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A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings
OCTOBER 2005

October 2, 2005	October 9, 2005	October 16, 2005	October 23, 2005	October 30, 2005
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20	Exodus 32:1-14	Exodus 33:12-23	Deuteronomy 34:1-12	Joshua 3:7-17
Psalms 19 or Isaiah 5:1-7	Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23 or Isaiah 25:1-9	Psalms 99 or Isaiah 45:1-7	Psalms 90:1-6, 13-17 or Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18	Psalms 107:1-7, 33-37 or Micah 3:5-12
Psalms 80:7-15	Psalms 23	Psalms 96:1-9, (10-13)	Psalms 1	Psalms 43
Philippians 3:4b-14	Philippians 4:1-9	1 Thessalonians 1:1-10	1 Thessalonians 2:1-8	1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 21:33-46	Matthew 22:1-14	Matthew 22:15-22	Matthew 22:34-46	Matthew 23:1-12

In September's lectionary readings, we were warned of the danger of developing a false sense of entitlement, forgetting that God has the ultimate providence and responsibility for the world. We can neither force nor replace God's grace; the link between the power of creation and the power of deliverance cannot be broken. This theme continues in the October readings.

Since God created the world, all of creation testifies to God's intended design. As the physical laws of the world serve to sustain life, so too do the moral laws of the world. Exodus 20 contains one of the Hebrew Bible's several versions of the Ten Commandments. We often look at these well-known "Thou Shalts" and "Thou Shalt Nots" as laws in the same sense that our governments pass laws (which explains much about the contemporary debate over posting them in our courthouses). However, they "must be relationally rather than legalistically understood."¹ As Augustine observed, "these imperatives are rightly obeyed only when they are measured by the standard of our love of God and our love of our neighbor in God."² In other words, the Ten Commandments are a means of "protecting *the health of the community*, to which end the individual plays such an important role."³ This role is not easy for people to play, as Paul's prayer in 1 Thessalonians 1 shows: "Faith, love and hope... Each one demands effort."⁴

Failure to live within the moral laws set down by God, then, leads to suffering among God's people not because God acts as a divine judge imposing a sentence, but because it is a natural consequence of our fall into faithlessness, lovelessness, and hopelessness. Our relationship with God is damaged, as is expressed in the parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), and also in Isaiah 5: "The singer invites his listeners to hear about the careful attention his friend showered on the vineyard and of the disappointment he experienced when the vineyard yielded nothing but rank grapes."⁵ No matter how steadfast God's love for us is, good wine cannot be made from rank grapes, so to speak. This naturalistic image leads us to see that we have no reason

to boast when we do manage to keep the moral laws: it is God's grace, God's "careful attention," that enables us to bear good fruit.

The image of the vineyard in Isaiah 5 also guards against Christian triumphalist readings of Philippians 3, where Paul puts his past relationship to Jewish traditions in the proper perspective. As it was good to plant the choicest vines in fertile soil that had been tilled and cleared of stones, so too was it good that the people of God had their traditions: "Paul does not toss away junk to gain Christ; he tosses away that which was of tremendous value to him."⁶ The vineyard image also guards against a self-help reading of the Gospel, whereby one learns to trade a less effective approach to getting "the good life" for a more effective approach: "Paul's testimony as to the 'surpassing worth' of life in Christ has to do with abandoning such a search altogether, but trusting solely in the grace of God."⁷ We are cultivated by God, not self-made.

It follows, then, that we cannot successfully make our own rules or bend God's rules to our own purposes. The story of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32 shows that such efforts cause God's people to "forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves."⁸ God is angry at their stumbling, because "Israel has violated the established relationship."⁹ However, God does not destroy them, because that punishment would itself violate the established relationship further, as Moses reminds God. Instead, God fulfills the requirements of order by showing grace within the covenant with Israel. The people of God suffer as a consequence of their faithlessness, but they do not suffer a total and complete catastrophe; hope remains the last word. In Isaiah 25, the prophet builds on this hope in the trustworthy promises of God: "The voice of thanksgiving sees that with the destruction of Babylon and the promise of the restoration of Zion, God is not acting mysteriously or arbitrarily. He is acting as he had promised to act."¹⁰ Therefore, the people of God should in all situations rejoice and build each other up, as Paul urges in Philippians 4.

But who are the people of God? Who rejoices, and who builds up? Is the call of God, for the purposes of God, selective? In some passages of the Bible, visible signs of the glory of God are seen as distinctly belonging to Israel, and any loss of their distinction as a chosen people therefore diminishes glory of God. However, in Isaiah 45, the prophet demonstrates God's prerogative to use all nations (e.g., Cyrus) as instruments of providence: if the Lord is One, God is the Lord of—and for—everyone. Early Christians followed this line of theology, affirming that "with the calling of the nations there is no longer a separation of a people nor a special honor accorded to Israel."¹¹ The

ministry of Paul to Gentiles such as the Philippians and the Thessalonians is an embodiment of this expanded call.

Unfortunately, many Christians—past and present—have themselves tried to impose their own limits on who can legitimately receive God’s call. Men have been unwilling to give up their distinction by accepting the leadership of women, despite Paul’s inclusive witness in Philippians 4. As John Chrysostom noted: “Great therefore was the cohesion of the church at that time when the most respected, whether men or women, enjoyed such honor from the rest.”¹² Christians have also been unwilling to give up their distinction as believers, preferring readings of Matthew 22:15-22 that are dismissive of secular leadership, although the passage “declares that the distinction between what belongs to Caesar (as some things do) and what belongs to God (the ultimate loyalty) must be made” respectfully and prayerfully.¹³

Leaders within human society are an important part of the world created by God, and so play an important role in the deliverance of God’s people, both through their successes and by the example of their failures. Moses is the most praised leader among men, but God is above all men, and Deuteronomy 34 emphasizes that Moses “did not set foot in the land.”¹⁴ The ultimate limits of human authority are explored in Matthew 23. The dwelling of God (as explored in Exodus 33) with a people legitimizes the law and leadership of that people, but it can also be abused: “The confusion of God with the messenger is not an uncommon problem for communities of faith.”¹⁵ All too often, religious leaders “*say but do not do...burden others while failing to act themselves...act for the wrong reason: to make an impression on others.*”¹⁶ It is therefore crucial that we do not take the anointing of our leaders for granted.

How then do we discern the anointing of our leaders? In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul highlights the importance of leaders maintaining an apocalyptic way of life, a life lived in expectation of the return of Jesus, whatever the cost: “somehow the suffering not only validates the gospel (it shows that the preacher isn’t in it for the wrong reasons), but also, surprisingly, gives a sense of joy and freedom...At the heart of it all is the approval, not of humans, but of God.”¹⁷ In other words, caring leaders have the right perspective, and therefore pursue the proper goals. Augustine compares Paul’s witness with the story of Solomon and the two mothers, where the true mother can be distinguished from the pretender by her overriding desire to see the child saved.¹⁸

The Solomon comparison brings us back to the link between creation and deliverance. Just as a mother’s protective impulse towards her child is cemented through the creative experiences of

pregnancy and birth (for biological mothers) and childrearing, so too is God’s protective impulse towards us embodied in God’s creation of, and ongoing relationship with, God’s people. For this reason, God is depicted in the Bible as saving us if we cry out. Crying out to God is an acknowledgment of God’s active presence in the relationship, and so invokes God’s active presence in our lives.

It is not Joshua himself who stops the waters of the Jordan so that the people may cross, but “the priests bearing the ark containing the law of Moses, which more than anything else represents the presence of the ‘living God.’”¹⁹ This lesson is reiterated in Isaiah 25 by the prophet, who describes God as acting so that “those who trusted in cities of strength might now see the true source of strength.”²⁰ God’s grace alone keeps us from weakness, so when we forego that grace and seek to rely on idols—whether literal, like the Golden Calf, or figurative, like over-empowered leaders or our sense of having a special relationship with God—we inevitably suffer the effects of that weakness. God does not need to convict us; we sentence ourselves to do hard time. Thankfully, God is always there, ready to grant us clemency. Thanks be to God!

¹ Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1991), 219.

² Augustine, in *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c2001), 107.

³ Fretheim, 221.

⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2002), 89.

⁵ Christopher Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1993), 47.

⁶ Fred Craddock, *Philippians* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, c1985), 58.

⁷ Craddock, 59.

⁸ Fretheim, 281.

⁹ Fretheim, 281.

¹⁰ Seitz, 186.

¹¹ Apollinaris, in *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c2002), 146.

¹² John Chrysostom, in *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians: Ancient Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c1999), 280.

¹³ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 420-421.

¹⁴ Ronald E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1998), 538.

¹⁵ Fretheim, 282.

¹⁶ Boring, 431.

¹⁷ Wright, 95.

¹⁸ Augustine, in *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: Ancient Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c2000), 65.

¹⁹ Robert B. Coote, “The Book of Joshua: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1998), 599.

²⁰ Seitz, 187.