

shocking reality in the text is that these are religiously active people. They have prophesied, exorcised demons, and worked miracles. Only, the life of faith is not measured in terms of religious activity (which can be equated with lawlessness), but in terms of obedience and faithfulness.

But how is one to know God's will? The simple parable in 7:24–27 about the two builders takes the reader a step farther. The wise builder who constructs his house on a solid foundation is described as one who hears and does "these words of mine." The divine will is opened up by the teaching of Jesus, who in three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount has turned out to be the authoritative interpreter of the law (5:21–48).

But it is not simply a matter of hearing Jesus' words, of knowing God's will. What separates the wise from the foolish builder is the *doing* of "these words of mine." The words are not there to be toyed with or debated over or played off one against the other. They are to be obeyed. Or to put it another way, Jesus' words are not really "heard" until they begin to work within the hearer to transform life and direct behavior. Only in the changed action of the hearer is it clear that a proper "hearing" has taken place.

The Sermon is concluded with the report that "the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." The scribes could only assume a form of derived authority. "Rabbi X said such and such. And on the basis of this, I say this further word." But here was one who needed to cite no precedent, who confronted people with the very presence of God. Jesus' words conveyed an unmediated reality. They announced decisions beyond which there was no appeal.

Furthermore, Jesus' words have the power to accomplish something. He spoke and things happened. "Your sins are forgiven you." "Take up your bed and walk." "Stretch out your hand." The linguistic analysts label it "performative discourse." It is language that does not merely describe or command, but that creates and re-creates—and with such an unheard-of ultimacy. In reality, to hear Jesus' words is to be grasped and reshaped by them, to be activated to obey them, to be set by them on a journey of discipleship. Thus, in these unsettling passages of Matthew's story are words of power and hope, speech that effects change, language that mediates the very presence of God.

## PROPER 5

Ordinary Time 10

*Sunday between  
June 5 and 11 inclusive  
(if after Trinity Sunday)*

The four lessons for this Sunday from various perspectives confront us with the character of the human response to the gracious initiative of a promise-making and promise-keeping God. Each response (or reflection on a response) has its own peculiar dynamic, and yet the four are linked in the extraordinary way in which the promise and demand of God are met and confirmed in the midst of real human experience.

Genesis 12:1–9 describes the faithful obedience of Abraham, who responds to God's call to leave the ancestral homeland and to venture to a new country. It is a journey of considerable risk, yet a risk that makes possible a future rich with promise and hope. Paul reflects on the faith of Abraham in Rom. 4:13–25 and understands it as more than the solitary response of a single individual, more than the extraordinary achievement of an unusual saint. Abraham is a paradigmatic figure. His descendants become all those who share his faith, are linked with him to the divine promise, and are drawn into a special family composed of many nations. Abraham's faith is a model for Christian faith. At heart both share the conviction that God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist.

Psalms 33:1–12 is an expression of great joy over the reality of a God who both creates and sustains. The "word" by which God acts is characterized by covenant fidelity as well as by great power. Thus God's people respond with an overwhelming gladness, which others, who do not know this God, can never appropriate. The text from Matt. 9 in blunt and direct language relates Matthew's obedient response to the call of Jesus. In marked contrast to the religious people who grumble at Jesus' association with tax collectors and sinners, Matthew follows, no questions asked. The move from the tax table to the table in Jesus' house is the move of faith in response to a

gracious call, but in Matthew's case a move always bound to elicit conflicting reactions.

## Genesis 12:1–9

After eleven chapters of "world history," we are plunged abruptly and unexpectedly into the life and faith of Israel. The entry of Abraham and Sarah into the biblical story has no antecedents. They are new characters in the story. This is a new beginning, wrought only by the free speech of Yahweh, which summons new partners into speech and faith.

1. *Israel's life and Abraham's sojourn of faith begin in God's speech.* In Yahweh's first utterance, Israel knows everything it is to know of God (vs. 1–3). On the one hand, God's speech is a *terse command* (v. 1). God's first utterance is an imperative, "Go." On the other hand, God's speech is an *extravagant promise* (vs. 2–3). The promise, with no visible guarantees, is to govern and determine the categories of Israel's life for all time to come.

The second part of the promise places Abraham intentionally among the nations whose sorry story we know in Gen. 1–11. "The nations" have been characterized in those chapters by trouble and curse. Now Abraham is made crucial for the status of other peoples, who will have to come to terms with Abraham. Nations will be dealt with according to the way they deal with Abraham. God pledges to guarantee that odd connection. Abraham is made the determinative factor for the future of world history.

The final line of the promise in v. 3 is even more stunning. Other nations will have a blessing "in you." The existence of Israel is the clue to the power for life that is available among other peoples. This remarkable promise is taken by both Jews and Christians as a warrant for the cruciality of the community of faith. For Jews, the promise surely anticipates the historical community of Israel and the rise of David. For Christians the promise foreshadows the presence of the church in the midst of the world. Both readings stress that the concreteness of a particular community is decisive for the future well-being of the world.

2. *Abraham responds* to the address of God: "So Abram went" (vs. 4–5). Abraham speaks not a word. He acts silently and immediately. He trusts the promise. He honors the command. At the word of God, Abraham uproots his life and is on his way in obedience. No wonder that Abraham is reckoned as the father of faith. His exemplary trust in God is that he took the promise at face value; he decisively

reordered his life in immediate response to the word of God. He did not linger, hesitate, or bargain. He simply went.

3. *The goal of Abraham's journey is another land*, a land promised by God but not specified (vs. 1, 7). In this first journey, the narrative places Abraham in Canaan, Shechem, Bethel, Ai, and finally toward the Negeb. It is as though the story provides us an orienting map for the Genesis narratives that are to follow. We are given an overview of the territory in which the life and faith of Israel will be staged.

Three items are important about Abraham's journey into the land. First, the Bible is relentlessly concerned with land, with historical concreteness, with materiality. The story is a foundational protest against any escapist spiritualizing tendency. Biblical faith concerns real people in real places with real estate. Second, the land is for the future and is not claimed in the present. Thus far the land is only trusted promise, not controlled possession. Third, when Abraham arrives in the land he is to possess, it is already occupied: "Canaanites were in the land" (v. 6). The Land of Promise is not empty space; it is already claimed and occupied. This means that the promise immediately and endlessly places Abraham in crisis. Life in the real world is restlessly ambiguous; faith never permits the people of Abraham to escape the ambiguity. This ambiguity is decisive for biblical faith. Faith, as Abraham embraces it, is a decision to live the promise precisely where the promise is in question and at risk.

4. Our narrative is concluded as *Abraham undertakes two explicitly religious acts*. First, Abraham builds an altar to acknowledge Yahweh (v. 7). The erection of an altar is a dramatic, public declaration that Yahweh is the acknowledged ruler of the territory, and that the territory has come under the aegis of Yahweh's powerful promise. The altar is a political assertion that denies suzerainty to the Canaanite gods and delegitimizes the land rights of the Canaanites. Building the altar is a highly partisan, political act.

Second, Abraham "invoke[s] the name of the LORD" (v. 8). The phrasing suggests that Abraham intentionally and explicitly acknowledged that Yahweh is his God, and thereby acknowledged that Abraham is subject to the purposes of Yahweh. More precisely, Abraham acknowledges the power of the promise in his life, and his readiness to trust the promise.

These two acts should not be understood as "generic" acts of piety. They embody, rather, a concrete decision about the central loyalty of Abraham's life, the central power of promise for his future, and the central subject of Israel's story that follows. It is on that basis that Abraham "journeyed on" (v. 9).

## Psalm 33:1-12

This psalm is a hymn of praise, with a horizon as large as all creation. In our verses, the pattern of a hymn is twice enacted, vs. 1-7 and vs. 8-12.

The first standard rendition of praise is in two characteristic parts, the summons to praise (vs. 1-3) and the reasons for praise (vs. 4-7). The summons consists of six words evidencing great exuberance: rejoice, praise, praise, make melody, sing, play skillfully. The speaker intends to mobilize all of the choir and the sanctuary orchestra to join in celebration of Yahweh.

We may notice two special items in these verses. First, v. 1 identifies the "righteous" and "upright" as the ones who may properly praise. Those who have not kept Torah obedience are not invited to praise, and their praise is not fitting; it is incongruous with the character of Yahweh, who is "upright." Thus even in the initial summons to praise, Torah piety prevails. Second, the last term, "loud shouts," does not mean simply boisterousness, but a cry of victory, which celebrates God's sovereignty.

The reason given for praise is regularly introduced by "for" ("because" = *ki*) (v. 4). Two reasons are here given for praise of God. First, God's word, work, and love are marked by covenant fidelity (vs. 4-5). This vocabulary (upright, faithfulness, righteousness, justice, steadfast love) constitutes Israel's preferred and recurring phrasing for Yahweh, as seen in Ex. 34:6-7a. God's word is utterly pure, and God's work is completely reliable. It is because Yahweh's speech and action are marked by faithfulness that Yahweh should be praised.

The second reason for praise is that "the word" mentioned in v. 4 is effective and powerful (vs. 6-7). God's speech is the means whereby God has created the world. God has powerfully uttered the world into existence, like the commanding utterance of a royal ruler.

By this royal decree out of the mouth of Yahweh, there came to be the heavens and the "host of heaven," that is, the stars. The parallel to "word" as agent of creation is God's "breath," which translates the Hebrew *rûah* or God's spirit, on which see Gen. 1:2. With this combination of agents, "word" and *rûah*, the psalm parallels Gen. 1:1-3, which includes the same two agents. By speech God gathers the seas together, in order to create dry life for living things, and God has placed the dangerous, life-threatening "waters" in safe storage, so that they may be appropriately managed and distributed; see Job 38:11, 16, 22. In Job 38:22, the same term is used twice that is in our verse translated as "storehouses." All these actions by God create

living space in the midst of chaos and make the world safe for life. No wonder Yahweh should be praised!

In the second rendition of a hymn, the same sequence of summons and reason is reiterated (vs. 8-11). The summons is stated in two jussive verbs, "fear . . . stand in awe" (v. 8). This summons is not as direct as in vs. 1-3 or as is customary in this form. The content and intent are nonetheless the same. The world is to be amazed, astonished, and obedient to this great God.

The reason (introduced by "for") is that the word of God as command, the same word characterized in v. 4, is indeed powerful and effective (vs. 9-11). In addition to the large claim of v. 9 for creation in general, the poet becomes quite specific in vs. 10-11. Negatively, Yahweh nullifies the intention of the nations and prohibits their plans (v. 10). As in Ps. 2:2-3, the plans and counsel of the nations are a conspiracy whereby the nations (and their gods) seek to take over the rule of the earth and preempt the sovereignty of Yahweh. Thus the conspiracy is both theological and political. Yahweh, however, will not permit such a conspiracy to succeed, and is powerful enough to resist such a bald and unrealistic challenge to the proper ordering of the world.

Positively, Yahweh's "counsel" is utterly reliable and beyond challenge. Yahweh's "plans" endure for all time. The NRSV "plans" in v. 10 and "thoughts" in v. 11 are the same Hebrew term *hšb* (cf. Gen. 50:20; Jer. 29:11; Isa. 55:8-9). Thus it is counsel versus counsel and plan versus plan. Yahweh's intention (plan, counsel) will prevail and can be relied on against every threat, challenge, and conspiracy. Moreover, we know from vs. 4-5 what Yahweh's plan and counsel are: that the world be shaped according to faithfulness, justice, righteousness, and enduring love. Israel in its praise counts on the well-being of God's world, the friendliness, fruitfulness, and faithfulness of creation as a given for life, over which Israel need have no anxiety. No alternative power will be able to jeopardize God's good intention. No alternative that intends ill can possibly prevail in a world where God is Lord.

Our reading culminates in v. 12 with a didactic conclusion that follows from the doxological affirmations of the preceding verses. The conclusion is that God's chosen people will be made "happy" ("blessed") by this steadfastness and reliability of creation. Certainly this verse speaks of the people Israel, the "righteous" and "upright" of v. 1. Israel is here taken to be a faithful Torah keeper, and so a trusted creation means to live by the rules that will make creation flourish and Israel joyous.

While the linkage between creation and Israel's covenant of trust and obedience is clearly the intention of this verse, we may in our reading extrapolate, to affirm that every living community has the potential of taking Yahweh as God along with Yahweh's Torah, and so of living faithful to the nature of creation, and so a happy, blessed life. Thus the doxology to the Creator has quite practical implications. Those who conspire against this life-giving order in recalcitrant ways, in the end will not be "happy."

### Romans 4:13–25

The biblical story of Abraham figures prominently in a number of early Jewish and Christian texts. The diversity of this reflection about Abraham is evident even within the New Testament, since the author of the letter of James can use the story of Abraham to draw conclusions that appear to be diametrically opposed to Paul's own (James 2:21).

In Rom. 4, Paul makes three points about Abraham by way of underscoring his argument about the manner in which God deals with humankind. First, Paul insists that not even Abraham was justified by his deeds; he was justified because of his trust in God (4:1–9). Second, Abraham's justification came about before he had been circumcised, that he might be father both to the circumcised and to the uncircumcised (4:10–12).

The third point Paul makes about Abraham comes in our text, 4:13–25, and has to do with the promise that was made through Abraham to all his descendants. Verse 13 introduces the issue of the promise, insisting that it came about through the "righteousness of faith" and not through the law. Verses 14–15 put the matter more negatively by juxtaposing the law with faith. Paul comments on the negative impact of the law: "The law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation" (v. 15). Eventually, in Rom. 7, Paul will address the law in a more sustained fashion, because he needs to explain the comments he has made along the way. In the context of chapter 4, however, these are tangential comments and should not be overemphasized to the detriment of the positive claim being made about God's dealings with Abraham.

Paul returns to those dealings in v. 16, which can be translated: "For this reason [the promise comes] from faith, in order that [it might be] according to grace, so that the promise might be confirmed to every seed, not to the [seed] that is from the law only but also to the [seed] that is from the faith of Abraham, who is the father of all

of us." Dominating this statement about the promise to Abraham is the word "faith." Initially, Paul does not specify whose faith (or faithfulness) is in view, although v. 13 causes us to think the faith is that associated with Abraham. The end of the verse makes it clear that the promise is associated with Abraham's faith.

But the phrase "in order that [it might be] according to grace" prevents us from concluding that Abraham *earned* the promise by means of his faith, that God rewarded Abraham's faith. Instead, faith relies on grace. In other words, faith itself is a gift from God, never an achievement—not even for a person as exemplary as Abraham.

The question that cries out to be answered here is, What is Abraham's faith? Despite Paul's claim here and in v. 12, it is clear that neither he nor other early Christians operated with Abraham's faith, if by that phrase we mean the content of Abraham's faith. While early Christians varied in their beliefs, common—indeed central—to their faith was the notion that God had acted in Jesus Christ, and that central element is nowhere part of the Abraham story. Does this mean that Paul is simply confusing his own faith (that is, its content) with that of Abraham? Does he impute to Abraham belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as would some later Christian thinkers? In what sense do first-century Christians have a share in Abraham's faith?

Verses 17–18 provide an answer to the question. Verse 17 affirms that the promise was made to Abraham "in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." What Paul and his contemporaries have in common with Abraham is not a belief in Jesus as the Christ nor a belief that "faith" is the way to find God, but the conviction that God is powerful even over death and nonexistence.

In Abraham's case, this conviction took a specific form, as vs. 18–21 indicate. Abraham trusted that God was able to deliver on the promise made to him and to Sarah concerning their offspring. Despite the clear evidence to the contrary, his own advanced age and Sarah's previous barrenness, Abraham was "fully convinced" (v. 21) that God would do as God had said.

It is this faith that Paul offers as exemplary for Christians, as becomes evident at the end of the chapter. The story of Abraham was written not for Abraham's sake, "but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (v. 24). The common claim is that God is able to deliver on God's promise, whether that promise regards a childless couple or the resurrection of the dead.

It would be a mistake to read this text simply as a call to "more" or "better" human faith in God. The point Paul is after is primarily

about God. Underlying Paul's discussion of Abraham's faith is the utter conviction that God has not changed. While the advent of Jesus Christ is an apocalypse, an in-breaking of God in the world, God nevertheless continues to deal with human beings in the same way God dealt with Abraham. God may be trusted to justify human beings out of God's own grace and not based on their achievements or shortcomings.

### Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

The wealth of possibilities in the Gospel lesson for this Sunday will likely force the preacher to make some choices. The reading consists of the story of the call of Matthew (9:9), the account of Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (vs. 10-13), and the sandwiched stories of the restoration of the synagogue leader's daughter (vs. 18-19, 23-26) and the woman with persistent hemorrhaging (vs. 20-22). Each of the four incidents invites serious reflection.

First, Jesus sees Matthew "sitting at the tax booth" and confronts him with the abrupt command, "Follow me." And Matthew follows. It is not unlike the call earlier in the narrative of the two sets of brothers, who leave their boats and nets to follow Jesus (4:18-22). There are no windows that let the readers see the psychological dynamics at work in those confronted by Jesus. We are given the bare story. The point is that discipleship has to do with divine calls and human responses, with drastic changes of direction and radical transformation of commitments. Disciples are those who risk a break with the familiar in order to follow Jesus.

In one important feature, however, Matthew's call differs from the call of the two sets of brothers. Matthew is a tax collector, and collecting taxes is not the same as fishing. Already we have learned from the Sermon on the Mount that tax collectors can be singled out as people who act always in their own self-interest (5:46). They are prototype sinners. Here such a person responds to Jesus' call and follows. The immediateness of his obedience is striking. What a contrast he presents to the scribes who think evil in their hearts and grumble among themselves at Jesus' authority to forgive sins (9:3-4)! The consummate sinner obeys Jesus' word, while the religious are offended by the expression of his transcendent grace.

The second story follows immediately on the first. Not only Matthew but *many* tax collectors and sinners come and dine with Jesus. It is not clearly stated in the text in whose house the gathering took place, but there is sufficient evidence in Matthew's narrative to as-

sume that it was Jesus' house in Capernaum (see 4:13; 9:28; 13:1, 36; 17:25). Jesus is not only present but the host of the occasion, the one who invites known sinners to join him and his disciples and to eat at his table. The situation can be blamed solely on Jesus. This becomes clear in the Pharisees' question to the disciples: "Why does *your teacher* eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (emphasis added). Apparently, he does it often enough to gain the reputation of being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (11:19).

The Pharisees' question is inevitably one for those whose world is tidily organized according to the religious and the irreligious. Many Pharisees held that ritual purity was not to be practiced by Temple priests alone, but was an imperative for all Jews. Such an arrangement, however, has the effect of separating the good guys from the bad guys, and enables those who maintain the purity laws to be secure in their own situation. The boundary lines are distinct. There is a certain comfort in knowing where one stands and who are the insiders and the outsiders. Not surprisingly, Jesus' behavior disturbs and threatens such a world. His association with sinners blurs the lines and uncovers a grace so amazing that religious people, otherwise snug in the security of their religious identities, are left unsettled.

From the perspective of the tax collectors and sinners, however, Jesus' hospitality is welcomed. There is no threat, no menace, no intimidation in Jesus' house. Accustomed to living on the fringes of the religious community at best, they are not invited to dine at the table of One who has authority on earth to forgive sins (9:6). They are accepted by the One who is the ultimate judge (7:22-23).

The two miracle stories, so neatly interwoven in the way they advance the timing of the narrative, present an intriguing parallelism (9:18-26). Both characters are called "daughter" (9:18, 22). Both are restored after an approach is made to Jesus, the one publicly by the girl's father, the other secretly by the woman herself.

But the two stories also contain remarkable contrasts. The leader of the synagogue is a prominent figure, and the raising of his daughter is an astounding event that is reported throughout the region (9:26). The hemorrhaging woman, on the other hand, is unclean, and in Matthew's abbreviated account her healing goes unnoticed by anyone but herself and Jesus. For twelve years her physical condition would not allow her to enter the synagogue over which the leader presided. Yet, in her desperate act of reaching for the hem of Jesus' robe, she becomes a model of faith. Three times in the narrative, the verb "made well" (*sōzō*) is repeated, the same verb elsewhere translated "save." What happens to the woman is both a physical and a spiritual healing.