Friday, July 11

Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino, died around 540

Benedict is known as the father of Western monasticism. He was educated in Rome but was appalled by the decline of life around him. He went to live as a hermit, and a community of monks came to gather around him. In the prologue of his rule for monasteries he wrote that his intent in drawing up his regulations was "to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome." It is that moderate spirit that characterizes his rule and the monastic communities that are formed by it. Benedict encourages a generous spirit of hospitality, saying that visitors to Benedictine communities are to be welcomed as Christ himself.

Saturday, July 12

Nathan Söderblom, Bishop of Uppsala, died 1931

In 1930, this Swedish theologian, ecumenist, and social activist received the Nobel Prize for peace. Söderblom (ZAY-der-blom) saw the value of the ancient worship of the church catholic and encouraged the liturgical movement. He also valued the work of liberal Protestant scholars and believed social action was a first step on the path toward a united Christianity. He organized the Universal Christian Council on Life and Work, one of the organizations that in 1948 came together to form the World Council of Churches.

July 13, 2014

Time after Pentecost — Lectionary 15

God's word is like the rain that waters the earth and brings forth vegetation. It is also like the sower who scatters seed indiscriminately. Our lives are like seeds sown in the earth. Even from what appears to be little, dormant, or dead, God promises a harvest. At the Lord's table we are fed with the bread of life, that we may bear fruit in the world.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word. By your Holy Spirit help us to receive it with joy, live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Gospel Acclamation

Alleluia. The word is very | near to you;* it is in your mouth and | in your heart. *Alleluia.* (Deut. 30:14)

Readings and Psalm

Isaiah 55:10-13

God's word to Israel's exiles is as sure and effective as never-failing precipitation. Their return to the Holy Land in a new exodus is cheered on by singing mountains and by trees that clap their hands.

Psalm 65:[1-8] 9-13

Your paths overflow with plenty. (Ps. 65:11)

Romans 8:1-11

There is no condemnation for those who live in Christ. God sent Christ to accomplish what the law was unable to do: condemn sin and free us from its slavery. The Spirit now empowers proper actions and values in our lives and gives us the promise of resurrected life.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In Matthew's gospel, both Jesus and his disciples "sow the seed" of God's word by proclaiming the good news that "the kingdom of heaven is near." Now, in a memorable parable, Jesus explains why this good news produces different results in those who hear.

Semicontinuous reading and psalm

Genesis 25:19-34

Although Jacob was younger than his twin, Esau, he eventually gets the birthright away from his brother. Jacob is portrayed in the Bible as deceptive, gripping his brother when he came out of the womb and driving a hard bargain by buying the birthright for a bowl of lentils.

Psalm 119:105-112

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light upon my path. (Ps. 119:105)

Preface Sundays

Color Green

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Strengthened by the Spirit who gives us words to speak and hearts that care, let us bring our hopes and needs to God who listens.

A brief silence.

Merciful God, you give your word to guide, correct, teach, and inspire. Draw us into your story, and give us wisdom, understanding, and obedient hearts as we follow your Son Jesus. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

The amazing cycle of birth, growth, and death sustains your creation. Bring forth an abundant harvest, keep farmers safe, and teach us to cherish life in all its forms and stages. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

In places of war, bring peace, and in places of hatred, sow love. Help world leaders set aside their prejudices, put down their weapons, and work together for the good of all people. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We live in a land of plenty, and still there are those without enough to eat. Give us generous hearts to those who are hungry. Bless the hands of those who work so that others might eat. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Raise up leaders for your church who will tend to your harvest. We lift up seminaries and church colleges, bishops and synod staffs, Lutheran World Relief and the Lutheran World Federation, as they live out their callings to serve. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Bless the memory of those who now worship at your eternal throne (*especially*) and bless those who worship in hopeful expectation of your eternal kingdom. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

We lift our prayers to you, God of mercy, confident that all things are in your hands. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Images in the Readings

Although seed was valuable, the **sower** strewed the seed widely. In Christian imagination, the sower is Christ, and also the preacher, and also every Christian spreading the good news to others.

Those who live in the Spirit bear good **fruit**, says Matthew. The imagery of plentiful growth recurs throughout the Bible and can alert us to the beauteous variety of plants and trees we humans can enjoy. In the vision of the heavenly city in the book of Revelation the tree of life can by itself produce twelve different fruits.

The **trees** are clapping their hands. The troublesome thorn is replaced by the medicinally useful evergreen cypress, identified as a tree used in the building of the temple. The briar has been replaced with myrtle, an aromatic evergreen used in the rituals of Sukkoth.

Ideas for the Day

- The artist Vincent Van Gogh did several paintings entitled *The Sower*, paying homage to the painting of the same subject by his contemporary, Jean-François Millet. Millet's work is dominated by a man, fulfilling the mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). Van Gogh's final painting is quite different. The human is balanced equally by a tree (a reference to Christ or the cross, perhaps) and a sun forming what looks like a halo around the sower's head (many images are online, for example, www.lifeofvangogh.com/theSower.html). Van Gogh's painting emphasizes our role in spreading the gospel (the sower's face is obscured, anonymous), and how we must work in cooperation with the creation to complete our mandate. At www.artway.eu (search for "Sowing the Seeds of Faith"), James Romaine offers a "painterly" analysis that many preachers would find helpful.
- The agrarian motif of today's gospel is a kind of foreign language to many of us. We do not live close to the land, and most of us have never grown our food from seed. To better understand the process you could speak to a farmer or gardener, or even have one participate in the worship service. These persons have unique insight into plant production and can freshen this well-known story. Questions you might ask: Why would the sower throw seed indiscriminately? How does root structure figure into the health of the plant, and do different plants need different soil depths? How do thorns choke a plant—are they quick and violent, or slow and insidious? What is in "good" soil?
- One chore of summer is to tend the garden and yank the weeds competing with the crops. Attention might be given to our receptivity to the greatest seed of all—the mighty word of God. What pathways in our hearts are trampled hard because of other traffic? What precious

words get picked off because of flighty thoughts and ravenous temptations? What seeds from God get wasted because we are petrified by worldly concerns and have never taken the time to let our hearts be plowed in readiness for the word to enter in? What initial germinations of God's word get scorched as soon as our life runs into a burning problem?

Connections with the Liturgy

In each Thanksgiving at the Table, we pray with Paul that the Spirit of God come to dwell among us: with your Word and Holy Spirit to bless us; Holy God, we long for your Spirit; Come, Holy Spirit; pour out upon us the Spirit of your love; send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, whose breath revives us for life; Come, Spirit of freedom!; we pray for the gift of your Spirit, in our gathering, within this meal, among your people; the life of the Spirit of our risen Savior, to establish our faith in truth; Come, Holy Spirit.

Let the Children Come

On July 11 (just two days ago) the church calendar commemorates Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino. Benedictine men and women who follow Benedict's Rule for monasteries find life in the practice of hospitality. They welcome strangers as if they were welcoming Christ himself. How does your congregation welcome children in worship? Are they seen as interruptions? Are they shown ways they can be welcoming to others?

Assembly Song

Gathering

What is this place ELW 524
God, who stretched the spangled heavens ELW 771, LBW 463
Joyous light of heavenly glory ELW 561

Psalmody

Hopson, Hal H. "Psalm 65" from TP.
Long, Larry J. "Psalm 65," Refrain 1, from PSCY.
Makeever, Ray. "Psalm 65:[1-8] 9-13" from PWA.
Shepperd, Mark. "Psalm 119:105-112" from PWA.

Hymn of the Day

Lord, let my heart be good soil ELW 512, W&P 52 *GOOD SOIL*
Have you thanked the Lord? ELW 829, TFF 270 *LAMOTTA*
God, whose farm is all creation ELW 734 *HARVEST GIFTS*

Offering

Accept, O Lord, the gifts we bring ELW 691, WOV 759
For the fruit of all creation ELW 679, WOV 760
Lord, your hands have formed ELW 554, WOV 727

Communion

This is my Father's world ELW 824, LBW 554
Many and great, O God ELW 837, WOV 794
On what has now been sown ELW 550, LBW 261

Sending

Sent forth by God's blessing ELW 547, LBW 221
We plow the fields and scatter ELW 680/681, LLC 492

Additional Assembly Songs

The trees of the field W&P 138
The thirsty fields drink in the rain WOV 714
Young-Soo, Nah. Korea. "Look and Learn" from *Sent by the Lord: Songs of the World Church, Vol 2*. U. GIA G-3740.
Crowder, David. "I Need Words" from CCLI.
Fielding, Ben. "Kingdom Come" from CCLI.
Ligertwood, Brooke. "Desert Song" from WT.
McDonald, Shawn. "Rise" from CCLI.
Morgan, Reuben. "This Is How We Overcome" from CCLI.
Smith, Martin/Stuart Garrard. "Rain Down" from CCLI.

Music for the Day

Choral

Fedak, Alfred. "This Touch of Love." MH solo, org. MSM 40-830.
Haydn, Franz Joseph. "How Marvelous Is the Power of God." High voice solo, kybd. ECS 1.1914.
Helgen, John. "Spirit of God, Descend." SATB, kybd, cello. AFP 9780800676377.
Schalk, Carl. "Thy Word Is like a Garden, Lord." U, org, fl. CG CGA1089.
Scott, K. Lee. "Gracious Spirit, Dwell with Me." 2 pt, org. AFP 9780800646134.

Children's Choir

Dauermann, Stuart. "The Trees of the Field." LS 109.
Roff, Joseph. "Breathe in Me, O Holy Spirit." U, 2 pt, kybd. CPH 98-2993.
Schalk, Carl. "Thy Word Is like a Garden." U, org, fl. CG CGA1089.

Keyboard / Instrumental

Albrecht, Mark. "Good Soil" from *Timeless Tunes for Piano and Solo Instrument, Volume 3*. Inst, kybd. AFP 9780800675035.
Ferguson, John. "For the Beauty of the Earth" from *A Thanksgiving Triptych*. Org. MSM 10-603.
Leavitt, John. "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" from *A Mighty Fortress: Sacred Reflections for Piano*. Pno. CPH 97-7254.
Wold, Wayne. "Liebster Jesu" from *Augsburg Organ Library: Baptism and Holy Communion*. Org. AFP 9780800623555.

= global song
= praise song
= relates to hymn of the day

PROPER 10 (SUNDAY BETWEEN JULY 10 AND JULY 16 INCLUSIVE)

Isaiah 55:10-13

10For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

12For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
13Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Theological Perspective

Any clear vision of the future starts with hope. Pentecost is a story about hope. Now some weeks after Pentecost, to think and imagine new possibilities beyond our present circumstances remains a challenge to most mainline churches in the United States. Often the excitement of Pentecost is defused when we are faced with the complexity of life circumstances. Hope must be more than a mountaintop experience with the Spirit. It must be grounded in the concrete realities of both heaven and earth. This passage in Second Isaiah reflects an understanding of hope inspired by moments of transcendence in the context of everyday struggles of human existence.

The chapter starts with a hopeful invitation. YHWH's claim that "my ways are higher than your ways" (v. 9) is not a put-down to humans, but a challenge to look up. Hope not rooted in the concrete realities of the moment often leads to even deeper despair. However, the invitation in this text bases hope on a theological reality that is grounded in creation itself.

Although Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," Isaiah sees the evidence of God's faithfulness in the rhythmic nature of creation. Although YHWH's ways and thoughts are higher than the earth, things high will come down, just as

Pastoral Perspective

According to the prophet Isaiah, God's word is never shared without a good purpose; good is designed into everything. Events come together to bring completion and wholeness to our story of life, to attach meaning and lasting significance to it, even when we cannot see them coming. Recognizing the varied ways that life comes full circle—that the purpose for which we have been designed is accomplished—is a real gift to be cherished.

I am often struck by stories of faith I hear in my follow-up contacts with those who come to visit our church. I enjoy these follow-ups, which sometimes happen on the phone and sometimes over coffee. A comment shared by a recent visitor was noteworthy on its own, but has even more impact when viewed from Isaiah's perspective.

When I had lunch with the chief of heart failure and transplantation at a local major medical center, who with his family had made a first-time visit to our church, we dove conversationally into the meat of the matter. He shared his conviction that there is more than just a natural rhythm built into life, more than just karma, more than "what goes around, comes around." Through years of hands-on experience in dozens of life-and-death situations, he affirmed the good and redemptive purpose at work in life, even in the loss of life.

Exegetical Perspective

The invitation that opens chapter 55 of Isaiah continues in verse 10. The first words of the chapter call the thirsty and hungry to find water and food in abundant supply. The language of verse 10 identifies the word of God as a source of abundant water and food for the entire earth. The images of fertility, abundance, and prosperity accompany a note of exuberance to make this passage characteristic of the tone of Second Isaiah. Rain and snow water the earth in excess, generating a chain of production that ends in the doubled elements of seed and bread. A notable number of paired elements—rain and snow, bring forth and sprout, seed and bread, the sower and the eater—populates verse 10. This number heightens the sense of abundance that marks the opening and close of the chapter.

The passage (vv. 10–13) provides descriptions, convictions, and appeals about the word of God that tie it intricately into creation, nature, and human livelihood. The processes of the water cycle, of agricultural life, and of daily living find their referent in the word of God. While the author builds comparisons based upon these elements, the word of God also transcends the limitations of these elements.

We find a preliminary understanding of the water cycle here that sees precipitation returning from the earth to the skies. However, not all precipitation is

Homiletical Perspective

Must we mean what we say? Must we say what we mean? Is there a connection between saying and doing so essential that if this link is broken, a community will not survive? If this bond that binds human language and action together is destroyed, integrity and authentic relationship disappear. Our failure to trust God as Word is directly connected to our failure to stand by our own words. Truly prophetic speech is marked by this distinction: the Word "shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (v. 11).

Wendell Berry reminds us of the life-giving links between our life and our language in his book *Standing by Words.* Words lose their meaning when they are reduced to utilitarian ends, and promises made to be broken cannot serve as a means of grace.[1] If baptismal vows are pro forma, the prayers seem empty, the sermons contrived. If religious expression becomes indentured to institutional control, truth is eviscerated. Experience has a structure that is prior to language. but a dysfunctional relationship between language and action infects individual and communal integrity. When holy human dialogue is reduced to a means of crowd control,

1. Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words: Essays* (1983; repr., Berkeley, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

Theological Perspective

rain and snow come down upon the earth to nourish it back to health.

The natural cycle of creation is not a simple mechanical process that occurs automatically. The God pictured here is not a deist's distant watchmaker who simply winds the clock and allows it to run independently. Nor is this a God who can only respond out of the natural design of the created order. Isaiah's portrait is of a God who loves and cares about the people and is passionately involved with creation. The sources of hope are extensions of the Divine's personal involvement. God's word is not some benign cerebral exercise. The correlation to the metaphor is the promise that creative acts by "my word" will continue to "accomplish that which I purpose" (v. 11). YHWH's word is faithful, purposeful, and personal. A relationship of trust is established based on the trustworthiness of God's word, the same word present in the very act of creation.

Speaking to an exile people does present its own set of unique challenges. How do you inspire hope in a people who have been living under the governmental controls of a foreign nation? This is particularly problematic when living in exile becomes the new social and political norm. I often experience this problem when preaching in post–civil rights middle-class African American congregations. Although many will admit that there is still a problem in our communities, defining it has become increasingly elusive.

Once proclamation of hope can be nuanced by the context, celebrations occur as a natural response to the new life with God. Not only is there an up-and-down dimension to God's activity, but also a back-and-forth movement. The move back to the homeland out of exile will involve "going out" of captivity in order to be "be led back" to the land of promise.

Walter Brueggemann comments, "This is a homecoming, but not to the old city, to a home, an urban home, a city as a true home."[1] However, the celebrative activity of creation starts with this movement toward hope, demonstrated in Isaiah with the singing and clapping of hands by the mountains and the trees (v. 12). This is like the dynamics of many African American worship experiences, where celebration of the activity of God among the people is essential and there is no celebration of the heart alone; worship must also include a physical demonstration of the human involvement in God's

1. Walter Brueggemann, "The City in Biblical Perspective: Failed and Possible," *Word and World* 14, no. 3 (1999): 248.

Pastoral Perspective

Quickly switching metaphors, he used a sports analogy from the baseball diamond to share another way of looking at this point of view with the indisputable statement that "God always bats last." The good doctor had just emerged from a session with a family who had lost a loved one but who were nonetheless immensely grateful for the caring and attentiveness provided by all the hospital staff.

For this man, it was clear that the loved one had lived a good life, had "fought the good fight" (2 Tim. 4:7), and had been given the gift of willingness during his wait for a heart transplant to return to the One who made him. This was not the first time the physician had encountered a family with this experience, nor did he expect it to be the last. So he observed that life does not return empty to those left in loss, but becomes deeper and richer through the prism of memory blessed with mercy.

At a church I served in the mountains of North Carolina, there was a columbarium up a hill behind the sanctuary. The congregation consisted predominantly of retirees, and funerals occured with some regularity. It was our practice to perform the inurnment with a small group of family and friends thirty minutes before the larger Celebration of the Resurrection held in the sanctuary. The columbarium was a well-designed structure providing a striking view of the Blue Ridge just above the walls, with the mountains silently affirming the human life being celebrated, the mountain laurel and dogwood trees bowing approval at the passing of one worldly life on its way nearer to heaven.

Some of the most memorable moments I shared in memorial services took place under the open sky at that columbarium. With plenty of branches hanging overhead, a service in the autumn would bring a small harvest of acorns to be used as illustrations for the grandchildren. I would find the nearly perfect acorn, partially buried in the dirt underneath the laurel, with a small bud beginning to burst from its shell. As I held it up for a grandchild to see and later to take home, it was easy to illustrate that God never leaves life empty, that God's purposes are always fulfilled, even through dying. All it takes is a seed for God to use to create a new and better form of life.

In the ancient Celtic mission, from the fourth through the seventh centuries, the pattern for worship was to gather around high-standing crosses underneath the open sky. The earth itself was the sanctuary of God, which included all things.[1] I have

1. J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). 110.

Exegetical Perspective

sufficient to generate productive growth. Similarly, variable occurrences of precipitation can place harvests and human survival in jeopardy. The comparisons serve on one level as a contrast between the variable productivity of natural processes and the dependability of the word of God. On another level, the comparisons call attention to the current time as a season of abundance. In a context of limited precipitation, occurrences of rain and snow feel like a time of surplus.

Second Isaiah declares confidently that God's word will never experience drought or scarcity (cf. Amos 8:11). In fact, in this passage the word of God appears to undo drought conditions that yield only scrublike vegetation (v. 13). Equally, the declaration that God's word never fails (40:8) is revisited here. This adds to the growing descriptions of the word of God throughout Second Isaiah: creative (51:16), prophetic (44:26, cf. 46:10–11; 48:15), bringing justice (45:13), teaching (50:4, cf. 42:16), revealing God's voice (52:6), public (45:19; 48:16).[1]

The vivid descriptions add to the appeal of the invitation in verse 1. God's word not only provides abundance and fertility; it makes things happen. In the same way that precipitation sets off a chain of events, when God's word goes forth, it produces God's intended effect. Three clear statements in verse 11 describe both the relationship between the word and God, called here *devari* ("my word"), and the effects of the word. The word goes out from God's mouth, returns to God, and accomplishes God's purpose and intent. Each phrase of the verse builds from the previous one, culminating in "success" in God's sending. The concerns here appear to be with more than just speech or the content of speech. The word of God consists not merely in speech, but in results, impacts, outcomes, and transformations. Claus Westermann offers, "God's word is a word that does things. When God speaks, something comes about."[2]

The descriptions of the nature of God's word in verses 10–11 provide the framework for the proof of these assertions, as well as a further invitation to live in the abundance of the word of God. The audience for the passage appears to be both specific and general. The unidentified hearers in the chapter can belong to the audience to whom Second Isaiah offers the promise of restoration and return after their deportation to Babylon. Consequently, the action of

1. Klaus Blatzer, *Deutero Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 483.
2. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 289.

Homiletical Perspective

the beloved community suffers from a drought of revelation.

Fragmentation of community follows a collapse of the understanding of covenant. Even the natural order fails to thrive if there is a radical disconnection between a promise made and a promise kept. It is precisely here in the wasteland that the prophet/poet of exile plants a vision of paradise. The cosmic, organic, and historic converge in the closing verses of the revelation, convicted of the potency of the Word that calls all of creation into completion. Paradise is summoned, called into being by the Word that creates, redeems, and sustains creation. Zion is now a witness to peace, not a prisoner of war. God's beloved community is surrounded by a land that will receive healing as well. The cypress replaces thorns, and myrtle takes the place of briers.

This closing vision is central to the Servant's experience of divine presence. Here the Word is working just as the One who is the First and the Last intends. Organic and seasonal images are linked to generative human cycles, and all are held in holy relationship. The parabolic and prophetic nature of this Word spans the limits of human time and culture. Ordinary words and actions take on a sense of mystery in the presence of the Word. This affirmation of eternity is rooted in the earth; there is an attachment to the particularity of a place known as "the promised land." This communal hunger for a place, this inherited homesickness is rarely generated by generalized space, but is evoked by memories for a specific landscape known by heart.

Is this place, this homeland, this notion of a space preserved by the promise of God, essential to the nature of that God? Must God have a holy land in order to be a Holy God? Those who believed that Judah could not be defeated had fused the identities of nation and God. The Babylonian shattering of national identity raised traumatic questions about the promised return. While the social and political implications of the fall of Babylon and the coming of Cyrus are configured in this prophecy, the songs of the singer reveal a God who will transfigure the broken dreams of a nation into the healing of all nations.

Such a longing will outlast any one life span, and the prophet of the exile summons that memory in an effort to turn the hearts of the exiles back to the God who will not abandon them. It requires patience, discipline, hope, and a willingness to forgive those who refuse to listen. Such a lonely work can be fueled only by love, a love for a particular

Isaiah 55:10-13

Theological Perspective

liberation. As Paul Hanson notes, "ultimately salvation is God's accomplishment, to which humans beings need only open their hearts with rejoicing and their voices with songs."[2]

We in the black church are not celebrating just for celebration's sake. Nor is our worship merely a moment of emotional catharsis. As indicated in the prophetic claims of Isaiah, our hope is grounded in real observable change. Just as seasons are recognized by the changing colors of the leaves, the people of God will know that their lives have been restored when thorns have been replaced by the cypress, the brier by the myrtle. Liberation means change that is concrete and discernible. As in the parable in Luke 5:37–38, where Jesus says that "new wine" put in "old wineskins" will spill to the ground, likewise, the hopes and dreams of a better way often can be realized only through such physical and visible transformation.

Change serves another purpose besides cosmetic or structural transformation. It serves as a reminder of where we came from, in hopes that we never make the same mistakes again. So Isaiah offers an interesting theological perspective when he writes, "it shall be to the LORD for a memorial" (v. 13). Does God have trouble remembering? Is the need for a memorial (such as the rainbow in Gen. 9:13) an indication that God may not remember the promise?

This is the difficulty with metaphors and personifications of natural objects. Do we push their symbolism too far in the direction of realism? I say no. In this instance, the memorial functions as more than a marker for accountability. It is not only a sign to assure humanity that their exile will not happen again; it is also a commitment by God to the people, whether they are in exile or at home, to be an abiding presence among them. That is real hope.

JOHN L. THOMAS JR.

2. Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66*, Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 182.

Pastoral Perspective

often thought how different it can be when worship is outdoors. God and God's creation are bound together in an inextricable, delicate way. It is the deepest promise from which good news is possible.

In the realm of human relationships, the need for a sense of purpose is nowhere made plainer than in the writings of Victor Frankl, whose essays on WWII concentration-camp survivors speak to the power of trusting in the purpose for which we were made. Quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, Frankl writes, "He [*sic*] who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*." Then he goes on to say, "Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no more point in carrying on. He was soon lost."[2]

It is true consolation that we are made by a loving and compassionate God, and thus in our very being have a purpose for living—to reflect God's love and care in every breath we share. Although we live on this side of the veil of heaven and can often see only pain and loss, we do not see all that there is in creation. God has a purpose and an end for us greater and more glorious than we can begin to imagine.

Spring does not just arrive because the earth's axis tilts toward the sun. The warmth of God's presence arrives because God turns toward us in love. Forgiveness arrives because of the wideness of God's mercy. Joy arrives because we see a glimmer of our new life in God in our own. As Isaiah proclaimed so long ago, the word that goes out from the mouth of the Lord will not return empty, but shall accomplish its purpose and succeed in just the thing for which it was sent.

THOMAS W. BLAIR

2. Victor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square, 1963), 97. Nietzsche's words can be found in *The Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 12.

Exegetical Perspective

going out in joy (v. 12) reflects the image of the second exodus prevalent in Second Isaiah. In journeying back to their homeland, they will experience full proof of the efficacy of God's word.

In fact, their movement will embody the power of the word of God. The comparisons with precipitation from verse 10 continue in verse 12. This time the movement of people sets off a chain reaction that animates nature into singing and clapping, in the same way that precipitation leads to the activity of sowing and eating. Precipitation causes actions of the hands and the mouths of the sower and the eater; the movement of the people generates singing and clapping.

Precipitation causes vegetation to sprout; so too, the movement of the people leads to more lush vegetation (v. 13). As precipitation serves as a point of comparison for the word of God, the return of the deportees illustrates the efficacy of the word of God. In this way the assertions of verses 10–11 function doubly as evidence and invitation to live in the word of God.

The unidentified hearers can also be the general audience called upon to witness the efficacy of the word of God, experiencing it and functioning like it. Just as the word of God "goes out" (v. 11), so too the hearers "go out" (v. 12). As God anticipates the word to "return" successfully, so too the hearers are "led back" in *shalom* ("peace, success, prosperity," v. 12). As God's word produces its desired effect, so too the exit of the hearers results in the determined impact. The hearers do not effect the monumental and long-lasting transformations in nature (vv. 12–13); these occur as decreed.

The unidentified audience serves as a divine instrument in the same way the word functions as a divine instrument. These hearers embody the word of God in the world, and through them God speaks transformation to the world. They in turn witness to the power of God. Their presence speaks of a God whose word brings creation into being, sustains it, and transforms it. Their presence also speaks to a God who intervenes in history. A real, live audience testifies that they have seen the effect the word of God has in the world.

STEED VERNYL DAVIDSON

Homiletical Perspective

people who are in danger of forgetting who and whose they are. The clearest sense of identity we have of this late-sixth-century prophet, Isaiah of Babylon, can be found in the Latin phrase *anima quaerens verbum*, a soul in search of the Word. He—or perhaps she (there is little textual evidence to establish the personal identity of this prophet)—dedicates his or her life in service to the Word, the Holy One. A community in captivity to a dominant culture suffers from the erosion of their social purposes and carries the burden of religious desire that is alien to the empire.

As the focus of the Servant's revelation shifts from survival to preparation for homecoming, the everyday language of daily and domestic things gives way to a lyric vision that resonates beyond time and beyond human understanding. A dream of ordinary speech communicates a revelation that surpasses ordinary life through extraordinary experience. The Servant's first question, "What shall I cry?"(40:6), is answered in the closing. In the end is the beginning: "The word of our God will stand forever" (40:8).

Which word is that? What of the promise to David? What good is the covenant of peace to those struggling to survive the wars of Rome, or the Inquisition, or the Third Reich, or the current struggles of the West Bank and Gaza? Has the promise of homecoming and healing been sealed inside one nation, one border, one people? Where can we find the evidence for the Word that stands forever in this time and place?

Could it be we find it in these songs of an unknown Servant that preserve holy visions in the midst of human failure? These promises are remembered for generations after the community of this Servant returns from Babylon. How else can we explain how the songs of an unnamed singer from a marginal community survive the terrors of history and cultural amnesia of the world's great civilizations? Is the text sacred only because it survived, or is its survival actually the everlasting sign? God means what God says. The Word engages the world through the language and life of the prophets and the people of God again and again. Then the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us.

HEATHER MURRAY ELKINS

Psalm 65:(1-8) 9-13

[1]Praise is due to you,
O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed,
[2] O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come.
[3]When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,
you forgive our transgressions.
[4]Happy are those whom you choose and bring near
to live in your courts.
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
your holy temple.

[5]By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,
O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.
[6]By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

Theological Perspective

This psalm of praise focuses on God's sustaining involvement in the world. That is to say, the psalm assumes from the outset that the Judeo-Christian God is not a distant creator who made the world, set it spinning, and then departed, like the deist notion of a watchmaker who winds up the watch and continues to exist only at far remove. Rather, God is an intimate creator who continues to live in close relationship to that which God has created. God is transcendent—beyond creation, not of creation—yet God is immanent, immersed in the nitty-gritty, everyday ups and downs of life.

Such ups and downs range from the vicissitudes of human experience to the contours of the landscape that surrounds us. Whereas the first half of the psalm focuses on God's sustaining involvement with people—their needs and their deeds—the second half focuses on God's sustaining involvement with the environment. God is in the city, and God is in the country. The muddle of politics and the grandeur of nature are both the realm of God.

Here we focus on the second half of the psalm, an awe-inspiring picture of bucolic beauty and fecundity. We find "lingering, intense, sensuous portraits"[1] of rain and of grain. Both are the gift of God, even

1. John Goldingay, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 2:280.

Pastoral Perspective

Whenever I wonder *whether or not God understands* the human struggle, I read a psalm. The description of the human condition in the psalms is astonishingly honest and accurate. If we think we need to keep secrets from God to be loved, the psalms remind us that God knows us better than we know ourselves and still loves us. The psalmist assures us that "when deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, [God] forgives our transgressions" (v. 3).

Whenever I wonder *what God is doing* in the world or even if God is active in the world, I read a psalm. In particular, the psalms of lament presume that if we can get God's attention to our suffering and pain, God will act and things will be better. "By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation" (v. 5a). At the heart of Israel's faith is the conviction that all life is sustained by God's breathing.

Whenever I wonder *how God is active in the world*, I read a psalm. In Psalm 65, we are given vivid pictures of God's creative care as the one who silences the seas (v. 7), waters the earth (v. 9), softens it with rain (v. 10), and provides (lit. "makes arrangements for") grain (v. 9) for the people. According to the psalmist, God has "made arrangements" so that all creation has what it needs to continue.

7You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.
8Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

9You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
10You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.
11You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
12The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
13the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Exegetical Perspective

This psalm is composed of three units, which are occupied with communal "praise that is due God" (v. 1). God is praised, first, for activity in the temple, particularly answering prayers and accepting vows (vv. 1–4 or 5). God is praised, second, for activity in creation, particularly for establishing mountains and quieting seas (vv. 4 or 5–8). God is praised, third, for the activity of giving the land of Israel torrents of rain (vv. 9–13).

Although the psalm can be divided neatly into three sections, what the psalmist does so well is to eschew tidy partitions of thought. Through lovely and imaginative poetry, the psalmist tends rather to bridge worlds that might otherwise remain separate. In our time, when efficiency demands compartmentalization, when science is set over against religion, when spirituality is contrasted with materialism, the psalmist offers a fresh perspective by embracing instead a holistic vision: (1) of God, (2) of humankind, and (3) of reality as a whole.

God. This psalm begins with an approachable God who forgives sins—even the overwhelming sorts of transgression that beset the community (v. 3)—and accepts their vows. God, however, is no pushover, a spineless dispenser of forgiveness in response to prayer and vows. The God who forgives (vv. 1–4) is

Homiletical Perspective

Preaching Psalm 65 is no easy task, because the psalm is messy. As the opening line makes clear, it is a psalm of praise, but the praise is offered for a number of reasons, not all of which are clearly related (for instance, forgiveness of sins, creation, and harvest). Many commentators argue that the psalm has three movements, delineated by the three appearances of the name of God in verses 1, 5, and 9—the first focusing on the temple, the second on the world, and the third on the fields. In truth, language and imagery overlap these divisions in ways that do not work together in some obvious strategy. It is a messy psalm, but then again praise is not always orderly, rational, and rhetorically well-structured. Just think of the flow of joys and concerns in many worship services.

Noting this messiness is not to imply that the psalm cannot be preached well. It simply means that the preacher must find a way into the text, a way to offer the text to the congregation that differs from an expository, line-by-line approach. To preach the messy flow of the text will lead to a messy sermon. The inroad will likely be one of two approaches: the preacher can either focus the sermon on the *experience* of praise represented in the psalm, or choose an *image* in the psalm as the anchor for the sermon.

Before we consider these two options, it is important to note that the psalm ends with, climaxes with,

Psalm 65:(1-8) 9-13

Theological Perspective

though it is the first portrait (vv. 9–10) that stresses God's vital role as the continuous actor and agent. God is the subject of nine consecutive verbs. It is God who visits, waters, enriches, provides, prepares, waters, settles, softens, and blesses.

In the second portrait (vv. 12–13), God is assumed as the creator, but it is the elements of that creation—the pastures, the hills, the meadows and the valleys—that are the subjects. They overflow, gird themselves, clothe themselves, and deck themselves so as to shout and sing together for joy. To whom do they do this? To God, their creator, of course.

Like the preface of a book that describes the one "without whom" the book could not be, so here the green fertile fields of God's creation attribute their harvest not to their good soil or their own fruitfulness, but to God's generosity. Here is vivid fulfillment of what Isaiah predicts: "the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isa. 55:12). Their song is a psalm of praise to their creator.

The theological claim is simple and staggering. It is God's unprompted generosity and power that has caused creation to be and that continues to bring forth fruit. Here is creation theology at its best. The reality, however, is that the contemporary appropriation of creation has too often focused on the created rather than the creator—not least in debate about the means of creation.

Western theology owes much to the Celts for an appreciation of creation, especially in the context of worship; yet the West has been resistant to Celtic spiritual influence and creation theology more generally. It has been wary of pantheism, whereby God and nature are reduced to one another, as if creator and creation are equivalent (thus "Mother Nature"). Verses 12–13 stand counter to any pantheistic assumptions: meadows, hills, and valleys are glad to acknowledge their maker.

In one sense, the psalm's conclusion suggests that nature sets an example for humanity. Just as Isaiah's prophetic use of creation imagery serves to remind the exiles of God's ex nihilo capacity for newness (Isa. 40–55), so here, as elsewhere in the Psalms, creation imagery is invoked to guarantee the social order (e.g., Pss. 74, 77, 89). If God can bring the cosmic order into being, God can certainly restore human beings who stumble. In the second half of this psalm, the cycle of renewal in creation—from drought to rain, from winter to summer, from seed to harvest—provides the inspiration for

Pastoral Perspective

Whenever I wonder *why I should be grateful,* I read a psalm. Psalms that give thanks and praise for the abundance of God's gifts through creation remind us again and again that God's care is not limited by human need or even determined by what we request. As creator, God established the order in the universe, setting up the mountains and triumphing over chaotic cosmic waters. However, God is not only the creator of the world. God is the one who sustains the life brought forth.

Psalm 65 is a communal prayer of thanksgiving for God's awesome deeds of creation and salvation. God is pictured as one who acts as both creator and savior. As portrayed in this psalm, these two roles are not distinct from one another. Just as God stills the roaring of unruly waters, so God quells the tumult of warring peoples. Thus it is the creator God who has acted as savior. These marvels are acclaimed from east to west, from horizon to horizon—in other words, throughout the entire world.

The psalmist speaks in the name of the entire community and proclaims its gratitude to God for the abundance of creation. Chief among these blessings are the magnificent order and splendor of the universe, social harmony, and the fertility of the land. The water that was originally destructive is now manageable and life giving. This is the water that makes the land abundantly fertile. The psalmist uses vivid metaphors to represent this fertility. It is a vision of such abundance that even the "wagon tracks overflow with richness" (v. 11) because of what falls from the wagons. God's creation is full of bounty.

The psalmist's praise of God's activity in arranging the bounty of creation does not, however, fit the experience of everyone. Those who are without food in drought-stricken parts of the earth have difficulty acknowledging that God sustains the earth from rivers full of water. People whose lives were forever altered by the tsumani or rising tides from Hurricane Katrina are not likely to believe readily that God has tamed the roaring waters. Some people have seen only dry wagon tracks that resemble rocky gullies. As rivers flood and meadows burn, it would seem that God's arrangements of nature have failed. God seems absent. The sustaining, creative activity of God in the world is so hidden and so mysterious that it can be described only indirectly.

Even when the psalmist complains fiercely about God's neglect, the promise remains that God's absence is never permanent. The theological tenet of omnipresence is intended to declare that God is never absent—even though God may seem to be

an awesome God. The phrase "awesome deeds" (v. 5), which marks the transition between the forgiving God of the temple (vv. 1–4) and the powerful God who creates mountains and stills seas (vv. 6–8), is a dramatic term that evokes extraordinary actions. It conveys the "dread deeds" of God, who defends the right of the oppressed and sends arrows into the enemy of Israel's king (Ps. 45:4–5); God's liberating acts at the Red Sea (Ps. 106:22); the knitting of a child in its mother's womb (Ps. 139:13); and actions so awesome and unexpected that "the mountains quaked at your presence" (Isa. 64:3). The God who hears prayer and forgives sin and accepts vows in Psalm 65 is no wimpy God, but a God whose deeds could be turned to war, to the drama of liberation, to the miracle of birth, to actions that cause mountains to quake in awe.

Then there is something more in this psalm: this God cares about simple needs; this God sends rain. This is, in short, a practical God who responds to basic human need. Forgiving, accepting vows, and answering prayer—this is important. Creating the mountains and stilling the seas—awesome activities—these are important. So are the simple matters of grain in the pastures and flocks in the meadows. These need their rain, and this awesome and forgiving God gives it, and profusely so.

Humankind. The psalmist also refuses to divide humankind into insiders and outsiders, faithful and reprobate. This refusal is noteworthy because this psalm locates God in the temple: "We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple" (v. 4). The psalmist even underscores this belief with a proverb containing two key verbs that depict election: "Blessed [NRSV "Happy"] are those whom you *choose* and *bring near* to live in your courts" (65:4).

Rather than allowing this conviction to lead to a condemnation of outlying nations that threaten the well-being of this house, the psalmist welcomes those from earth's farthest coasts to the temple. To the God who answers prayer "all flesh shall come" (v. 2). The God who delivers with awesome deed is "the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas" (v. 5). Even the rain is not limited to Israel but is a sign that God visits "the earth" (v. 9). Therefore, despite a deep conviction that God dwells in the temple, that God has chosen Israel and brought it near, the psalmist refuses to exclude others, to mark them as outsiders. The psalmist joins at the hip a profound conviction that God dwells at the center of

praise for a bountiful harvest. In today's urbanized world, many of us are distant from plowing, planting, and reaping. We give thanks before a meal for food we have touched only at the very end of the production process. This is simply to acknowledge that whatever approaches preachers follow, urban and suburban congregations will have more steps to take to identify with the language and imagery of Psalm 65 than will rural ones.

First, the experience of praise in Psalm 65 is less one of "counting our many blessings" and more one of giving thanks for the one who blesses us in myriad ways. God is the one who answers prayers (v. 2), who forgives us (v. 3), who calls us into communion in worship (v. 4), who delivers us and is the hope of all (v. 5), who created the world and provides for its continued orderliness (vv. 6–8), who waters the earth that it might produce flocks and grain (vv. 9–13). In other words, Psalm 65 invites preachers and congregations to reflect on the character of God—known through God's creative, providential, and salvific interaction with the world—and invites this reflection to lead to a posture and life of praise and thanksgiving.

Second, the final movement of Psalm 65 (vv. 9–13, on which the lectionary focuses our attention) is dominated by water imagery. Indeed the lectionary chose this psalm because this imagery echoes the references to rain and snow watering the earth in the Isaiah reading for the day (55:10). However, the imagery functions differently in Isaiah 55 and Psalm 65. In Isaiah the image of rain and snow not returning to heaven until they have watered the earth and brought forth produce is a metaphor for the claim that God's word will not return empty, will not return until it has fulfilled God's purpose. In Psalm 65:9–13, by contrast, the water imagery is about water—literally. The psalmist praises God for the way God provides hydration for the earth and thus provides sustenance for God's people.

This literal reference to water in the psalm invites preachers in our day to engage their congregations in an eco-theological conversation. Does the way we care for stream and rivers, lakes and oceans, look as if we are praising God for the gift of water? How about the fact that our air pollution creates acid rain and snow? What about the way our poor care for the earth is changing climatic patterns and damaging the water cycle? Preachers who follow this line of thought must take care not simply to name the ways we have failed to praise God in our relationship to the waters of the earth, but must offer a constructive

Psalm 65:(1-8) 9-13

Theological Perspective

understanding God's ongoing work of restoration and re-creation in the first half of the psalm.

The psalm is certainly designed to inspire and to bring us, like the meadows and valleys, to shout and sing, to pause and wonder—not just at the marvel of creation, but at the first cause behind creation: God, the creator. This rhetoric is a challenge to our modern sensibilities. On the one hand, science is assumed to explain nature; thus secondary causes have apparently replaced the need for primary causality. On the other hand, humans have achieved such a level of autonomy that they tend to believe in no cause beyond the self. Walter Brueggemann asks, "Have we come to such a profane understanding of reality, such a reduction of creation to commodity, that we are incapable of speaking in this way?"[2]

The issue may best be conceived in economic terms. God is a God of abundance. As illustrated in the parables of the Sower or the Prodigal in the Gospels, there is no shortage of resources with God, whether those consist of the seed of God's word or the grace of God's forgiveness. By contrast, in a world that is largely economically driven, the resources are (by definition) limited. Without realizing it, scarcity becomes the lens through which we view all things, even in the church—except perhaps our capacity for iniquity (v. 3)!

Psalm 65 invites us to be newly overwhelmed—no longer by transgression and failure, but by the limitless resources of grace, flowing in a never-ending, ever-rejoicing cycle of abundance. "The river of God is full of water" (v. 9). It does not run dry.

JO BAILEY WELLS

Pastoral Perspective

absent. Because presence and absence are so connected in human life, the experience of God's absence is an unavoidable consequence of the experience of divine presence. Our dependence on God's presence makes the experience of God's absence all the more poignant. When we have known the life-sustaining nearness of God, the experience of God's absence is particularly painful. One of the consequences of experiencing the absence of God is that it creates a wintry sort of spirituality that is in solidarity with those whose horizon excludes God.

The psalmist uses vivid metaphors to point to the power and generosity of God in the wonders of creation. All of creation cries out to God in praise. This includes both the crops of the land meant for human consumption and the pastures intended for the animals. Hills and valleys and rivers and meadows bear witness to God. Sun and moon and stars praise God (Ps. 148:3–4). Israel testifies to the generosity of the creator God, and so does creation itself. Despite the incongruity between the claims of that testimony and what we see in daily life, the psalmist still declares gratitude and praise of God for the bounty of creation. Israel's belief in the faithfulness of God remains even when sovereignty of God is hidden.

When God seems hidden, creation cries out to God in praise and thanksgiving. The images of continuing creative activity in Psalm 65 bring us back to the one who has chosen us and saved through awesome deeds. The earth is blanketed with life. When we hear a valley "sing" or when we see meadow "decked out" splendidly (v. 13) or when hills are "girded" with joy (v. 12), we know that God is near. Creation sings before we do. It is creation's song we sing, in gratitude for the bounty we may not see. It is creation's splendor we celebrate in joy as the work of God, whose sovereign faithfulness is often hidden from view.

HERBERT ANDERSON

2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 136.

Exegetical Perspective

a national institution, the temple, with a belief that those on the outside also have their prayers answered, experience God's awesome deeds, and enjoy the fruits and fruitfulness of God's gift of rain.

Reality and Fantasy. The psalmist resists as well the tendency to opt for reality and to deride fantasy, to distinguish between history and myth. This refusal is evident in two respects. First, the psalmist traces the rich flow of water to "the river of God," which is "full of water" (v. 9), that is, to the Temple Mount. Psalm 46 imagines "a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (Ps. 46:4–5).

Ezekiel imagines an ankle-deep stream that becomes deeper as it flows from the temple to the Dead Sea, where it sweetens and enlivens the mineral waters (Ezek. 47:1–12; see also Isa. 33:21; Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8). This belief, however, did not rest in reality but in the conviction that the temple was the epicenter of paradise, the source of the great world river (Gen. 2:10–14). We know that, in reality, there were small canals that transported small amounts of water to the temple and that the tunnel Hezekiah constructed was small enough to be vulnerable to enemy ambushes. In brief, reality and fantasy lay far apart, but this does not stop the psalmist from praising God for the waters that come from the temple to sustain fruitful harvests and healthy flocks.

The line between reality and fantasy is breached again when the psalmist describes the delight of the creation at the welcome presence of rain. Although the psalm contains tame descriptions—furrows are abundantly watered, ridges softened—it is replete with fantastic images: the year is crowned like royalty; God's wagon tracks drip fat and richness; the hills are clothed in joy, the meadows with flocks; the valleys are decked with grain and shout and sing with joy.

There is something delightful about the conclusion to this psalm, which makes much of rain, plain and simple. For the psalmist, there are not enough ways in everyday language to express delight, so the psalmist breaches the gossamer curtain that typically divides harsh reality from vivid fantasy. The basics of life, the fundamentals of food—which lie just within or, in drought, outside human reach—become the stuff of fantasy.

JOHN R. LEVISON

Homiletical Perspective

vision for how we can do better. In other words, the preacher needs to offer an ecological ethic that is presented as offering God due praise.

Another homiletical entry point into this psalm could lie in the fact that while in verses 9–13 the psalmist speaks literally of the water that providentially nourishes the earth, in verse 7 God is mentioned as silencing the roaring of the seas and waves. Following verse 6, which speaks of God establishing the mountains, this is clearly a reference to the image of God bringing forth creation from the formless void in Genesis 1. God places earth, with its orderliness, in between the waters above and the waters below. Even though water remains formless and disorderly and dangerous (which is mentioned a multitude of times in the Bible), God has nevertheless subdued the waters. This seems to be the psalmist's main point; but then, for just a second, the psalmist breaks out of referring to water literally and uses it as a metaphor for God's ordering of us:

> You silence the roaring of the seas,
> the roaring of their waves,
> *the tumult of the peoples.* (v. 7, emphasis added)

Having earlier named God as the one who forgives our transgressions, invites us into the temple, and is our hope of deliverance, the psalmist cannot help connecting the destructive force of water with the turmoil of humanity. Preachers would do well to note this parallel in the first half of the sermon. Then in the second half they could raise the question of what parallel is implied in the last part of the psalm. If God silences the waters and then uses them to nourish the earth, in what way is God redeeming us for usefulness?

O. WESLEY ALLEN JR.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

[1]That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. [2]Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. [3]And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. [4]And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. [5]Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. [6]But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. [7]Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. [8]Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. [9]Let anyone with ears listen! . . .

Theological Perspective

This parable and its interpretation are sandwiched between stories of opposition to the gospel. Chapters 11–12 contain multiple stories of opposition and misunderstanding of Jesus' ministry. Chapter 13 concludes with Jesus' hometown rejecting him. The parable in between these rejection/opposition narratives may be an answer to the question, why does the gospel find hospitable space to grow among some people but not among others? The flip side of this question is, what are the necessary conditions for fruitful discipleship? In answering these questions, Matthew gives us a practical theological explanation of why so many more hear than understand, why more disciples are planted than bear fruit, and which elements are necessary for fruitful discipleship.

Matthew gives his readers/hearers at least three points of view to consider. The preacher could harvest a rich theological field if she approached the facets with "and" rather than "or": this parable is the parable of the Sower, the parable of the Four Soils, *and* the parable of the Miraculous Yields. The resulting topics of this approach include the extravagant evangelism of God; the importance of understanding, perseverance, and attentiveness; and the miracle of faith.

The Sower. Whether one pictures the sower as preacher, teacher, evangelist, or missionary, as Jesus, or

Pastoral Perspective

This passage is often called the parable of the Sower, sometimes the parable of the Soils. Maybe it should be called the Hundredfold Harvest. Even if the harvest were only thirtyfold, this story would end with a miracle. Sevenfold meant a good year for a farmer, and tenfold meant true abundance. Thirtyfold would feed a village for a year and a hundredfold would let the farmer retire to a villa by the Sea of Galilee.

Bushels of abundance are where this parable leads. To be sure, Jesus starts with a good dose of realism. Everyone in the crowd nods his or her head as Jesus describes the trials of traditional first-century farming. Unlike a modern American farmer, who carefully prepares the soil with just the right pH balance and then injects the seed into the ground, farmers in Jesus' time cast the seed and *then* plow the land. With this scattershot approach, it is no surprise that some seed falls on hard soil, other seed on ground too rocky for good roots, and still other seed among thorns and weeds. Those are the facts of life, and everyone knows it, including Jesus.

Both Jesus and those who follow him also know such facts apply not only to farming, but also to his own ministry at that time. The seed of his teaching has fallen on rock-laden, thorn-strewn ground. In preceding chapters, the disciples lose faith during a storm at sea. The Pharisees want to choke out his

[18]"Hear then the parable of the sower. [19]When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. [20]As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; [21]yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. [22]As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. [23]But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Exegetical Perspective

Matthew 13 falls in the midsection of each of the three major literary frameworks for this Gospel that receive support in today's academic circles. The most widely embraced is the traditional fivefold structural pattern, based on the belief that Matthew stylistically modeled his material after the five books of Moses. J. D. Kingsbury has argued for a simpler threefold pattern, consisting of the material leading up to Jesus' public ministry, the ministry itself, and the movement to Jerusalem with the passion and the ministry of the resurrected Christ.[1]

More recently Ben Witherington III has presented a sixfold structural pattern.[2] Within this structural formula, Matthew presents Jesus as a sage within the wisdom tradition. Whatever pattern Matthew followed, this chapter contains Jesus' personal assessment of the public response to his ministry. Through the ages these parables have served as aids to the church's assessment of public response to its ministries.

Through the eight parables collected in chapter 13, Matthew presents Jesus as understanding that within his life and ministry the kingdom of God has

1. J. D. Kingsbury, *The Parables of Jesus in Matthew 13* (London: SPCK, 1969), 130–31.
2. Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 14–21.

Homiletical Perspective

"A sower went out to sow."

What do we make of a sower who throws seeds everywhere, even in such unlikely, seemingly unproductive places? Quite apart from best agricultural practices, what sort of worldview is suggested by someone who throws seeds on a well-worn path where birds can eat them, or on rocky ground where it is unlikely that they will grow, or among thorns that will choke them?

We scratch our heads and wonder at such a foolish waste of seed and other precious resources on the part of this sower. The logical place to sow seed, of course, is on good soil, and we readily take this message to heart. Even if we are not farmers, the lesson here is easily applied to our situation. If you ever set about to plant a new church, plant it in a carefully scrutinized, sure-to-grow neighborhood. If you ever decide to develop a new missionary opportunity, choose one where the odds are good and the possibilities are promising. If you ever decide to double your church's membership, then craft your message for a promising demographic and reach out to people who are motivated and purposeful and driven enough to receive and do something with it. Be strategic about location—like any self-respecting hamburger or gas station or grocery chain—and maximize your effort toward the arena of greatest

Theological Perspective

as God, the sower is one who spreads the good news; and we have a much more interesting story because the soil is not cultivated prior to seeding. Present-day evangelism techniques often emphasize plowing first: do your demographic work, determine your target audience, develop your communication strategies to fit your target. Do any of these strategies truly reveal the nature of the soil in which one is trying to seed the word? No. The sower does not know in advance what is beneath the soil's surface, where the ground is hard, where the soil is shallow, or where weeds will choke. Neither the church nor a preacher knows the quality of the soil before sowing. It is the purpose of the sower—the preacher, teacher, apostle, missionary, evangelist, and the church per se—to sow.

Four Soils. Sowing results in *some* disciples. In Matthew's interpretation of this parable, he once refers to the seed as the good news (v. 19) but otherwise uses "seed" to speak of "germinated disciples" who have begun to grow. The parable of the Four Soils—hardened, shallow, thorny, and good—serves to remind the church of the necessary conditions for fruitful discipleship. In order for disciples to grow, they must understand, attend properly, and persevere.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of understanding for Matthew. Without understanding, the word finds no place to implant, and the ever-near evil one, like the hovering bird, snatches away the potential of faith. Understanding opens the ground, but it is important to note that understanding does not mean mere acknowledgment. Rather, understanding is insight tied to urgency to act. Understanding is life-attuning knowledge.

Imagine finding yourself on a train track and coming to understand that a locomotive will run you over in ten seconds. That understanding leads to action! In Matthew's story, Jesus the teacher tries to impart to his hearers the fundamental *sine qua non* of discipleship: understanding that enables discipleship to begin. Through his Gospel, Matthew seeks the same end. Through its ministries, the church is called to do likewise.

Understanding, however, is a necessary, but not sufficient element for fruitful discipleship. Also necessary are attentiveness and perseverance. Matthew reminds us repeatedly (including in the lections for this Sunday and for the next two) that disciples must endure the evil one's powerful opposition. One form this opposition takes is persecution. Joy in response to receiving the gospel is wonderful, but "trouble or persecution . . . on account of the word" (v. 21) will arise.

Pastoral Perspective

message. Jesus is soon to experience the hard soil of his hometown as Nazarenes reject him. Jesus does not just tell this parable. He lives it.

So does the community for whom Matthew's Gospel is written. First-century Palestine is a hard time and place to be a Christian. Due to both poverty and persecution, massive numbers of people are migrating out of the region. Within the church itself there are dissenters and false prophets. With this parable, Jesus reminds his followers—and Matthew reminds his community—that rejection of Jesus' message does not mean the message is wrong or their efforts are folly. It is simply a fact of life, whether in farming or in faith.

Like Jesus, preachers cast the gospel as broadly as the sower in the parable does, with no guarantee where it will land. On Sunday mornings, we look out on congregations of people who are here for all kinds of reasons. There is the newcomer who is "church shopping" or "trying out" Christianity. There is the person in crisis who will vanish when things get better. There is the family who comes "for the kids" but quits once the kids' soccer season starts.

Standing in front of them all is the preacher, who has poured heart and soul into the sermon, in hope it will take root, but who also knows her odds are not any better than the sower's. Have you ever preached what you thought was a powerful message, only to have someone say, "Sorry, it didn't connect for me today," or offer the ubiquitous, "I like your new haircut"? Did you climb back into the pulpit the next Sunday and preach your next sermon?

That is our job, our calling. To sow the seed and to bear the heartache when it falls on rocky, arid, or weed-infested ground. In accepting that calling, we stand in solidarity with the people in our congregations who also know the hard truth of this parable. The parent whose words of guidance and compassion fall on their teenager's deaf ears knows hard-packed ground. The businessman who produces a quality product and pays employees a living wage, only to see his clients go where things are cheaper, is well acquainted with shallow roots. This parable reminds us all that we are not alone in such times, even as it reminded the first crowd who heard it.

The parable also reminds us where to keep our focus. In my own ministry I am often tempted to spend my resources—time, energy, hope—trying to coax, cajole, and beg for growth from inhospitable places and people. I can also spend much time despairing when the seed does not take root. The sower does not do that. He accepts the reality that

broken into this age and will continue to grow until such time as God determines appropriate for the consummation. The first of these parables and its explanation comprise the Gospel lectionary selection for this week. Noticeably missing from the lectionary are those verses (vv. 10–17) in which Jesus explains his rationale for teaching in parables: the secrets of the kingdom can be known only by those who are his disciples. Others may see and hear, but they are incapable of comprehending.

As a form of metaphorical speech, a parable can be anything from a one-liner to a longer narrative. Known usually as the parable of the Sower, our text follows the narrative pattern. Although Matthew says Jesus utilizes parables earlier in his ministry (5:14–16; 7:24–27; and perhaps 9:15–17; 11:16–17; 12:43–45), the block of teaching collected in this discourse consists entirely of parables, linked by verses devoted to the reason for teaching in parables; private explanations of two of the parables to the disciples; and general admonitions to listen.

The predominant theme addressed by the parables of Jesus is the kingdom of God. If the observation of C. H. Dodd that the purpose of a parable is to "tease the mind into active thought" is correct, then what better way to describe the indescribable kingdom of God than to tease the minds of those who would hear?

The discourse of chapter 13 further illuminates Jesus' answer to the kinship question with which chapter 12 ends. Assuming the sitting position preferred by wisdom rabbis/sages for teaching (v. 1), and echoing the setting for the "discourse (sermon) on the mount" during which the blessings and "laws" of the kingdom are presented, Jesus begins to share fresh lessons about the kingdom. These lessons focus on those who are his kin not by blood but by hearing and understanding what he says.

The parable of the Sower or Soils, one of six parables found in all of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 4:3–9; Luke 8:5–8), begins and ends with the admonition to "listen." The accompanying interpretation moves "listening" to "hearing." Although the authenticity of the interpretation continues to be debated, the authenticity of the parable itself as coming from Jesus remains widely accepted. While it has been argued that the explanations found both in Mark and here are redactions of either the Gospel writer or a later church leader, the given explanation remains true to the parable itself. It addresses an issue that could well have been true to Jesus' own self-understanding and fits the pattern

result. Find the good soil and throw seed on *it!* It's just good business!

It seems obvious that the sower in this text is anything but a good businessperson. He seems willing to just fling that seed anywhere. Why does he do this? Maybe he does so in order to remind us that the gospel might be bigger than good business principles, bigger than just good soil. Since this is a parable, we may want to entertain the possibility that this sower throws seed just anywhere in order to suggest that "anywhere" is, in the final analysis, the arena of God's care and redemptive activity. This sower throws seed not only on good soil, but also amid the rocky, barren, broken places, in order to suggest that God's vision for the world is itself often apprehended in strange and broken places.

I once caught a glimpse of God and God's mercy in such a place. I was with a group of civic leaders—lawyers, politicians, foundation representatives, journalists—touring various outposts of our city's criminal justice system. It was near the end of the day, and we were visiting the juvenile court and detention center. That place was so depressing, its landscape marked by wire-mesh gates with large padlocks and razor wire wrapped around electrified fences. When the doors clanged shut behind us, I imagined how final they must always sound when adolescents—children!—are escorted there. We were led, floor by floor, through this facility by an amazing young judge who worked there. She showed us the holding cells where the new inmates are processed. She showed us the classrooms where an ongoing education is at least attempted. She showed us the courtrooms where cases are prosecuted.

Near the end of our tour, she led us down one bleak hall to give us a sense of the cells where young offenders lived. Each cell had a steel door with narrow slots about two-thirds of the way up, through which various pairs of eyes were watching us as we walked down the hall. Some of these children were accused of major crimes; some of them were repeat offenders. Most of them, we learned, had had little or no nurture across their brief lives—not from a primary adult who cared about them, not from family, not from neighborhood, not from church. It was hard to notice those eyes staring through narrow slots without doing something. So I lingered at one door and whispered to one pair of eyes: "God loves you." The eyes did not appear to register much, and sometimes I wonder what, if anything, happened next. Did that news fall on the path to get eaten by birds? Did it fall among thorns to get choked out? I will never know.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Theological Perspective

Disciples need to be prepared not only for persecution (troubles without), but also temptation (troubles within), especially in the form of anxious cares (see Matt. 6:25–32) and "the lure of wealth" (v. 22). Elsewhere (see Matt. 19:16–22), Matthew provides examples of disciples lured away by attention to their worldly anxieties or their attachment to wealth. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus' counter exhortation is to attend first to the "empire of the heavens."[1]

Miraculous Yields. Can we shift the interpretation of this text, however, from the descriptive to the hortatory? Jesus' community is populated not with passive seeds, who have no control over the soil in which they are planted, but with *agents*, who can shift themselves from rocky or thorny ground to good soil. The factor that disciples are not able to control, however, is whether or not the path is hard, whether or not there is understanding. Understanding, like faith, is a gift.

Considering the powerful opposition to the gospel—the evil one, hardened hearts, persecution, the anxiety-driven lure of wealth—it is a miracle that there are disciples and that the empire of the heavens grows. The yields are miraculous because, ultimately, all growth comes from God. Opposition may eliminate three-fourths of the seed, but the remaining seeds yield abundant fruit. Faith that initiates discipleship is a gift. Fruitful yield as the outcome of discipleship is a gift. While theologians have debated the contribution, if any, of human agency to the process of being saved, from the apostle Paul through the Reformation and into contemporary times, this claim is nearly constant: faith is a gift from God, and fruitful discipleship is the work of God in us. We might try to predict why some people receive faith and become fruitful disciples but, really, we do not know why some people receive faith and some do not, and whether those who first receive will be fruitful disciples.

The "therefore" to all this is the call to spread seed extravagantly, to school disciples in strategies to deal with opposition and temptation, and to give thanks to God for fruitful growth. Matthew's perspective is far away from belt- and gun-handle-notching evangelism. Perhaps this text should always be paired with Acts 2, in hopes of keeping the church both hopeful and humble in regard to evangelism.

GARY PELUSO-VERDEND

1. Here and in the reflections on the next two Sundays, I use this translation from Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

Pastoral Perspective

some seed, a goodly portion of it, will fall on bad soil, and he keeps sowing. As the next fifteen chapters of Matthew demonstrate, Jesus keeps spreading the word, no matter how dry, rocky, or weed-infested the ground. His followers are called to do so the same.

But like Jesus, we have yet another calling, also found in this parable. The story does not end with the inhospitable soils—though many sermons do. It does not even end with a normal harvest from the good soil. It ends with a miracle, a hundredfold harvest. It is our job to trust—and preach—that possibility as well.

The parable's ending is its greatest challenge. Jesus goes beyond simply encouraging his listeners to "keep on keeping on" in the face of rejection. Instead, his parable challenges them—and us—to believe in God's abundance.

If the parable ended with the sevenfold harvest from good soil, then *dayenu*, as our Jewish brothers and sisters might say. That would be sufficient, a good story of encouragement and hope.

However, this parable is not simply pragmatic. It is also filled with promise. We are called to proclaim that promise, even in the face of rejection and the reality of this world. Novelist Bebe Moore Campbell writes, "Some of us have that empty-barrel faith. Walking around expecting things to run out. Expecting that there isn't enough air, enough water. Expecting that someone is going to do you wrong. The God I serve told me to expect the best, that there is enough for everybody."[1]

That is the God this parable calls us to trust. Jesus knows the hard ways of this world. He also knows the abundant ways of God. May we as pastors have faith in God's abundance too.

TALITHA J. ARNOLD

1. Bebe Moore Campbell, *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (New York: Putnam, 1998), 131.

Exegetical Perspective

of the disciples' learning curve as presented by the parable.

Joachim Jeremias has made a strong case that the activity of the sower described within the parable was familiar in the context of the time.[3] It should be quickly obvious that the sower's intent is not to waste seed on poor soil but rather to cast seed onto whatever ground might produce the desired crop. Regardless of how good the seed is or how caring the sower is, some seed sown in such a fashion will land on soil under less than favorable conditions and result in no growth, poor growth, or truncated growth. There has been some academic discussion as to whether the resulting harvest should be regarded as bountiful or simply at the higher end of an average yield. Regardless, the portion of seed that does fall on good soil results in a hearty harvest.

That both the sower and the seed are constant, while the results across the four types of soil change, implies that the purpose of the parable is to assist the disciples, and perhaps Jesus himself, in understanding why the response to the gospel message shared so consistently varies so greatly. The sower and soil are understood as good. That some soils are labeled "bad" is not because of any choice of their own, nor is the good soil "good" because of what it does or does not do to make it more productive.

In understanding the soils, one must resist pushing the metaphor too far or reading into it more than the context warrants. The good soil is good simply because its nature provides an environment in which the seed can be nurtured to full maturity. Thus, the kingdom of heaven is like a bountiful crop produced in spite of what seem to be overwhelming setbacks.

The lectionary reading omits verses 10–17, which contain the disciples' request to Jesus to explain why he has chosen to teach in parables. Jesus responds that it "has been given [to them] to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11). This gift is a new blessing or beatitude (vv. 16, 17). They have been given understanding. With that said, the focus of a disciple of any era should not be on good efforts that fail, but on celebrating the abundant harvest that is produced.

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3. Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 151.

Homiletical Perspective

As the tour went on, the cumulative effect of all this brokenness got to one member of our group, who finally just stopped in the hallway and began to cry. When the judge noticed this, she paused in her narration, walked back and put her arms around that person, and, with tears in her own eyes, said, "I know. I understand."

I thought to myself, "If I am ever to be judged, I want a judge like that." Then it dawned on me—like a seed thrown onto my path—that indeed I do have a judge like that!

Our blessed judge—the holy One toward whose ultimate judgment we now make our way—is like the sower in this text. The parable, true to its form, is more like a riddle, hiding as much as it reveals about God. It must have been confusing to its original readers and hearers too, because an allegorical interpretation (vv. 18–23) was finally added to clean things up and drive home a good point about good soil.

Ultimately, though, with all due respect to the well-meaning allegorist, this parable is not so much about good *soil* as it is about a good *sower.* This sower is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed in only those places where the chances for growth are best. No, this sower is a high-risk sower, relentless in indiscriminately throwing seed on all soil—as if it were *all* potentially good soil. On the rocks, amid the thorns, on the well-worn path, maybe even in a jail!

Which leaves us to wonder if there is any place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot sprout and take root.

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