcerated among them. How else might Rachel have responded but through tears of grief?

At the time of the magi's visit to Bethlehem, an idyllic and tranquil scene had been disrupted by the rage and paranoia of an aging tyrant, bringing about the slaughter of the most innocent of all: babies under the age of two. The lives of mothers and their families had been turned from joyous optimism to frantic despair. Those managing to escape notice of the king's army, such as Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus, had their lives no less disrupted, forced to take up refugee status first in Egypt and later in Nazareth. Once again the only appropriate response was Rachel weeping.

The role of Rachel's Lament within this infancy narrative would not have gone unnoticed by the Christians of Matthew's day, likely living in Antioch in the last decades of the first century.[2] As Jack Kingsbury observes, Matthew's community was located "at a point after the resurrection but short of the Parousia," a point Matthew himself describes as a time of "the messianic woes."[3] His point is that it was a time of disruption. The community probably

1. Matthew's version of the lament does not correspond exactly to any of the known texts of Jer 31:15. It may represent his own revision of one of the Septuagint versions. Martinus J. J. Menken, "The Quotation from Jeremiah 31 (38).15 in Matthew 2.18: A Study in Matthew's Scriptural Text," in *Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 106–25.

2. For this and alternate views see Donald Senior, *What Are They Saying about Matthew?* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 14.

3. Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 147–60.

consisted of many Jews forced from their homeland by the Jewish Revolt of 66–70 C.E. The temple had been destroyed, and now there was conflict between church and synagogue. With Matthew's special interest in the city[4] it is likely that such disruptions brought a whole new way of life from the small towns and villages of Galilee to the urban centers of Syria. Matthew's Gospel is a reminder that such disruptions occur not only among the poor but also among those of some means. Again Rachel's tears are meant to console such people "on the move" in Matthew's day.

To those exiles of Jeremiah's day, to those mourning the slaughter in Bethlehem, and to those of Matthew's community one can add a whole stream of refugees and displaced persons over the centuries, the homeless, those forced to emigrate for political or economic reasons, and the millions leaving farm and village in hopes that the large city provides an answer. Such transitions bring tears and the grief of separation; they lead to doubt and fear.[5]

Why does a weeping Rachel speak so poignantly to such situations? How is it that Rachel has become, as it were, a patron saint for people in transition? It is only natural to seek out answers within the Genesis story itself.

The Genesis story of Rachel

The story of Rachel is a favorite for many. It is a beautiful romance, presenting attractive themes like love, adventure, sibling rivalry, the idealism of youth, and the gift of children. Rachel is the ideal mother figure, striving for children yet tragically dying in the process.

At the end of the Book of Genesis the patriarch Jacob reflects back on his adventurous life—a story that began in chapter 25 and reached its culmination in chapters 48–49. The episode that strikes him most is the tragic death of his wife Rachel. With an efficiency of words he recalls,

> For when I came from Paddan, Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan *on the way*, while there was still some distance to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there *on the way* to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). (Gen 48:7; emphasis added)[6]

There is nothing in the Genesis text that explains the meaning of tragedy. There is no word "Why?"—only the what, the when, and the where. Rachel died. That's a fact of life. What seems to bother Jacob the most is the fact that her death occurred *on the way*. A life cut short before her prime, young Rachel was never to reach her goal. She died *on the way*—not at home where conditions for survival might have been better. She was buried *on the way*—not at the Machpelah cave where other patriarchs and matriarchs, including Leah, found a resting place.

Jacob's end-of-life summary is basically a condensed version of the Genesis 25 narrator's description of Rachel's death:

> 16 Then they *journeyed* from Bethel; and when they were *still some distance from* Ephrath,

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4. Kingsbury notes that Matthew uses the term city (*polis*) no less than twenty-six times, more than three times the occurrences in Mark (*Matthew as Story*, 152).

5. For an anthropological study of the role of Bethlehem's Rachel's Tomb on Jews returning from the diaspora in the mid-twentieth century see Susan Starr Sered, "Rachel's Tomb: Societal Liminality and the Revitalization of a Shrine," *Religion* 19 (1989): 27–40.

6. Claus Westermann attributes this verse to the Priestly writer—not so distant from the time of Jeremiah—in *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 182. Contrast Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1981), 36, who attributes v. 7 to the Elohist though agreeing that vv. 3–6 belong to the Priestly writer.

Rachel was in childbirth, and she had hard labor. 17 When she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, "Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son." 18 As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. 20 So Rachel died, and she was buried *on the way* to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. (Gen 35:16–20; emphasis added)

Once again the focus is on the context of a journey. They were *still some distance from* their goal when she went into labor and died. She was buried *on the way*.

It is striking that in the course of these few verses—the narrator's description and Jacob's reminiscence—the expression *on the way* occurs three times. In some sense, one might interpret this as Jacob's obsession with his wife's death. Yet in reality one would have expected nothing different from Rachel, because she was a woman always *on the way*. In one sense, the expression emphasizes the tragic character of her end. In another sense, it reveals her faith and hope.

The Genesis story of Rachel can be divided into five basic parts—a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue—each typified by her *on-the-way* character.[7]

Prologue (Gen 29:1–12): Rachel, the young, vulnerable shepherdess, *on the way* to water her flocks, encounters the traveler Jacob at the well.[8] She risks the encounter with the stranger and welcomes him to her father's home.[9]

Act 1 (Gen 29:13–30): Rachel, *on the way* to marriage, patiently and faithfully endures seven years waiting and then is delayed by Laban's deception. Not only is her future dependent upon the wiles of two crafty men, but her destiny is to always play second fiddle to her older sister Leah, Jacob's first wife.[10]

Act 2 (Gen 29:31–30:24): Rachel, now married, is *on the way* to motherhood—barren and struggling to conceive while Leah and two maidservants produce children for Jacob. "Give me children, or I shall die," her first speaking part, signals her striving for a goal that eventually will be the death of her. When her womb is finally opened, she gives birth to Joseph, yet crying out "May the Lord add to me another son!"

Act 3 (Gen 30:25–35:20): Rachel is *on the way* with Jacob to the land of his birth, struggling as he struggles, though not victorious as he, rather succumbing to the pain of childbirth, naming her second-born Ben-oni, son of my sorrow. Paralleling the summary statement of Jacob in chapter 48, her final moments are reported briefly, emphasizing death and burial *on the way*.

Epilogue: Rachel's offspring, Joseph, is sent *on his way* far from the land of promise to Egypt, awaiting reunion with father and brothers only when the risk is taken of sending the youngest son, Benjamin, vulnerable *on the way*. Unlike the other matriarchs whose stories do not con-

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7. This proposal is further elaborated in Fred Strickert, *Rachel Weeping: Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 3–16.

8. For wells as meeting places, see Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 16.

9. Flavius Josephus offers an extensive expansion of this section, emphasizing both the emotional character of Rachel and her love (*erōs*) for Jacob. James L. Bailey, "Josephus' Portrayal of the Matriarchs," in *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 154–79.

10. Rachel's lack of voice places her at the mercy of father and future husband. Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 70–86, esp. 71.

tinue beyond the pages of Genesis, Rachel's story continues through people, like Joseph and Benjamin, who follow her *on-the-way* kind of life.

Whether or not Jacob grasped all of this about Rachel as he reflected on his deathbed we can only speculate. As far as the future, Gen 48:7 provides little clear articulation. It is in the context of this simple verse that the reader can offer a Rachel-would-be-proud kind of smile. For Jacob's reminiscence about Rachel was elicited by the deathbed visit of Joseph, Rachel's firstborn. Subsequently Jacob blesses their grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh, who now will stand on the same level as his twelve sons—tribal patriarchs in their own right. How sad that Rachel was not still alive to see this moment for herself.

The fact is that Rachel had died years ago, and now Jacob himself is dim of sight so that he has no clear vision of the future. This is the stuff of the great faith chapter of Hebrews: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Jacob is, of course, mentioned in that long list of ancestors for his faith in blessing the two sons of Joseph (v. 21). Of all the events in his long life, this typifies the stance of faith.[11] Hope is a glimpse of the future that even the dim of sight might grasp, not seeing but believing all the same. It occurs for people *on the way*.

So Jacob is counted in Hebrews 11 among the faithful. But what about Rachel? Is it possible for someone with such a sudden and unexpected death—for someone youthful and dying before her time—to die with such faith and hope? Certainly, from the perspective of the Genesis writer, history has given meaning to her tragic death. Generations have come forth from her. Stories innumerable have been written about her offspring—successes as well as failures, acts of piety and charity as well as acts of selfishness, lives of faith as well as lives of sin. Nevertheless, stories of Rachel's offspring weave together a tapestry that has influenced a significant part of the world over a period of several centuries. Such figures as Saul, Samuel, Jeremiah, Esther, and the apostle Paul are tributes to her beginning. Though not seen, these were surely the things Rachel hoped for.

The words of Jacob in that final reminiscence underscore the characterization of Rachel as a woman who was *on the move*—someone with a past and with a goal set out ahead of her.

Rachel's death occurred when she and Jacob "came from Paddan" and yet were "still some distance to go to Ephrath." These words are significant for the reader who has followed her story with interest, for she had for all practical purposes cut herself off from her past in Paddan, having left the house of Laban in much the same way that her husband's grandfather, Abram, had left "his father's house" for the land that God would show him. Like the patriarchs and matriarchs before her, Rachel had staked her claim with Jacob in the promise expressed repeatedly in Genesis in terms of numerous offspring and land. Her death in childbirth points to the fragility and vulnerability of the former. The author's reference "in the land of Canaan" points to the "not yet" character of the latter.

In his study on land, Walter Brueggemann writes, "The Bible itself is primarily

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11. Martin Luther writes of her death, "There she died and was buried in a neighboring field or on a road just as if the wife of a shepherd died in the fields in the midst of the flocks. There was no house nor any lodging house except Jacob's tent. This is the way of the saints to heaven." Luther, "Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31–37," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 6, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, American Edition (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 272–73.

concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place."[12] The patriarchs and matriarchs were living out the twofold promise of Gen 12:1–3 for land and progeny, with "land" functioning as a symbol for all for which they quested. So Jacob and Rachel are the perfect example of homeless people who were constantly *on the way* to landedness. Yet land always became a problem. "The very land that contained the sources of life drove kings to become agents of death. Society became the frantic effort of the landed to hold on to turf, no matter what the cost."[13] Thus the story is in constant movement from landlessness to landedness and back to landlessness.[14] So appropriately at the moment Rachel moves into the land and bears her child Benjamin she loses her stake in it.

This is the understanding of land for Jeremiah's day. The treasure had been squandered and now is lost. His prophetic words had offered a pointed critique, and now all that is left to do is to sit down and cry, to weep as only Rachel can weep. Yet Rachel's weeping is not the end. Rachel was always *on the way*, a woman of faith and hope. So Rachel's own descendent Jeremiah prefaced this lament: "A voice is heard" (Jer 31:15a). Terence Fretheim notes, "Recognizing her weeping and her tears, God seeks to comfort her with a word of unconditional promise, completely without motivation or rationale."[15]

Jeremiah continues:

> Thus says the Lord:
> Keep your voice from weeping
> and your eyes from tears . . .
> There is hope for your future,
> says the Lord:
> your children shall come back
> to their own country. (Jer 31:16–17)

This hope is to be fulfilled with the establishment of a new covenant, one written on their hearts and based on forgiveness (Jer 31:31). This is come into being with unexpected surprises:

> For the Lord has created a new thing
> on the earth;
> A woman encompasses a man. (Jer 31:22)[16]

What a revolutionary message! God would turn the world inside out. The faith and hope of Rachel model that kind of thinking.

Rachel's on-the-way tomb

There is yet another meaning to be grasped from the Genesis *on-the-way* characterization of Rachel. Buried not in the ancestral tomb at Machpelah but only *on the way*, Rachel remains accessible to all, especially to those forced on their way.[17] This undoubtedly was Jeremiah's inspiration. Rachel's tomb as described in 1 Sam 10:1–5 was located in Ramah just within the sight of the deportees. How appropriate

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12. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenges in Biblical Faith,* 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 2.

13. Brueggemann, *The Land*, 11.

14. In Matthew's infancy account the magi and King Herod form a perfect contrast. Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew," *The Women's Bible Commentary,* 254, notes that "Herod and all Jerusalem" represent "those who stay put and remain complacent." They reject God's speaking in Scripture and seek by every means to hold on to their turf. In contrast, the magi, journeying far from the security of home, heed the prophet's word to fall before Jesus in worship.

15. Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 434.

16. Literally: a female surrounds a warrior.

17. Thus Christians, Muslims, and Jews have all had a role in constructing various phases of Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, and Christians, Muslims, and Jews have all worshipped at this site until recent times. Strickert, *Rachel Weeping*, 71–127.

that mother Rachel should speak a farewell, as it were, from her grave. In some sense this was the same poetic license that personifies Jerusalem in the book of Lamentations. Rachel has become mother of all Israel.

This idea is developed further in rabbinic Judaism. The on-the-way location of her grave was providential, according to one midrash, because her own son Joseph, having been sold to caravaners, would pass along this road on the way to Egypt. Young Joseph threw himself on the grave crying:

> O mother, mother, that didst bear me, arise, come forth and see how thy son hath been sold into slavery, with none to take pity upon him . . .

Joseph remained immovable until a voice with heavy tears spoke to him from the grave:

> My son Joseph, my son, I heard thy complaints and thy groans, I saw thy tears, and I knew thy misery, my son. I am grieved for thy sake, and thy affliction is added to the burden of my affliction. . . . Fear not, for the Lord is with thee, and He will deliver thee from all evil. . . .[18]

Again, buried *on the way* makes Rachel accessible.

Another midrash views Rachel's weeping mercifully for her children as exemplary of the divine attribute of mercy and faithfulness. Perhaps as a further development of Jeremiah's Lament, this midrash describes the same situation at the beginning of exile. First, Moses is called from his grave beyond the Jordan to appeal on the people's behalf. Then all the patriarchs from their common grave at Machpelah make their appeal. Yet it is all to no avail. The people have broken the covenant. They have not been faithful while God remained faithful. Finally, Rachel appears from her roadside grave. Her tears of mercy are justified because her faithfulness exceeds all others. She speaks:

> Lord of the world! It is perfectly self-evident to you that your servant, Jacob, loved me with a mighty love, and worked for me for father for seven years, but when those seven years were fulfilled, and the time came for my wedding to my husband, father planned to substitute my sister for me in the marriage to my husband. Now that matter was very hard for me, for I knew the deceit, and I told my husband and gave him a sign by which he would know the difference between me and my sister, so that my father would not be able to trade me off. But then I regretted it and I bore my passion, and I had mercy for my sister, that she should not be shamed. So in the evening for my husband they substituted my sister for me, and I gave my sister all the signs that I had given to my husband, so that he would think that she was Rachel. And not only so, but I crawled under the bed on which he was lying with my sister, while she remained silent, and I made all the replies so that he would not discern the voice of my sister.[19]

While this midrash clearly embellishes the details of Leah's marriage in Rachel's stead, it eloquently expresses the depth of torment that Rachel suffered in her obedience and faithfulness to Jacob while he was less than faithful to her. So who better to understand what it means to be faithful in the midst of unfaithfulness? Like Abraham and Job, Rachel has solid ground to appeal for God to be true to the attributes of mercy and faithfulness. So she continues:

> I paid my sister only kindness, and I was not jealous of her, and I did not allow her to be shamed, and I am a mere mortal, dust and ashes. Now I had no envy of my rival, and I did not place her at risk for shame and humiliation. But you are the King, loving and enduring and merciful. How come then you are jealous of idolatry, which is nothing, and so have sent my children into exile, allowed them to be killed by the

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18. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews,* vol. 2, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1910), 20–21.

19. *Lamentations Rabbah* 24, trans. Jacob Neusner, *Scripture and Midrash in Judaism,* vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), 57.

sword, permitted the enemy to do whatever they wanted to them?[20]

So crucial was Rachel's faithfulness in salvation history that Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai said, "Everything depended upon Rachel."[21] For many, this was just good storytelling. Yet others noted an interesting interpretation of her name. The three main consonants RHL are the same as *Ruah EL* (Spirit of Elohim).[22] For still others Rachel is the embodiment of *Shekinah*.[23]

Somewhere on the trajectory between Jeremiah's Lament and rabbinic midrash lies Matthew's reference to Rachel. One cannot avoid the fact that here Rachel's Lament interprets a story taking place in Bethlehem—a second traditional location for Rachel's tomb. While historically the location of Rachel's tomb was not Bethlehem but Ramah,[24] from a literary point of view the later gloss "that is Bethlehem" in Genesis 35[25] may well have influenced Matthew to insert Rachel's Lament to interpret the text. How central was this quotation to Matthew's story?

Rachel's Lament in Matthew

The episode in Matthew 2:16–18 is rather straightforward.[26] While Mary and all the young mothers of Bethlehem shed tears over Herod's violent rage bringing murder over the area's boy babies, the matriarch offers what comfort she can. Rachel weeps for her children. This is one of five biblical quotations the evangelist uses in the first two chapters, demonstrating his own interpretation of these auspicious events at Jesus' birth, providing meaning and understanding—and also a message of comfort—for the evangelist's late–first-century audience and also for readers *on the way* in later generations.

The author's mention of Rachel shortly after the opening genealogy is significant. There a handful of women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the "wife of Uriah" (Bathsheba)[27] —are inserted into what otherwise is a typical list of forty-two men—a sign that the gospel turns things upside down even in that man's world of ancient Israel and the Roman Empire. After this unusual beginning, Matthew simply does not name many women in recounting the story of Jesus.

Many nameless women are held up as examples in stories such as the woman baking bread or the five wise virgins. Others show their assertiveness as the Canaanite woman asking for crumbs, the woman with a hemorrhage fighting through the crowds to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, or the anointing woman whose story will be told into perpetuity. The Queen of the South (not identified by name) exemplifies those women who travel great distances to hear the good news. Many nameless women stand along the roads on Palm Sunday and at the foot of the cross. Others are identified

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20. *Lamentations Rabbah* 24, 57–58.

21. *Genesis Rabbah* 71.2. Jacob Neusner, *Scripture and Midrash in Judaism,* vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), 116.

22. Samuel H. Dresner, *Rachel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 183–84.

23. *Zohar* 3:187.

24. That the current Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem is not authentic is argued in detail in Strickert, *Rachel Weeping*, 57–70.

25. Westermann and many others have correctly noted that "that is Bethlehem" in Gen 35:20 is out of place and likely a later gloss (*Genesis 37–50,* 555). Rachel's death occurred near Ephrath, not Bethlehem. Zecharia Kallai, "Rachel's Tomb: A Historiographical Review," in *Vielseitigkeit des Altes Testaments* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999), 215–23.

26. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 204–23.

27. For various interpretations concerning these women in the genealogy, see Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 71–74.

only by their relationship to men: Pilate's wife, Jairus's daughter, Peter's mother-in-law, and the mother of James and John.[28]

When it comes to named women followers of Jesus there is only Mary Magdalene, the exemplary witness of crucifixion and resurrection (although the author does throw in the aside that really she had been following and serving all along) and Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is present all along but named only at the beginning and end of the Gospel (at the cross she is "Mary mother of James and Joseph" and at the tomb she is "the other Mary").[29] So when Rachel's name occurs it is worthy of note.

As a matriarch of Israel, we might very well have expected mention of Rachel in Matthew's genealogy alongside Jacob's name. After all, the promises made to Abraham of a great progeny and nation had been put at risk by the brotherly feud with Esau that sent Jacob packing to a far-off land. The story could have turned out so differently were it not for Jacob's encounter with Rachel that gave him hope and purpose. He could easily have been forgotten, the one who emigrated to a distant land as a footnote or dead end in the family tree were it not for Rachel. It therefore is ironic that Matthew's genealogy seemingly ignores Rachel. Jacob's offspring Judah, son of Rachel's rival Leah, is included in that ancestral list, not Rachel's cherished offspring Joseph and Benjamin.

Of course, the purpose of the genealogy is to establish Jesus as "son of David" and "son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1) and to demonstrate the role of Mary's husband within salvation history as descended from David, the offspring of Judah, son of Jacob and Leah (Matt 1:16).

Even within the episode of the magi (where Rachel is mentioned) the newborn Jesus' title is "King of the Jews" (Matt 2:2) and Jesus' birthplace is Bethlehem of Judah (Matt 2:1, 5). Matthew has even reworked the quotation of Micah 5:2 to include a reference to the land of Judah in both of the first two lines: "And You Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah" (Matt 2:6a).[30]

It would seem that Matthew has written Rachel's offspring out of the family will, echoing her lament "they are no more." But has he?

In another departure from the standard genealogy formula, Matthew has added "and his brothers" after mentioning Judah in verse 5. To be sure, Matthew reports in verse 6 that the line continues with Judah, yet in verse 5 the notation "Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers" includes the offspring of both Leah and Rachel, reminding the reader that the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37–50) is another of the amazing surprises of salvation history.

We cannot avoid the obvious, that whenever Mary's husband is named in those two infancy chapters of Matthew (seven times) Joseph's more famous namesake comes to mind. When he is introduced at the end of the genealogy, the reader discovers that the husband of Mary also is Joseph, son of Jacob (Matt 1:16)—not Joseph, son of Heli, as in Luke's genealogy (Lk 3:23). Like Joseph of old, the righteous (Matt 1:19) husband of Mary is a dreamer (Matt 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22), and the outcome of the

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28. Amy-Jill Levine, "Matthew," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, 252–62. See also Janice Capel Anderson, "Matthew: Gender and Reading," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 3–27.

29. The only named woman in the middle of the Gospel is not a follower, but Herodias, instrumental in the death of John the Baptist (Matt 14:3).

30. Micah 5:2, which talks about the insignificance of Bethlehem, mentions Ephrathah in line 1 and Judah in line 2. Strickert, *Rachel Weeping*, 141–48.

story is dependent upon his faithful adherence to these divine warnings. Ultimately these dreams lead him to Egypt, as was the case of Joseph in Genesis 37, for, as the evangelist notes quoting Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" (Matt 2:15).

Joseph in the infancy accounts plays an active role, providing a model of the faithful follower of the voice of God. In contrast, Mary—unlike Luke's portrayal—is quite passive.[31]

In many ways, this is quite odd. In the parallel story from Exodus 1, where Pharaoh (like Herod) kills the young Hebrew boy babies, it is the women who step forward as courageous leaders, such as the midwives and Miriam. So Mary's role is surprising. She has no speaking parts and merely follows Joseph's lead. In fact, in chapter 2 she is mentioned by name only in verse 11, while Matthew elsewhere employs the expression "the child and his mother" (Matt 2:14; 20; 21). Thus the singular focus is on her role as mother. Under these circumstances it is highly appropriate that Rachel steps in—even as in the form of a quotation inserted by Matthew—to give voice to the mothers of Bethlehem. Someone must weep alongside them. Who else but Rachel, the exemplary mother from Israel's past?

So it is that mother Rachel finds herself alongside mother Mary at the Christchild's bed.

It is often said that the infancy accounts provide the gospel in a nutshell. Mary and Rachel thus form a perfect pair. The tears of mother Rachel foreshadow the tears of Mary, walking the Via Dolorosa, standing by the cross, embracing her son's dead corpse before burial. Rachel's son Ben-oni (Son of my Sorrow) prefigures Mary's child, the man of sorrows. Yet renamed "Son of my Right Hand," Benjamin also prefigures the victorious offspring of Mary. In other ways, they are a perfect contrast. Rachel dies giving life, while Mary lives giving birth to one destined for death. So it is that Matthew needed to record Rachel's Lament, this somber note, about such a joyful birth. So it is that the mothers weeping for their Bethlehem children would one day join those weeping along the streets of Jerusalem as this newborn made his way to the cross. So it is that Jesus, like Rachel, was destined to die outside the city *on the way*.

Rachel's Lament sets a somber tone for the infancy stories and for the whole Gospel. Herod does not have the final word, however. The quotation from Jer 31:15 is encircled by news of Herod's ultimate death (vv. 15, 19, 20). Likewise, from the perspective of Matthew's day, other power figures responsible for Jesus' death have now met their demise. Just as Rachel was told to dry her eyes (Jer 31:16) and look forward to a new covenant (Jer 31:31), so Matthew's quotation in 2:18 is only a prelude to the unfolding of God's covenantal plan in Jesus (Matt 26:28). The Gospel comes full circle in Matthew 28 when the tears of the women at the tomb are changed to great joy (v. 8). Like the magi of chapter 2 who have journeyed to fall before the newborn king to worship him, so the women beginning their journey encountering Jesus *on the way* grasp his feet to worship him (Matt 28:9). This journey takes them and the disciples into all nations, a disruption of their lives to be sure, yet Jesus is with them always *on the way*.

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31. Levine, "Matthew," 253–54.

Book Reviews

Matthew: A Commentary. By Frederick Dale Bruner. 2 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004. Vol. I: xviii and 604 pages. Cloth. $45.00. Vol. II: xxxii and 854 pages. Cloth. $50.00.

The Lutheran *sola gratia* emphasis, on grace alone, tempts us to value some parts of Scripture over others. Luther himself, in the preface to one edition of his Bible translation, famously encouraged readers to turn first to John, Paul (especially Romans), and 1 Peter, for "this is the real nature of the gospel."

For those who have suspected that Matthew, beloved of the Protestant left-wing traditions, is the gospel of law over grace, Frederick Dale Bruner's commentary comes as a happy correction. It is a mainstream Reformation-Christian interpretation, rooted solidly in the theology of Luther and Calvin, and the effect is to hear Matthew, from the opening genealogy through the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount and the church instructions right through to the concluding missionary imperative, as a joyful, liberating word.

This is a practical commentary for preachers and teachers in congregations. Bruner takes seriously the historical-critical scholarship on Matthew, but this is not a scholars' book; its orientation is theological and missionary: What is the Word of God in the Gospel of Matthew, for proclamation today? Bruner's criticism of the modern quest for the historical Jesus on this score is succinct: "Do they not have to preach next Sunday?" Legions of preachers will shout "Amen!" and will appreciate deeply Bruner's alternative exercise.

This is also a historical commentary. The most dependable apostolic succession we have, Bruner suggests, is the long tradition of church commentary on the Scriptures, and so reading his book is like studying Talmud. The reader sits in on Bruner's conversation with such as Jerome, Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Bengel, Barth, and Hauerwas. As the discussion continues, the Word in the Gospel becomes sharp and alive, and the reader's faith and life are engaged and challenged.

Bruner says that he intends for his commentary to be "historical-theological-missionary" in orientation, "historical in canvassing the two-thousand-year commentary tradition; theological in referring texts to creeds; and missionary in aiming the texts at the world." It is a worthy intention, and the endeavor is marvelously successful.

[Editor's note: Both volumes became available in paperback in summer 2007.]

Robert Klonowski
Chicago, Illinois

The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology. By Mark C. Mattes. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004. xvii and 198 pages. Paper. $25.00.

Examining the role of the doctrine of justification in recent theology, Mark Mattes explores the works of Jüngel, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Jenson, and Bayer. His analysis shows a wide and deep engagement with each. If readers are not familiar with these thinkers, Mattes provides enough explanation to overcome that potentially large obstacle.

The contemporary theologians each receive one chapter on how they have presented Christian justification and how they compare to Luther. Mattes evaluates his subjects' writings based on how well he perceives they have followed Luther. Returning to Luther in every chapter allows Mattes to keep his thesis central; it does, however, raise the self-identified temptation to "seek to return to the pre-modern world" (p. 189).

On this point, one notices that Mattes does not care for modern movements or strands of thought that he identifies as having "Hegelian" elements. While Hegel's work can certainly raise theological eyebrows, a reader may won-

der whether Hegel really represents the primary threat to Christian proclamation in today's congregations. The study could have benefited from a wider view of the challenges and solutions facing the church; to that end, a more diverse panel of theologians may have been valuable. Nevertheless, Mattes has succeeded in embracing a core issue for the whole church and presented a highly engaging analysis of major modern-day thinkers.

This book is useful for pastors and theologians as a broad survey and interpretation of these five influential theologians. Its focus on theology as being "for the church" is also refreshing. Although the academic theological language may be difficult for some, Mattes is consistent and precise in his use of technical terms. Readers may not agree with each of his analyses or conclusions. They will, however, find a well-informed discussion of a crucial theme in contemporary Christianity. This book adds its voice to broader conversations on why justification still matters to the church and the world.

Martin J. Lohrmann
Lutheran Theol. Seminary at Philadelphia

Reforming the Doctrine of God. By F. LeRon Shults. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005. x and 326 pages. Paper. $35.00.

This work is an exploration of the conceptual space in which problematic formulations of deep Christian intuitions about God's knowing, acting, and being are reformed and presented as the gospel that reforms our longings for wisdom, justice, and harmony. Shults seeks to conserve the intuitions that God's knowing, acting, and being embrace all things, which are linked with the experience and understanding of God as the intimately faithful, powerfully loving presence of hope. The formulations from which he seeks to liberate these intuitions depict God as a single immaterial substance or subject whose timeless knowledge and causation of temporal events precedes time. The space within which his reconstructive work takes place is the nexus of three trajectories emerging in twentieth-century treatments of the doctrine of God: "the retrieval of divine infinity, the revival of trinitarian doctrine, and the renewal of eschatological ontology" (p. 1). While his work focuses on the conceptual dimensions of this space, Shults' approach thematizes the mutual interdetermination of thinking with acting and being in relation to God. In other words, Shults recognizes that the space opened up by the three trajectories has practical and liturgical as well as conceptual dimensions. His rearticulation of the gospel of God's omniscient faithfulness, omnipotent love, and omnipresent hope, therefore, aims to integrate the hermeneutical, agogic and doxological moments of theology. This integration is most obviously present in the subsections referencing "The Ecumenical and Reformative Appeal," and "The Gospel of," each of the three trajectories.

The work is divided into three parts in which Shults outlines the challenges facing construals of infinity as immaterial substance, Trinity as a single subject, and eternity as first cause (part 1), traces the emergence of renewed reflection on "intensive Infinity," "robust Trinity," and "absolute Futurity" in the work of prominent Reformed, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox theologians (part 2), and sketches a proposal for weaving the trajectories together in a doctrine of the biblical God that is good news in our contemporary culture (part 3). The epilogue notes the author's sense of place within the theological dialogue and situates the present work within his overall program for "*reforming* Christian theology" (p. 297).

This artfully written book is a delight to read. It is truly innovative and engaged with some of the most creative theological discussions underway, as well as solidly rooted in the biblical text and traditional resources from the Patristic era through the magisterial Reformation. It is primarily aimed at scholars and students of theology, but its proposals, if taken seriously, will have profound implications for the life and ministry of the church it aims to serve.

James R. Wilson
Union Theological Seminary
Richmond, Virginia

Preaching Helps

The Transfiguration of Our Lord—Second Sunday of Easter, Series A

How Do You Read the Bible?

ELCA Lutherans are reading the Bible. While the headline "Lutherans vote to read the Bible" may have made us look a little silly, I think the Book of Faith initiative is a wonderful thing for the church to be doing. I pray it will be a catalyst though which the Spirit works in powerful ways. You can learn more about the Book of Faith initiative at *www.elca.org/bookoffaith/*. You'll find an overview of the initiative, the video shown at the churchwide assembly, ways your congregation can participate, Bible studies, and other resources.

Listening to Christians talk about how they read the Bible leads me to a conclusion as obvious as the findings of some of those government studies that tell us, among other things, that new teenage drivers are more hazardous, that staring directly into the sun for an hour before a math test adversely affects your score, and that most Americans are bewildered and dumbfounded by the number of useless, senseless, and brainless studies that are done each year by the government.

So here is my conclusion: We read the Bible differently (see Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through You: How Faith Convictions Shape Preaching and Mission* [Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007]). Even in the same congregation, people read and interpret Scripture many different ways. Christians can read the same passage and interpret it differently. Whenever someone points to those passages that mention homosexuality and accuses the church of not being biblical, I like to open my Bible to the Gospel appointed for Maundy Thursday. Jesus said, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Should washing one another's feet be part of our Christian practice, or was Jesus speaking metaphorically? Is Jesus addressing us or is Jesus only speaking to the first disciples? It depends on how one reads the Bible. In order to address tough issues, we need to figure that out.

For some, the Bible is history; every word is literally true. For others, the Bible is an answer book. Still others approach the narratives in the Bible as models of how God interacts with us and the world. Some Christians read Scripture for inspiration rather than for information. Others look to the Bible for a perspective or frame of reference on worship, the world, and Christian life. Still others read Scripture as a testimony to God's saving activity, a conversation

partner, or even a conversation itself. Regardless of how they read the Bible, all Christians agree that the Bible is God's Word, that Scripture is meaningful and important for their lives, and that they take it very seriously. Christians are also clear that what they agree on about the Bible far exceeds that about which they disagree. From this perspective, Scripture unites more than it divides.

While we may not need a study to tell us this, we frequently can use some help remembering it, particularly when talking about difficult or even divisive issues. When our approach to Scripture remains unarticulated or, even more problematic, when we assume that our approach to Scripture is the only valid one, conversation stalls as people get stuck. This happens in sermons when a preacher and the hearers approach the pericope in different ways. It happens in Preaching Helps when a contributor comes to the readings with one set of questions and readers open the Helps with another set of questions.

Frederick A. Niedner, who contributes this series of reflections, gives us the help we need. First and foremost, Dr. Niedner offers keen insights into the readings from Transfiguration through the Second Sunday of Easter. Moreover, by asking ourselves what questions Professor Niedner is asking of the texts, we receive important insights on how to read the Bible, regardless of our approach. We read with our eye on Jesus. We read from the perspective of the gospel. We read with a deep curiosity that compels us to dig in and get to know the world behind the text. We read with a deep concern for our people and the world that motivates us to clearly name the realities of life and how Scripture speaks to them. Every preacher does this differently. As you read these reflections I invite you to consider how Niedner does it, how this preacher reads the Bible.

Niedner teaches biblical studies in Valparaiso University's Department of Theology and offers homiletically oriented text studies at Valparaiso's annual Institute of Liturgical Studies. His ongoing work in biblical theology focuses primarily on enmity and polarization in the biblical world and the ways in which biblical texts have been employed to perpetuate those same things in our world. His studies also probe biblical themes of reconciliation and forgiveness. He served numerous adjunct roles at Valparaiso University's Chapel of the Resurrection, contributes regularly to publications that offer text studies and other resources for preaching in the church, and writes a fortnightly column on matters religious for the NW Indiana *Post-Tribune*.

Perhaps this Lent we can "give up" some of the ways we always read and interpret Scripture so that the Christ may raise us to a new or renewed relationship with Scripture. May God bless your reading and your preaching!

Craig A. Satterlee, Editor of Preaching Helps
http://craigasatterlee.com

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 3, 2008

Exodus 24:12–18
Psalm 2 or Psalm 99
2 Peter 1:16–21
Matthew 17:1–9

First Reading

Zora Neale Hurston had reason enough to title her 1939 novel on the Bible's exodus story *Moses, Man of the Mountain.* Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers tell Moses' story in such a way that readers can scarcely track all the great prophet's treks up and down the "mountain of God." In today's first reading, Moses seems to have gone up merely to receive the stone tablets upon which God has inscribed "the law and the commandment." In the preceding chapters, God has come down to that mountain and from there proclaimed the "ten words" (Exod 20:1–17) plus several more chapters of laws (20:22–23:19) and promises (23:20–33) in Moses' hearing while the people stood at a distance. Moses then declared all these things to the people (24:3) and wrote them down (24:4). This part of the covenant procedure concludes with Moses and seventy elders going up the mountain, where together they "saw God" and "ate and drank" (24:9–11). Remarkably, they survived the encounter.

Before anyone leaves the mountain banquet, God summons Moses (24:12) to come up and receive the tablets of stone bearing the law and commandment. Moses enters the cloud, also described as a "consuming fire," atop the mountain and spends forty days and nights awaiting the tablets, which God finally delivers (31:18).

No one else ever sees them, however, as Moses smashes the tablets in anger over the incident of the golden calf (32:15–20). He later returns to the mountaintop to take dictation of Law and Commandment 2.0 over the course of another forty days and nights (34:1–28). When Moses descends from this second long rendezvous with God, the prophet's face shines so brightly he must veil it lest the people flee in fear (34:29–35).

This entire sequence lies behind Matthew's rendering of the Transfiguration narrative he inherited from Mark. Only Matthew mentions that Jesus' face "shone like the sun" (17:2), as had the skin on Moses' face, and Matthew alone describes Jesus as taking time to dispel the disciples' fear (17:7), much as Moses had done in Exodus 20:20 when Israel quaked in terror at the prospect of coming face to face with God. Together, these details serve Matthew's elaborate, much-discussed depiction of Jesus as a new Moses.

In Mark's Gospel, the Transfiguration story serves primarily to answer a crucial post-resurrection question: "Where is this Jesus, whom you say is raised from death? May I see him, too?" Unlike the later Gospels, Mark has no post–empty-tomb appearance stories that help answer this question, but Jesus has explicitly instructed the disciples as they come down from the Transfiguration mountain, "Don't tell anyone about this until the Son of Man is raised from the dead. Then tell this story" (Mark 9:9–10). Where is Jesus? This much we know—we have seen him in the company of Moses and Elijah. Although Matthew has a pair of appearance stories that answer questions about the risen Christ's presence, Matthew, too, wants readers to know that the secret of Jesus' connection to Moses and Elijah makes sense only after the resurrection.

Elijah doesn't appear in any reading for this day save Matthew's. However, we might consider Elijah another "man of the mountain." On Mount Carmel, Elijah defeats the

prophets of Baal in dramatic fashion (1 Kings 18), but soon thereafter Elijah slinks off to Mount Horeb in great discouragement and tenders his resignation in a scene that finds the prophet face to face with God (1 Kings 19). Soon after, a whirlwind takes Elijah up into heaven (2 Kings 2), where, according to *The Assumption of Moses*, a much later apocryphal work, he could join Israel's liberator and lawgiver in serving God as one dispatched on special missions to aid the faithful.

Neither Moses nor Elijah get any notice in 2 Peter's recollection of the Transfiguration scene. Nor do questions concerning the risen Christ's whereabouts linger in the background. Rather, the writer, who claims to have witnessed firsthand the pronouncement of Jesus as Son and Beloved atop the holy mountain, uses his attendance at this event as proof that he and his fellows hold a place in the tradition of great prophets who have stood in God's presence and now function as shining lights amid the world's darkness.

For all their time atop mountains, these writers, prophets, and beloved children of God nevertheless spend the bulk of their lives in the wilderness regions that surround the physical and spiritual peaks they have experienced. In Jesus' case, even as the temptation in the wilderness follows immediately upon his baptism and its pronouncement, so does a major warning about his crucifixion come immediately after the confirmation of divine sonship at the Transfiguration.

Pastoral Reflection

Those of us who hear these readings on this high day of celebration will soon head into the wilderness as well. In three days we shall sit in the dust and smear ashes on our faces. After another four, we will encounter the tempter who seems to rule the regions between bondage and freedom, that wordless expanse of transition between the past we escaped and the future we still don't know.

There, we, too, will face questions and circumstances that leave us exhausted, fearful, and uncertain of our identities, the meaning of our lives, and whatever place we might have in a family of beloved sons and daughters. True, we don't all crash in the wilderness at once. A few among us seem to live in the glow of the mountaintop more consistently than others. Sooner or later, however, the prosecutor eventually corners each of us, and the trial begins. You are gravely ill, says the ruler of the wilderness, telling only the truth. You have failed your friends and family. Your best years are behind you.

How can we find our way back to the mountaintop? Truth be told, we can't. That, however, is not the only truth concerning us, the mountain, and the voices and figures we have witnessed there.

Twice in Matthew's Gospel we encounter familiar sayings about the power of faith to move a mountain. One comes as the disciples stand on the temple mount and listen to Jesus' judgment upon that holy place. We hear the other while still at the foot of the mount of Transfiguration in Matt 17:20. Jesus says, "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

This mountain, and more importantly its voice of promise and the company of transfigured ones, follows us into the wilderness where we—like the moonstruck, demon-beset youth whose miseries prompted this saying of Jesus—find ourselves thrown helplessly to the ground. The gospel is not that we have a map to find our way back to the mountain but that the mountain follows us everywhere.

The beloved Son who went from this mountain to the temple mount, and from there to the place of crucifixion and burial, seeks us out as we lie on the ground overcome by fear (Matt 17:7). "Get up and do not be afraid," he says.

And so we do. We follow, even into the consuming fire, for this Man of the Mountain goes with us, always. FAN

Ash Wednesday
February 6, 2008

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

First Reading

The readings for this solemn day of repentance call the faithful from pretense, sham, and hypocrisy to a life of repentance that manifests itself paradoxically in a combination of transparency and secrecy. The prophet Joel speaks to a generation that habitually responds to the threat of judgment with outward signs like the rending of garments. "Rend your hearts instead," he urges. Joel stresses the urgency of repentance by describing a scene as comic as Nineveh's mass ritual of contrition in Jonah 3. There, on the chance that God might relent from threatened punishment, everyone, from oldest to youngest and from greatest to least—including all the animals—fasts and puts on sackcloth. Joel, too, calls for the aged as well as suckling infants, even new brides and grooms, who in Israel remain exempt from every other duty, to join in teary prayers that God might spare the people.

The optional reading in Isaiah 58 likewise disdains mere outward signs like bowing and prostrating oneself, or even donning sackcloth and ashes. Those who truly turn toward God fast by undoing the injustice through which they have fattened themselves, and in turn provide for the needs of the hungry, naked, and homeless.

Joel dares to repent because he trusts in God's ancient, self-proclaimed reputation as gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and relenting of threatened punishments. Isaiah 58 expresses faith in a similarly unique and holy God, one who turns things upside down. Normally, gods and masters issue a summons, while prophets and servants respond, הִנֵּנִי, "Here I am" or "At your service." Here, however, we find the promise that when we call, God responds in a servant mode.

David, freshly exposed as a murderous adulterer (according to the notation at the head of Psalm 51), hands himself over to God with the very same trust: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love."

All of these teachings lie behind the exhortation to genuine piety in the portion of the Sermon on the Mount we rehearse every year on Ash Wednesday. In Matthew 6, Jesus bids disciples to exercise their "piety" (δικαιοσύνη, elsewhere translated "righteousness"), including almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, in strictest secrecy. Practice generosity with such stealth that your left hand doesn't know what your right hand gives away, Jesus bids with a touch of humor. Say your prayers in a tiny, dark closet. Fast in such a way that others would guess you've just come from a feast.

Jesus doesn't identify the nature of the Father's promised reward for such piety, as distinct from the praise of others that more public exercises of piety often garner, nor does he define the "treasures in heaven" that accumulate thanks to a discipline of secret piety. One way to count them, however, appears a chapter earlier, when Jesus calls his followers "the light of the world" whose

good works will cause others "to give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Alms given secretly earn no plaques that honor donors. Surprised and grateful beneficiaries of such almsgiving can only thank and glorify God. Likewise, a fast of the kind that Isaiah or Jesus urges will lead to shifts that few can trace but for which many will have reason to throw up their hands in gratitude.

Pastoral Reflection

The liturgy of this day provides us with still more powerful texts to consider along with the appointed readings. These texts, like Jesus' words in Matthew 6, also speak of secrets. "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return," we shall say to every person who joins us, even tiny babies who don't know what we say and frail old people who think of little else these days. That ancient word of God remains our most fearsome secret, the one we try hardest to keep hidden but that haunts us all our lives. That secret has a way of prompting all the sorry behaviors that today we cast off in repentance. "I may be food for worms, tomorrow's humus, but for now I have made myself known and necessary. It will matter that I lived!" we shout into the gathering darkness by means of our big buildings, powerful institutions, and every one of our accomplishments and relationships. In the process, each of those things becomes another tombstone bearing some epitaph that notes our having passed this way—even our marriages, and the few things we did right as parents or friends. Until, of course, those too vanish.

Being dust is not the worst thing that could happen. After all, as our words today remind us, we came from the dust, and even before the life-giving breath that made us human we had a place in the hands that had first made the dust and then took it up and formed it. No matter what, there we remain. And although we become breathless dust once more, we trust the one who holds us. We know what that one does with dust.

Yet another text speaks to us today, this one inscribed upon each of our foreheads. The smear of ashes that reminds us how quickly we pass through this world comes in the form of a cross, Christ's cross, the same pattern made upon our fragile skin on the day we were baptized into Christ's death and buried with him. For all of our days, we bear that secret, too. Most days no one sees it, perhaps not even ourselves. But that mark remains. No matter what other story may epitomize our life in space and time, that single sign, the cross of ashes, becomes both epitaph and defining promise.

It too, reminds us daily of death. From one angle it looks like a sign of mourning. Just as truly, however, that smear of water, oil, and ashes serves as our secret party clothes, the only festive garment we'll need on the morning after the vigil, when all the crucifying and all the burying have been finished in this dusty old world.

On this side of that celebration, we wear the garments of repentance, but secretly. One thing we give up for Lent is letting anyone else know what we've given up for Lent. That way, if any good comes of it, the world around us won't know who else to thank but God, the Father with whom we've been closeted in prayer. From him, no secrets are hid. That's a promise. FAN

First Sunday in Lent
February 10, 2008

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

First Reading

In both of this week's temptation stories God places human subjects into a setting where testing proves inevitable. God puts the *adam*, or dust-creature, into the Garden of Delight (*Eden* in Hebrew) and gives that solitary soul work to do, plus a single rule, "Don't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden." Lacking any experience of obedience, disobedience, success, failure, or any consequences thereof, the human beings easily fall prey to the crafty serpent's suggestion that they wrest control of their own lives.

The Spirit leads Jesus, whom Paul identifies as the new prototype, a second *adam*, into the wilderness—and not just any wilderness, but by suggestion the kind in which Israel had once sojourned on the way from bondage to freedom. Jesus' ancestors knew bondage intimately. They did not know freedom, however, so they, too, proved easy marks when threats of hunger, thirst, and danger tested them from the moment they left Egypt.

If Jesus is the Lord's anointed, beloved, and Son (as the voice at his baptism so recently declared in Matt 3:13–17), how shall he establish the freedom of God's reign? How might he bring to an end every form of bondage his people have known?

The three temptations Jesus faces represent not only Israel's deepest expectations, which in turn have their grounds in God's promises for the messianic age, but universal human dreams for what it would take to fix the world once and for all. Given the number of stones available, in the wilderness or anywhere else, if someone could convert them to food no one would ever again perish from hunger. Nor would we have reason to fight with others over having enough.

Psalm 91, which the tempter quotes for Jesus, promises protection and long life to all who love and find their refuge in the Lord. Similar texts, like Isaiah 65:17–25, promise a day when tragedy will never again strike the faithful. Shouldn't any messiah worthy of the title bring on precisely that new age?

A host of biblical texts declare that the Lord's messiah will restore Israel's fortunes and rule the world in peace. So, Jesus, if you are the messiah, the only question is how you will take control and establish your reign. The "worship" for which the tempter asks constitutes the simple admission that only his way of gaining and keeping power actually works. And what might that look like? In Jesus' day, the *Pax Romana* held sway and epitomized the tempter's rule. Rome established peace through force and kept it in place by means of fear. Nations behaved as the empire demanded or else suffered annihilation. The same principle works well for every empire, so long as each can make others fall down in fear and worship them.

Jesus refuses each temptation. We could have all the bread in the world, he says, quoting Deuteronomy, and still not have enough. Wilderness wanderers experience hungers that bread can't satisfy. As for the peace that will bring an end to humanity's warring madness, the true worship of God doesn't merely mean trading Rome's powers of intimidation for Jerusalem's threats of divinely aided retribution. The true God does not rely on threats but, as Jesus' career path will demonstrate, on a power quite the opposite.

Having declined each urging of the tempter, Jesus finds himself alone in the wilderness save for the angels who come to him as table-waiters. The text leaves this meal's menu to our imagination, although we may assume that whatever got served proved "enough." And the next time in Matthew that we find Jesus in the wilderness (ἔρημος), he will provide the food—and more than enough (Matthew 14:13–21).

Pastoral Reflection

Curiously, the words for "wilderness" in both Hebrew (מִדְבָּר) and Greek (ἔρημος) appear to be fashioned from words for "word" or "speech," but with a preposition attached. A full-blown etymology won't fit in this space, but a bit of rabbinic playfulness allows us to define the wilderness, theologically at least, as a place without or beyond words. Ancient Israel hated bondage but after four centuries knew its language and meaning. Freedom, on the other hand, remained an untested dream. In between lay the wilderness, a time and place of transition and the learning of new ways, new words, new meanings. Little wonder that wary Israelites resorted to murmuring, an English term for wordless trash-talking every bit as onomatopoeic as the Bible's Hebrew and Greek equivalents.

We *adam*-children don't know how to talk or think any more effectively in Eden. We've never lived here before, either. The rule says, "No eating over there, or you die." But what does "die" mean? Mere youth isn't the only thing that makes us too new and too naive to avoid taking candy from strangers, or selling our souls by investing in some crafty salesman's stolen-fruit scheme.

Truth be told, we live pretty much our whole lives in the wilderness. Yes, we taste freedom, glimpse the promise land, and have dreams of Eden that almost seem real. But we live in the wordless voids of transition between bondage and freedom, between addiction and recovery, between abuse-induced paralysis and standing up as a person, between divorce and being intact once more, between stunning grief and the life we expect might come again if only we somehow survive this pain. We are tempted to give up, to go back.

We sit helplessly at the bedside of a broken child. Although we enjoy life expectancies three times the length that Mary, Joseph, or Jairus knew, still, too many among us bury children. Where is God when we need a miracle?

We also live amid social structures that ought to work for everyone but somehow don't. We know whose fault that is, and of course it's never ours. Therefore, we presume to go to work for God by seeing that the first go to the end of the line and the last become first. And we know better than everyone—don't we?—which end is which.

Perhaps, but only if we remember that we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, and particularly by the word that says, "This is my child, beloved and chosen." In order to hear and to have this very word, we come deliberately every Lent to the wilderness. We come to practice. We come to listen carefully once more to the broken logic of the wordless void and to rehearse amid its din of murmuring the baptismal promise.

And with that patterned smear of dust and ashes on our brow, we go the way of the cross, because, with or without that cross, no one escapes the wilderness alive. The ancients didn't, and neither do we. We can either die here alone or die with Christ, the new dust-creature, who clung in hope to the promise of his baptism and gave away his life, his bread, his cup, his very last morsels. Even today, we live on the leftovers of that feast. Over and over, they prove enough. Indeed, when we eat them, we swear we

sometimes taste freedom and smell the promised land. FAN

Second Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2008

Genesis 12:1–4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1–5, 13–17
John 3:1–17

First Reading

Everyone we meet in these readings must start over, even God.

Most obviously, perhaps, Abram and Sarai must begin a new life in a place they have never seen. God says "Go," and they go. They go with a promise, about which Paul makes much in his discussion of faith in his letter to the Romans, but the way Genesis tells the story, they go with little else. They also go as God's last hope for the world, something they could hardly know but which the careful reader can discern in the way Genesis locates their story at the fulcrum between the creation-related narratives and the subsequent history of Israel. As we witnessed last week in the tragic story of Eden, human beings play God, defy God, and hide from God. God responds with curse. The earth will now produce thorns more readily than any other crop, and the pleasure of having a partner will yield a disproportionate share of pain.

In the next story, one angry brother kills another, mostly because he cannot wring God's neck. Once again God discovers the sin and responds with curse. The story of the great flood continues the pattern, although now both sin and curse have become global. This time, however, God recognizes that curse solves nothing (Gen 8:21–22) and pledges never again to employ destruction as the cure for human perversity.

Finally, after the comical story of Babel, in which humans again seek a place among the gods and God steps in to thwart them by sowing great confusion and scattering humankind over the face of the earth, God chooses a family to become agents of blessing in a world that previously has known only curse. Thus do Abram and Sarai become God's last hope. If blessing doesn't work, well, better not to think about the alternative.

Ultimately, if anyone demonstrates unfailing faith in the idea of blessing or the seed of Abram and Sarai, it is God.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus calls Nicodemus to start over, or, in his case, to give in to the Spirit's calling and thus become a newborn, birthed not in the usual manner of flesh and blood (cf. John 1:13) but of water and the Spirit. Nicodemus responds as one with a mind impervious to metaphorical thought. "How can I, a leader of Israel, revert to infancy or reenter my mother's womb?" he asks. Whether Nicodemus' crippled imagination is real or feigned, his reply makes a space for Jesus' long discourse concerning the purposes for which God has sent the Son and calls others to link their lives to his.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son . . . and God didn't send the Son into the world so that the world would be condemned, but that the world might be saved," says Jesus. Recall that much later in John (20:21–22) the risen Jesus will say to the frightened huddle of disciples, "As the Father sent me, now I send you." Then he breathes on them, and they all start over, sent into the world even as Jesus, Abram, and Sarai had been, not so that the world would be cursed but that it might be saved.

God has not abandoned the idea of blessing for all the families of the earth, no matter the cost. This reading from John

hints at that cost. The Son of Man must be lifted up—one of John's code words for crucifixion—even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. On that day, Jesus, too, must start over.

Pastoral Reflection

Nicodemus came at night, in secret. As a leader, a man of some gravity, he risked far too much if he associated with Jesus in broad daylight. He could not afford to start his life over. It might kill him, just as it would kill most of us to give up all that we have worked for and made of ourselves over a lifetime.

Should the new birth that Jesus urged on Nicodemus—and all the rest of us—finally occur, we would have no identity at all save that as a son or daughter of God. Yes, we might still have our titles, degrees, pedigrees, and hard-won perching places in the pecking order, but they would become so much dust and ashes smeared upon our foreheads.

Those very ashes, however, signs of the ultimate worthlessness of everything else by which we gauge our meaning, identity, or value in the world, point to our hope as frail folks who, as surely as evening follows morning, will one day lose everything and become helpless as infants. Those ashen crosses remind us of the one whom Nicodemus went to see in the darkness so he could satisfy his curiosity and still keep his day job.

Jesus, we confess, is God's new start on creation, the new *adam*, as Paul calls him in one of last week's readings. And how does Jesus make the world new, or establish the "reign of God" into which he invites Nicodemus? He performs signs and wonders of the sort Nicodemus mentions when he comes to chat. Jesus also gives advice and shares his wisdom.

But the burden of John's Gospel is the story of Jesus' passing through the tortuous birth canal that stretched from Lazarus' tomb to his own tomb, with all the stops in between, including the Temple, Gethsemane, Pilate's Praetorium, and finally being "lifted up" on Golgotha.

Do you recall who waited to catch the body of Jesus as it finally emerged in the dark and painful birthing on Golgotha? Nicodemus staffed the birthing room that night, when everyone but he and Joseph of Arimathea had slipped away or fled in fear and despair. Nicodemus became the midwife at Jesus' new birth.

With myrrh and aloes he came, and a new, clean cloth in which to wrap the body of this child of God. Nicodemus probably thought it was the end of the story, just as it would have been for him had he accepted Jesus' offer during that nighttime visit two years earlier.

Ah, but we know the grand surprise. The burial cloth Nicodemus brought would become the swaddling clothes on a newborn, come early dawn on the first day of the week.

For now, we wait, too, beside Nicodemus, with spices and burial clothes, ready to help bury Jesus Christ at the end of this Lenten journey. We prepare as well to bury ourselves and one another, and all our sins and shame right along with our accomplishments, titles, reputation, earnings, and everything else we're proud of—including even the best of our good deeds. We'll wrap ourselves in the grave clothes and wait. This much we trust, that God is full of faith, never gives up, and makes ready to start anew. FAN

Third Sunday in Lent
February 24, 2008

Exodus 17:1–7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1–11
John 4:5–42

First Reading

Today's first reading reports one of the notorious testing episodes that punctuate the story of Israel's wilderness sojourn. Lack of water prompts murmuring and snide sarcasm from the thirst-crazed masses. "So, Moses, you brought us out of Egypt just to kill us like this?" The Hebrew verb רִיב, which most English translations render as "quarrel," means to take someone to court. In other words, at the first sign the administrator hasn't adequately anticipated their needs, the people sue. How thoroughly contemporary!

Psalm 95, a call to worship familiar to many because of its place in the order of Matins, warns against behaving like the quarrelsome crowd that put God to the test. However, that part of the psalm hasn't enjoyed a place in regular morning prayer, perhaps because we hesitate to sing of how God loathes a stubborn and difficult generation and will never grant it rest.

If we trust what Paul writes in Romans 5, however, we could risk singing all of Psalm 95. In the very midst of our litigious murmuring and bitter sarcasm against God, Christ gives his life for us and reconciles us to God. Had God waited until all the whining and rebellion stopped, God's rest could come only after everyone died of thirst.

Two thirsty souls meet up at a well in today's Gospel reading, but only one goes away with a drink. A day on the dusty roads made Jesus seek water, and at the well where he pauses, he meets up with a woman who has a bucket. The woman, a Samaritan, can scarcely define her thirst, given all she has lost over a lifetime—including five husbands. She meets a man who offers her "living water." She'll never again have to visit the well.

The story of this meeting does not end anywhere in John 4, however. Nor does it begin there. What happens in John 4 begins in Genesis 24, with Abraham sending a servant off to the old country to find a wife for Isaac. The servant comes to a well, where he meets Rebekah. She runs home, saying, "I met a man!" Her brother says, "Where is he? Bring him here!" The servant comes, and receives hospitality. A betrothal is arranged.

The same sequence occurs in Genesis 29, when Jacob, fleeing for his life, stops at a well in the ancestral territory and meets Rachel. Once more, the woman runs home with news of the meeting, the visitor comes to receive hospitality, and the men work out a betrothal. Moses gets Zipporah as wife through an identical sequence of steps in Exod 2:15–21.

These stylized stories, called "type scenes" in scholarly literature, function much as similar elements of our popular culture. Think of chase scenes in every action movie Hollywood makes. Though the outline remains the same, peculiarities of each scene tell the real tale. In the Bible's well stories, we find Isaac absent from his own betrothal, while Rebekah voices her consent to the plan. That will prove the story of their life together, as Rebekah calls the shots and Isaac remains a passive, easily duped father. Jacob works very hard to get water for Rachel, and he ultimately must work even harder to have her as his wife. In the Hebrew text of Moses' well encounter, he literally "saves" Reuel's daughters, and that will become the template for his life. He will serve as Israel's deliverer, often saving the

people by providing water.

John's Gospel signals an imminent betrothal in 3:28–30, when John the Baptist calls himself the best man for the bridegroom who will soon appear. Immediately thereafter, Jesus meets a woman at a well, precisely at noon, while traveling outside his home territory. The entire sequence common to the Hebrew Bible's stories takes place, but Jesus never gets his drink—or his bride.

Both missing pieces come in John's Passion Narrative. In John, the crucifixion happens at noon; once more Jesus asks for a drink. This time he receives one; significantly, the narrator identifies it as ὄξος, or wine vinegar, as we call it. More significantly, this is the same drink the Septuagint's version of Ruth's mirror-image sequence of these old well stories says she received at the dinner that culminated in her betrothal to Boaz (Ruth 2:14). With this drink given him on the cross, Jesus betrothal is finished at last, as he will soon declare.

Who is his bride? We are—the host of the baptized, all who come adorned as a bride to meet the bridegroom (Rev 21:1–4). FAN

Pastoral Reflection

We, too, are a thirsty, cantankerous lot. If you have trouble remembering this, cultivate the habit of reading the newspapers' advice columns. Such woes and longings as we witness there, exposed for all the world to read, lurk barely hidden behind the eyes of every soul about us as we gather at table for a sip from the cup, a morsel of bread, and a drink from the well of promises God makes to all of us here in this wilderness we share.

How many times have we gone to the old, familiar wells in order to slake our thirst for meaning and identity, some reason to hope or keep moving through the dim light? Like our Samaritan sister, we have tried a little of everything. Some of us have become addicts of things we found at this well or that. A few even become addicted to the very habit of moving from one well to another. Our thirsts are killing us, and so are the searches by which we seek to stem the craving.

We long to find ourselves in the role of this sister who one day shows up at the same old well, only to receive the drink that means never having to return. We shall indeed share her drink, but not before we die with the thirsty wilderness generation that turned on Moses, or even with Moses, whose water-related problems finally cost him the chance to get out of the wilderness alive.

We die, however, not only with that generation but with another thirsty one, the Bridegroom himself, who in his last moments cries out in the midst of his fearsome thirst for life, for meaning, for God. While we were yet murmuring, Christ died with us in our wilderness, that we might be one with him and he with us, one flesh, joined in this life and in whatever life might come after this, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, so long as . . . well, for as long as he lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Congratulations! Let's raise a toast of ὄξος, right here in the wilderness, a foretaste of the wedding feast to come. FAN

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 2, 2008

1 Samuel 16:1–13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8–14
John 9:1–41

First Reading

Movement from darkness to light and from blindness to sight become the metaphors for this week's leg of our Lenten journey. In the story of David's anointing, Samuel sees plenty of leadership potential in Jesse's older sons, but God does not see as Samuel does. Indeed, God sees and chooses someone not even present, David, the shepherd boy and runt of the litter. Ah, but he's a handsome lad, with beautiful eyes, at least in God's sight.

In Psalm 23, which we're told David composed, the shepherd of sheep become shepherd of a nation has eyes of faith that recognize God as his own shepherd, the one who sees the sometimes frightened singer through the valley of the shadow.

The Letter to the Ephesians calls readers to leave behind old habits cultivated in darkness, that they might live in the light of Christ. The contrast between the two is as great as that between death and life.

The characters in John 9 play out a multilayered drama of movement between light and darkness, blindness and sight. On one level, Jesus' healing of a man born to darkness grants sight to one individual but casts others, like the Pharisees, into forms of blindness and confusion. The story thus serves in one way as a complex backdrop to Jesus' saying in John 20:29 when he asks Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" and then turns to the audience to conclude, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed." John 9 demonstrates that seeing is not necessarily believing, as Thomas and all of us who remain his twins seem to think. We observe in this story how some see Jesus' deeds and say, "This is a prophet!" Others see and swear, "He must be stopped!" Those, like the man born blind with whom Jesus lingers, eventually see and believe that Jesus is the Christ. Later on, some will see because they believe (John 11:40), and others will believe without having seen (20:29).

The artistry of the Fourth Gospel is also on display in the elaborate allegory of the newly baptized person that runs through John 9. No less than a new creation occurs when Jesus, working with clay, fashions new eyes for this man born blind and sends him off to be washed in the waters of the Sent One, which this narrator takes pains to offer as the meaning of "Siloam." (Jesus refers to himself repeatedly as the "sent one" in John, and has done so in 9:4, just prior to the reference to Siloam.)

The gift of sight and the new life that goes with it do not allow the man formerly blind or anyone else to live happily ever after, however. Rather, his new loyalty to Jesus gets the man born blind excommunicated, a common experience for the newly baptized in this Gospel's original audience, soon after Pharisaic Judaism and the followers of Jesus had parted company. The comical conversation between the newly sighted fellow and his detractors, as well as the later one between Jesus and the man he had healed, reveal the confusion and fragmentary insight that still becloud the heart and mind of any newly baptized person. Jesus sticks with the man, however, and eventually he comes to make the simple but profound confession several others do in John, "Lord, I believe."

Pastoral Reflection

As individuals and also as communities, we suffer from every form of blindness diagnosed in these readings. Like the prophet Samuel, we see as mortals see, not as God sees. Hence, we habitually make judgments based on outward appearances, while God looks into the heart. A form of such blindness causes the disciples in John 9 to ask whose sin brought on the blindness of the man born blind. We ask such questions, at least in our hearts if not aloud, because we have convinced ourselves that somehow or other people get what they deserve, and we surely want to avoid whatever that man, or his parents, did to warrant such a plight. How else can we control our fates, except to do what it takes to remain righteous and deserving of such gifts as sight?

The blindness of the formerly blind man's neighbors afflicts us, too. Some didn't even recognize their neighbor without his disability, and, perhaps more importantly, his status-lowering dependence on them. The persistent blindness of the Pharisees, who simply could not see anything good that came from a system beyond their control, imprisons any and every institution, including the church.

Hence, although baptized and created anew, all of us still live in both realms the Letter to the Ephesians names: the darkness, where unspeakable behaviors abound, and the light, where the brilliance of Christ exposes everything. This both-and, *simul-justus-et-peccator* existence confounds all of us, but perhaps most especially the neophytes whom that newly sighted man in John 9 epitomizes. We see things we've never noticed before and perhaps cannot recognize them. Family members don't understand us, and those Pharisaic folks around us whose role it is to keep people and things in their proper categories resist and resent the changes we make.

Little wonder that our tradition teaches us that the life of the baptized involves daily dying, a repeated and repentant burial of our eyes, ears, and indeed our whole selves, that we might rise anew each day to see the truth of what lies within and without ourselves. One thing our new sight lets us see is the presence of Christ, who does not give us new eyes and then abandon us to figure out for ourselves the meaning of what we see. Rather, as in the case of the man in John 9, Christ, in the flesh and blood of his body, the church, sticks by us, ready to face with us the challenges of those who hate what has become of us, ready even to die with us if that should prove the next and necessary step of discipleship. This man, tossed from the synagogue and unrecognizable to his own family, has a new community of brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. This new family isn't smarter or more righteous than the old one. All they have in common, and all they have for credentials, is having died with Christ

The most curious and perhaps the saddest feature of the story in John 9 is something that does not occur. When the man born blind first can see, everyone around him works so busily at determining if such a thing should really have happened that no one, not even the man's family, says, "Let's celebrate! Our son was blind, but now he sees!" Because the party didn't happen then, we set the festive table today, and every time we gather, so that with seeing eyes we may look into each others' faces and for the first time, perhaps, see in the faces of one another the eyes of Christ himself, he whose shining light raises us from the sleep of death and allows us to see—everything. FAN

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 9, 2008

Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11
John 11:1–45

First Reading

Like Martha in the Gospel reading, the house of Israel in Ezekiel's vision despairs that life can ever come again to the desiccated corpses of the dead. "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost," the exiles lament (Ezek 37:11). The word of the LORD brings life to the bones, however, even as Ezekiel prophesies according to God's command. Amidst the din of bones rattling noisily, first sinew and then flesh come upon the bones, and finally, the breath of God comes as prophesied, and lo! the house of Israel lives.

The psalmist who cries out from the depths of some grave or another knows intimately the despair of waiting and waiting until time itself comes to mean nothing. Even if God should happen upon our graves, he wonders, would we dare show our faces? Yes, we may. On account of God's steadfast and redeeming love, we hope in the word of the LORD on whom we wait.

Paul, too, describes how the Spirit of God, who once raised Christ from death, will also raise our mortal bodies, despite how long they have moldered in sin and death.

John 11 presents yet another multilevel drama of life and death. Most plainly, by raising Lazarus Jesus offers another of the "signs" by which people may come to believe in him as Messiah. In this case, Jesus' sign points to his identity as "the resurrection and the life." Whoever clings in belief to Christ will never die (vv. 25–26).

However, by the time the first readers of this Gospel rehearsed the story of Lazarus, some of their number had died, others would soon follow, and still the expected return of Christ had not occurred. He dilly-dallied, it seemed. What was Jesus waiting for? One after another, believers in the community of the beloved disciple could chide in the way Martha does, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Despite the long delay, and the seemingly hopeless state of the corps of corpses our community is fast becoming, when Christ arrives, his word raises the ones he loves.

On a third level, this narrative tells another story of life among the baptized. All of us in this community have been wrapped in burial cloths and buried, and then raised by the word of promise in baptism to new life. Each in a slightly different way has come from the darkness of our tomb, with the stench of death and the grave-clothes still clinging to us. We find it difficult to walk, to really live, bound up in the dead, old life we once knew. So Jesus says to those more accustomed to light and fresh air, "Unbind him, set him loose." The Greek verbs in the original (λύω and ἀφίημι) are the same as those used for forgiveness of sins in key texts such as John 20:23 and Matthew 18:18. The community of the baptized, charged as they have been by the risen Christ who breathed on them and sent them out as he himself was sent to handle the world's sins, employ forgiveness as a key practice at stripping off their own grave-clothes as well as those that bind the neophytes still learning to walk in Jesus' way.

On yet another level, this story hints at the nature of the way of life into which Jesus summons those raised to new life in baptism. When Jesus informs the disciples that he must return to Judea, they upbraid him for seeming recklessness (v. 8): "They'll stone you!" Immediately after Lazarus leaves the tomb and word spreads of what hap-

pened, this threat materializes. The chief priests and Pharisees determine once and for all to kill Jesus because of what has happened in Bethany (11:47–53), and shortly thereafter they determine to kill Lazarus as well (12:9–11).

How curious, to raise one's dear friend from death only to invite him along on a journey that is sure to get him killed.

Pastoral Reflection

We can hear ourselves in all the despairing notes rung in today's readings. Along with Martha and Mary, we have cried out, "Where were you, Lord, when my loved one died?" And with the townspeople who watched, we grumble, "Wouldn't you think a guy who could open a blind man's eyes could keep his friend from dying?"

So many of our prayers prove in the end no more than requests that God would keep us from dying. "Keep us safe. Heal our diseases. Give us (and all the poor folks) food. Make peace in our time." Every one of them boils down to the same plea: "Keep us from dying." We organize the rest of our lives around the same bottom line, spending plenty on our medical plans, teaching our children safe ways, supporting causes that will hopefully stop drunk driving and cure cystic fibrosis. We all work to stave off the threat of dying, and we enlist God as our biggest supporter.

Curiously, even when Jesus undoes Lazarus' dying, he doesn't call for a celebration, an even bigger feast than the one no doubt served pot-luck style in the synagogue's fellowship hall after Lazarus' funeral, at which everyone sat around telling their favorite Lazarus story. No, given the conversation on the way to Bethany, and ones among the priests and Pharisees after Jesus left again, we can imagine the gist of Jesus' loud, prophetic words that brought new life that day in Bethany as sounding a little different than we're used to remembering them. "Lazarus, come out!" we read. But the way the whole story works, Jesus might as well have shouted into that tomb, "Heads up in there! I'm coming in!" Because that's where Jesus was headed. Barely a week after the day he called out Lazarus, Joseph and Nicodemus laid Jesus in a tomb a few miles away, and Lazarus had a price on his head. All of which means that Jesus did not call his dear friend out of his grave to come live happily ever after in a trouble-free life of no more pain and sorrow. Rather, in effect he said to Lazarus, "Come, my friend, let's get ourselves up to Jerusalem and die a real death! We won't settle for some death by illness or accident, but let's give our lives for something."

To that way, truth, and life Jesus calls us here in the darkness of our Lenten passage, marked as we are with dust and ashes that remind us where our flesh will take us. Called as we are, and accompanied as well by the body of Christ dispatched to strip us over and over of our grave-clothes, we look death in the eye, and we have another prayer besides "Please, please, please God, keep me from dying." Now we pray, "Unbind me, loose me, for we're on the way to Jerusalem." There are feet to wash and a Passover to keep. This year, one of us will be the lamb whose blood shows up on the doorpost. FAN

Sunday of the Passion/ Palm Sunday March 16, 2008

Matthew 21:1–11 (procession with palms)
Isaiah 50:4–9
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 26:14–27:66

First Reading

The Processional Gospel, Matthew's version of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, contains several of Matthew's peculiar stamps. Instead of one donkey, Jesus rides two, although English translations try hard to gloss this over. Scholars vary widely in their comments on why Matthew deliberately "misreads" the intent of the Hebrew parallelism of Zech 9:9, but the doubling of the animals likely has at least some connection to the combining of Isa 62:11 and Zech 9:9 into a new text that Matthew quotes as having been fulfilled in this moment. The Zechariah text highlights the humility of the king who comes as peacemaker, while the context of the Isaiah passage speaks of an eschatological event that includes both salvation and judgment. Another signal regarding the eschatological nature of this "arrival" at Jerusalem comes in the word describing the turmoil into which Jesus' coming throws the city, since σείω is the term for the quaking that happens as Jesus dies in Matthew (27:51) and also when the angel comes to open the tomb (28:2) and stun the guards (28:4). The one who comes into Jerusalem today will come again, but he will come even then as the crucified.

If Jesus is exorcist and prophet in Mark and a benefactor in Luke, Matthew depicts Jesus as a teacher. The third of the exilic Isaiah's "suffering servant" poems (Isa 50:4–9) describes a teacher whose message comes from God but whose people reject him nevertheless. The abuse the teacher suffers corresponds in several ways to things Jesus experiences in Matthew's passion narrative. The same goes for the portion of Psalm 31 appointed for this day, a stretch of poetry with many links to the prophet Jeremiah's experience of life as one called to bring a message that neither friends nor enemies want to hear (cf. Jer 20:7–18).

The reading in Philippians 2 declares in straightforward promise language the same thing the Processional Gospel teaches by means of narrative. The humble one who endured the cross will come again, and in confessing that one as Lord, God will be glorified.

Matthew's Passion Narrative has important features that differ from all the others. Most significant, the theology of forgiveness that runs throughout Matthew also permeates the passion story. For example, Matthew has earlier connected the name Jesus to forgiveness (1:21) and in 12:31–32 quoted Jesus regarding the sole limit on forgiveness. In Matt 18:15–22 Jesus calls for the community of his followers to take on the values of the shepherd who finds the prospect of losing a single sheep of his flock completely intolerable. He cannot rest until every lost one is restored (18:10–14).

The name Jesus becomes a crucial piece of the forgiveness theme when Pilate insists that the people choose between two men with that name (27:15–26). One is released, never to be heard from again. The other is slaughtered, and his blood covers the people —not in curse, as so many have assumed over the centuries, but as part of an ultimate atonement ritual that closely mirrors the procedures commanded in Leviticus 16.

In Matthew, Judas and Peter become the test cases for understanding the reach of Christ's cleansing blood. Peter exemplifies a "lapsed Christian" who has denied the

faith under threat of persecution. Judas represents the traitor, another problem type for communities such as Matthew's. Could folks like these be forgiven?

Everyone knew that Peter was eventually forgiven and had become chief apostle of the Jerusalem church. Could Judas, too, be forgiven? Judas repented and went to confess his sin (27:3–10), just as the Torah dictates for such a case (Lev 5:14–16). The priests refused him, however, so he hanged himself. The priests took Judas's money and bought a field for burying strangers, all of which, Matthew says, fulfilled a prophecy of Jeremiah. Except, as Matthew well knew, the quotation he gives appears in Zech 11:12, 13, not in Jeremiah. But by mentioning Jeremiah, Matthew recalls Jeremiah's purchase of "the field of hope" (Jeremiah 32), and perhaps also the way Jesus had quoted Jeremiah's words about himself when describing Judas's role in the economy of forgiveness (cf. Matt 26:24 and Jer 20:14–15). Is there hope for Judas, who spoke against the Son of Man? Can God have him back, despite his own and later generations' inability to forgive?

Pastoral Reflection

In many congregations, the lengthy readings and the pageantry of palms will, and perhaps should, suffice as preaching and will preempt the sermon on this day. Should one choose to preach, however, a brief, simple point of gospel ties things together on this day despite the nearly overwhelming riches of the its images and themes.

Being among the baptized means that, one way or another, each of us will be buried in that field bought with Jesus' blood, that field full of strangers who, thanks to that blood, remain estranged no more, no matter what turns our lives might take. Nothing could ever come of us that has the power to banish us forever outside the bounds of God's or the community's love or care. In Christ, God has crossed and will cross any boundary, including those of space and time, to seek and find one who has become lost. We consistently fail and betray each other when it comes to handling sin, and we betray ourselves as well. But in Jesus Christ we see that God, the shepherd who cannot rest until every sheep is home, proves the eternally restless reconciler.

The concluding scene of the 1984 film *Places in the Heart* provides a poignant image for what the forgiving blood of Christ accomplishes. Every sort of human cussedness gets perpetrated among the folks of a small southern town, from murder to racial harassment. In the film's last scene, however, the entire cast of characters is gathered in church, the living and the dead, the murderer with the murdered, the abused with the abusers, the slanderers with the slandered, all of them together receiving from one another the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper—and singing. FAN

Maundy Thursday
March 19, 2008

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

First Reading

As Paul's rehearsal indicates, any commemoration of the night in which Jesus was betrayed has the bread and cup at its center. Curiously, however, the bread and cup do not appear in the Last Supper account John's Gospel offers. Instead, we receive a towel and basin.

In John, this final gathering with the disciples happens on Nisan 14, one calendar day earlier than the Passover seder that

appears in the synoptics' accounts. In John, Jesus will die on the Day of Preparation for Passover, at precisely the hour when Jerusalem's priests hang up the lambs for that year's observance, check them for broken bones, and slit them open so their blood drains out. By the end of the day, Jesus dies in the role John the Baptist announced back in John 1:29, namely, as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Exodus 12:3 states that every household shall select its lamb on the tenth day of the month, and so it happens in John. Jesus' anointing at Bethany in preparation for his burial comes six days before the Passover (John 12:1–8), not two days prior, as in Mark (14:3–9) and Matthew (26:6–13).

The language of Psalm 116 echoes the themes of this night's other readings in remarkable ways. In Hebrew, the cup of salvation the psalmist hoists in tribute is כוס־ישועות (*kos yeshu'oth*), to Christian ears a play on the name of the one we recognize as Savior. Once that cup is passed, as it were, the psalmist pledges to lead a life of servanthood.

That same, ironic progression occurs in the teaching that comes in the course of John's last supper. Passover celebrates freedom from a life as slaves or servants. In John's Gospel, however, the paschal sequence we have entered with the selection of Jesus as our lamb continues with lessons from our teacher and Lord concerning our future as servants. The task of foot washing in the ancient world fell to the lowliest slave in a household, which usually meant some younger servant girl. When Jesus abandoned his clothes to take up a towel and basin, and then offered his behavior as exemplary for all present, he turned the themes of Passover upside down. As the designated Passover lamb, Jesus began already on this night to set his followers free—free to live as slaves to one another.

Then, with his towel laid aside, he offers the *mandatum* for which this day is named: a new commandment, that his disciples love one another as he has loved them. According to the old commandment, observant people of God love their neighbors as themselves. Now, however, they must, and in the grammar of the command they also will—it's a promise, too—embody Christ's own love for each other.

The necessity of this kind of loving stems in part from the absence to which Jesus refers when he says, "I am with you only a little longer," and, "Where I'm going, you can't come." The community will know Christ's love in the embrace of its own members. Moreover, just as Jesus will do, so also, through loving service, those who love as Christ loved will not only glorify the Father as Christ did but will also share in his cruciform glory and exaltation.

Pastoral Reflection

The Germans call such meals as this a *Henkersmahlzeit*, or "hangman's meal." As dictated by long tradition, the condemned get to choose the very last things they will taste and smell before the noose, the blade, or the needle puts an end to every dream and desire. John does not say what Jesus ate or drank as he sat at table on the night before the empire's machines would crush him. Instead, we watch as Jesus chooses a different kind of final delight. With hands that tomorrow would be ruined forever, Jesus held the feet of each friend with whom he had walked the roads of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, long enough to wash them, knead them like clay, carefully dry them, and set them back upon the earth.

Jesus engaged in an act so full of grace, but at the same time so humble and so intimate, that it seems to have rendered most everyone but Peter speechless. That rough-hewn rock of a man, the stone of so much

stumbling in John's Gospel, tries to stop the proceeding when those already betrayed hands pick up his feet. "Never!" he protests.

On one level, the conversation that ensues proclaims the necessity and promise of baptism. Washed in and by Christ, from whom tomorrow the cleansing waters of forgiveness will flow (John 19:34, 37; Zech 12:10–13:1), we have a "share" in Christ, we become a part of him. Apart from that washing we wander alone, in isolation.

Why do we, along with Peter, resist? Who would turn down a foot massage?

Foot washing is slave's work because slaves are not really people like the rest of us, and having one's feet handled, caressed, and carefully cleaned by another person is so intimate an experience that it cannot help but bond us to the other, unless, of course, that one isn't really a person but a slave. Or a pedicurist, perhaps, whom we pay for such service. Remember, "feet" serve, with good reason, as the circumlocution for one's private parts in the Hebrew Bible.

Feet don't lie. They give away clues to our health. They have touched every place we have ventured and stepped in our lives. Once they were smooth and soft and we didn't care who took one of ours in hand. Now we wouldn't think of letting a colleague, a neighbor, or certainly not some stranger touch our feet. For shame! It's a family thing. Foot washing makes of us one flesh. We become part of one another through such intimacy. We share a life.

Which is exactly what takes place when the one who is not greater than the Father who sent him takes our feet in his hands and we become joined to him as one flesh, one body, in a family that finds its greatest delight off in the edges of the room, in the shadows where the most necessary, profound, and lifegiving acts of service take place. When we eat of the bread, and drink from his cup, we proclaim our Lord's death until he comes again. When we take into our own broken hands the tired, aching feet of one another, infected and infested with everything we have stepped in or trod upon in a lifetime of sinning and stumbling with our brother Peter, and wash them each day with baptismal waters, we not only heed his new commandment; we live our Lord's life until he comes again. FAN

Good Friday
March 20, 2008

Isaiah 52:13–53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16–25
or Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7–9
John 18:1–19:42

First Reading

Without some sense of the dramatist's, preacher's, or apocalypticist's art, one might think the narrator of John's passion narrative describes a wholly different sequence of events than the ones readers see in the synoptic Gospels. Moreover, the other readings appointed for this day seem to fit well with the synoptic accounts but not with John. True, we catch echoes of Psalm 22, as the soldiers divide Jesus' garments (John 19:24), but Jesus does not come close to crying out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" He dies instead with a shout of victory: "It worked!!!"

Nor does Jesus weep (except for his friend Lazarus) in John or beg for his life as he does in Mark's Gethsemane scene. John's Gospel has no scene of agonized prayer, but only the briefest moment of questioning in 12:27: "Now is the hour. Shall I ask for something different? No way! For this I have come." And that's that.

From this point on, Jesus exercises control over all that will transpire. He finds his

own donkey for entering Jerusalem (12:14), carries his own cross (19:17), and chooses the moment of his own death (19:30). Jesus choreographs every scene, and all the players follow his orders, including Judas (13:27), the six hundred Roman soldiers Judas brought out to arrest Jesus (18:3; a σπεῖρα in Greek, or *cohort* in Latin), and even Pontius Pilate (18:37). Isaiah speaks of a servant who opens not his mouth (53:7), and so Jesus behaves in Mark (e.g., 15:1–5). In John, however, Jesus proves quite talkative—testy, even, to the point of putting on trial all who attempt to interrogate him (cf. John 18:19–24 or 33–38).

In Matthew, events in Jesus' life fulfill words spoken by Moses or the prophets. John's Jesus fulfills his own prophecies. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord," he prophesies (10:18), and so he does. "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself," Jesus says, and the narrator adds, "He said this to show by what death he would die" (12:32–33). Then Jesus goes about the business of dying death by exaltation, lifted up, cross-high, and with his dying breaths bringing together into one family mother Judaism and her new offspring, the disciple who represented all who had come to see the Father in Jesus (19:25–27).

Each of John's great themes comes to its climax in the passion narrative, as Jesus fulfills his roles as Passover lamb (1:29; 19:31–37), bridegroom (3:28–30; 4:1–45; 19:28–29), and reconciling ruler of all (19:19–22). Given what spectators must have witnessed without benefit of later passion narratives, all of this drama in John is paradox, mystery, and high irony, but not altogether new or unheard of. Isaiah's poetry speaks of the crushed and battered servant as "exalted, lifted up," and ultimately "very high" (52:13) and as one who didn't merely lose his life at the hands of brutal assailants but, despite appearances, "poured out himself to death," thus bearing the sins of many (53:12).

In sum, historians will see one kind of story as they piece together shards of information about the day Jesus died. Gospelers, looking back through the lens of the empty tomb in which Joseph and Nicodemus had laid Jesus, will see another.

Pastoral Reflection

"What is truth?" Pilate asked when he saw that his conversation with Jesus on the subject of power and authority had reached an impasse. This was no great philosophical question, at least not under the circumstances, but an expression of frustration from a powerful man who had just had a prisoner change the subject on him several times in quick succession. And yet, flawed and curious as it remains, hanging there seemingly unanswered in this day's drama, we never quite finish with Pilate's question, especially when we find ourselves among the stricken, smitten, and afflicted. What can life mean when *this* is what becomes of our bodies, our strength, our dreams, our careers, our marriages, and our families?

In the war of all against all that this world has become, sooner or later we all end up in the scene that comes after Pilate's question. We find ourselves crucified on some instrument of death, most likely one we have fashioned for ourselves, as our various life choices and sins finally catch up with us, and we are pinned helplessly, shamed and broken. Or perhaps we are innocent, like the man in the middle. We have done nothing to deserve the disease, the abuse, or the injustice that has nailed us or someone we love to a hospice bed or trashed our lives in some other way.

Either way, can any of us say at the inevitable end of our road that life is finished and complete, and not mean merely

that it's over? If one of our number should perish between tonight and Sunday morning, would we lay that one to rest lamenting how sad and tragic her passing, or would we say, "Hallelujah! She made it! Her life was complete"?

What is the truth of our existence? Who or what, if anything, is in control?

Of all the prophecies Jesus makes about himself and his work in John, one of the most underappreciated comes in those Last Supper discourses when Jesus tells his friends, "I go to prepare a place (τόπος) for you" (14:1–4). We think all too quickly that he means he must leave to get some "place" in the afterlife ready for our arrival. Maybe so, but Jesus has several other "places" he must go, ones we have visited again today, thanks to John's Gospel. Jesus went from that last meal to the "place" that Judas also knew (John 18:2), then to the place of judgment, called "the Pavement" (19:13), then to "The Place of the Skull" (19:17), and finally to the place where they laid his lifeless body (19:41).

Jesus has gone ahead to all such places also in our space and time so that he might prepare them, too. There he awaits our arrival, because each of us will come as well to all those places, as our bodies betray us, judgment rains down on us, death takes us, and finally loved ones, or perhaps strangers, quietly lay us in the earth. Tragic and chaotic as our lives may sometimes appear, there is no place we can ever end up except that even there, Jesus, the crucified, is Lord for us.

That is the truth. FAN

The Resurrection of Our Lord March 20, 2008

Acts 10:34–43
Jeremiah 31:1–6
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Colossians 3:1–4
Matthew 28:1–10 or John 20:1–18

First Reading

Psalm 118 and Jeremiah 31:1–6 call readers to join in song as God's people rise from the hopelessness of severe punishment to live again in the certain embrace of God's love. The new life Jeremiah describes has the look and sound of a wedding celebration. In order for the LORD to claim his bride, however, God must first build (בנה) the virgin Israel from the ruins of those who survived the sword. Perhaps Jeremiah has in his mind certain echoes of the creation story we know as Genesis 2, in which God builds (בנה) the first woman, quite specifically as a solution to the difficulty of loneliness in the creation, something God seems to understand long before humankind.

In Matthew, we have seen that Jesus rode two donkeys into Jerusalem (21:5–7) and that two Jesus figures play a part in the salvific character of Jesus' death (27:16–25). Now, two women named Mary become the first to learn of the new thing God has done, the first to see the risen Jesus, and the first to serve as the Risen One's witnesses. Upon their arrival at the tomb, these women first experience an earthquake, Matthew's second sign (cf. the first in 27:52–53 and its earlier echo in 21:10) that Jesus' death triggered the eschatological events prophesied in Zech 14:4–5, in which God will kick over the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem's graveyard, shoving it up against Mount Zion, thereby releasing from the tombs a proces-

sion of risen saints who come marching into the city. Of all the deaths that ever occurred, this one breaks the graveyard's power and accomplishes resurrection, Matthew teaches.

Like the women who find Jesus' tomb empty in Mark (16:1–8), the two Marys run away afraid, but also like the wise men in Matthew who visited the child Jesus (2:10), they depart with joy. Of all who encounter the risen Christ in any of the canonical Gospels' appearance stories, only these two have no misapprehensions or doubts about the one whom they see, touch, and talk with.

In John's complex empty-tomb scene, one Mary comes to the tomb alone. She will have her meeting with Jesus a bit later, after running a quick errand to alert Peter and that "other disciple." When Mary does meet up with her beloved, she mistakes him for someone else, a common feature of post–resurrection appearance stories in the canonical Gospels. Everyone but Matthew's two Marys can look directly at Jesus and not be certain about whom they see. This common element of the stories contributes to an important piece of teaching that all the Gospels had to offer in response to a hard question nagging the community in those early days. "So, you say this Jesus is risen from the dead. Well, where is he? And how can I see him?"

Answer: The risen Christ is with you—on the road, at the table, or lingering beside you as you grieve in the graveyard, only you may not perceive him.

What does it take to recognize him? Each Gospel has its answer. In John, Jesus himself takes the necessary step to conquer blindness that stems from fear, doubt, or sorrow. In Mary's case, Jesus speaks her name. Many see in that exchange a fulfillment of Jesus' self-prophecy about the genuine sheep of his flock who recognize his voice, follow him, and receive eternal life (10:27–28).

As for the two (Peter and the other disciple) whom Mary alerted to the opened, empty tomb, they play out roles they cannot escape throughout the last half of John's Gospel. They compete, this time in a footrace. Peter always loses, or finds himself one step removed from Jesus as compared to his rival. The same thing happens here. The other disciple not only arrives first at the tomb, he also believes first, even though Peter actually enters the tomb first and studies its abandoned grave clothes. Neither disciple yet knows the scriptures that will unlock this mystery, so they don't act on this experience. Jesus will have to seek them out, too, before any of this makes sense or changes the way they live.

Pastoral Reflection

Nothing here in the wilderness of tombs, where we wrap ourselves in grave clothes, can prepare us for the new life we have as people raised with Christ from death. Nothing except that new life itself, as it is lived by the risen one, the one whom death no longer holds but who never leaves the cemetery until we go with him, free of the fear and disbelief that keeps our hearts and minds tethered firmly to what Paul calls "earth" (Col 3:2).

We know death as intimately as we know our spouses, children, and all the dances we must do in death's strangely compelling company. Indeed, our lives revolve around keeping death at just the right distance from us and from our loved ones. Even our deepest loves would not have the desperately precious sweetness we find in them if we didn't know, somewhere deep within ourselves, that we have each other for such a short season—'til death do us part. We don't truly know love that isn't in large part a secret heartache.

So how can we set our minds on things above and beyond the realm of this tyrant,

death? We cannot, except the God who raised Jesus from the dead also picks us up, dead as doornails in trespasses and sins, drowned and cold as the River Jordan's muddy waters, and builds us, recreates us, makes us new. And not just once, but daily.

Preachers love these days to declare that the resurrection of Jesus was every bit as historical an event as the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. or Neil Armstrong's step upon the moon. With that assertion they seek to chase away the doubts sown by a tribe of entrepreneurial historicists who claim in one way or another to have found the historical Jesus, bones and all. Matthew would teach us, however, that a merely historical event would be too small. It might fascinate us, but it would not help us, or change our lives, any more than the resurrection of the dead boy whose life returned after Elijah's prayers (1 Kings 17:17–24).

Jesus' resurrection, just as his death, is an eschatological event, the Gospels and Paul teach us. Every life ever lived and every death ever died are gathered up in the darkness and in the last breath of Jesus at Golgotha. Every one of them and all of them together are present as well in light of the tomb we find empty today.

All of that is too much for our finite, mortal minds and hearts to grasp, however. So we sit by the tomb of our loved one, perhaps in anticipation of a death that hasn't even happened yet, and mourn, prisoners entombed in fear and sorrow. We have so much practice at that. But the one whose death knocked the hell out of the Mount of Olives won't leave you alone in that grief. Risen, he comes now in the body he has these days in space and time, the body you see here around you, dressed in the baptismal garments that are the clothing of the eschaton. He speaks your name, and you recognize him.

Notice, he doesn't say "Come with me." That was back in Galilee. Now he says "Go. Tell." What he does not explain, perhaps because he doesn't need to, is that when you do that, those who listen to you will see him. FAN

Second Sunday of Easter
30 Mar 2008

Acts 2:14a, 22–32
Psalm 16:1–11
1 Peter 1:3–9
John 20:19–31

First Reading
In Luke's rehearsal, Peter's sermon almost sounds like affirmation of Hellenistic ideas about the immortality of the soul and the ontological impossibility of death having its way with Jesus. But no, like David, who died and whose tomb is with us to this day, Jesus also died. The impossibility of death holding Jesus comes solely from the authority of God's promise, which David, Peter, and Luke trust enough to declare it also to us.

The audience of 1 Peter waits for the revealing of Jesus Christ, in whose resurrection this group of believers has hope. Like those of whom Jesus speaks at the end of this week's Gospel reading, they love and believe in Jesus even though they have not seen him. In the grammar of verses 8–9, believing, rejoicing with a joy beyond all telling, and salvation are all parts of the same thing, the "outcome" of faith (τὸ τέλος τῆς πίστεως).

John's risen Christ, apparently having ascended to the Father after meeting with Mary Magdalene (20:17), needs no keys or even doors to gain entry to spaces fear has locked down. He greets the disciples with the day's common greeting, "Shalom," but this is more than mere convention. Jesus

once again fulfills a self-prophecy. He had promised a peace the world cannot give to the fearful (John 14:26; 16:33), and now he grants it.

The disciples rejoice when they see Jesus, setting a pattern the readers of 1 Peter imitate in their own gatherings—but, in their case, without yet seeing Jesus.

This scene also includes John's version of Pentecost, as Jesus breathes on the disciples, sends them out as the Father had earlier sent him, and charges them to forgive sins. To understand the significance of being sent as Christ himself was sent, the reader must retrace this theme in John, beginning with the statement that God sent the Son into the world not that the world might be condemned but that it might be saved (3:17). Now, with the power to forgive, Jesus' disciples can begin the same work.

Thomas, called Δίδυμος, the Twin, didn't make the meeting. Since this gospel writer does not engage in the casual dropping of meaningless detail, it must mean something that the writer here reminds us that Thomas has a twin; many have sought to identify this twin. The most obvious twin is the reader, and any others who were not present when Jesus first came among the disciples, showed them his wrecked hands and rent side, and breathed on them, and who, because they missed all this, have said, "If only I could see and touch, I could believe."

Jesus does not refuse Thomas but comes to him as he had to Mary and the others, to offer what Thomas needs for believing. Significantly, the wounds on the body of Christ become the telling sign that prompts a confession of faith. Jesus hadn't merely beaten death somehow. These marks prove him the Lamb of God who took to his grave the sin of the world (19:34–36).

Jesus then teaches the lesson 1 Peter's readers have learned through experience, which the cast of characters in John 9 has demonstrated through their behavior. Seeing is not necessarily believing. Indeed, some see because they believe (11:40).

Pastoral Reflection

Thomas is our twin, and his story important, but we miss plenty if we get too hung up on his doubts. For one thing, doubt can serve faith. It surely is not faith's opposite. The more deadly alternative to faith, also on display in today's readings, is fear. Fear kept the disciples, minus Judas and Thomas, locked up and hiding on the occasion of Jesus' visit. It wouldn't have surprised us to find them huddled away on the immediately prior evening. With Jesus dead, their worst nightmares had come true. This, however, was a new day, begun and ended with amazing news. Jesus was risen!

Instead of rejoicing, the disciples shut themselves in a prison of fear. Perhaps they had good reason to fear a risen Jesus. They had abandoned, betrayed, and denied knowing him. When someone dies, our mutual faults and failings die with them. This time, someone they'd failed returned for a reckoning. How bitterly would he accuse them?

Most of us cultivate intimate, ongoing relationships with fear. Sometimes we fear things will never change; at other times we dread that they might. We protect ourselves from intruders large and small, known and unknown, real and imagined. If we risk honest introspection, we learn to fear ourselves as much as those outside.

Blocked entrances always become closed exits as well. When fear locks down a community, the only visitors allowed are its own ugly kinfolk—anger, despair, resentment, regret, cynicism, self-pity, and other wretchedly familiar ogres.

Death offers the only means of escaping a life sentence in a cell nailed shut by fear. Then, someone else carries you out.

Pathetic as this may seem, in the remarkable way of the gospel it is also the good news. Notice, in today's reading, the only one who freely comes and goes is the one who died. Fear and his dirty friends cannot restrain the one with those wrecked hands, whose clothes barely conceal a ripped-open torso.

Free of resentment and anger, he comes among his quaking, dispirited friends and speaks the familiar greeting, "Shalom! Peace to all of you." He does not mention their abandoning him, or denying they knew him. Instead, he breathes on them. In this way he keeps a host of promises to these friends, promises he'd made back on the other side of death. "I will come again," he said (14:3), and "you will see me" (14:18). "I will send to you the Advocate, the Spirit, by whose power you will do greater things than any of you has yet witnessed" (14:12–17). "I will give you peace, my peace—not like the peace the world can give, but the peace that surpasses all understanding" (14:27). "And when my joy is in you, your joy will be complete" (15:11).

In this very room, we, too, a bunch of lifers in fear's prison, have died and gained our freedom—in the waters of baptism. Among us, too, comes the one marked forever with the signs of crucifixion, to share that peace the world cannot give. Indeed, we may touch him, put our finger in his wounds, every time we gather as his body.

And now, like him, and like his quixotic friend Peter, we come and go. We come to die, we go out to live. Only through all that dying could we have the courage to stand with Peter, quoting David, saying, "I will not be shaken, and my heart is so glad I can scarcely express it." FAN

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Responses ***are welcome!***

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