

band. Matthew "the tax collector" is among the despised, partly because his profession is noted for fleecing the people and partly because it has meant collaboration with the Romans. Whatever Matthew may have done since leaving his tax booth to follow Jesus, he still carries the distinction of being "the tax collector." Then there is Simon the Cananaean, whose distinction is not that he comes from the town of Cana or is a Canaanite, but that he is or was a Zealot, a political enthusiast, probably a member or former member of the Zealot party. Think what it must have been to have a collaborator with the Romans side by side with a Zealot, dedicated to the ousting of the Romans! And finally, there is Judas Iscariot, "who betrayed him." His presence among the disciples is a constant and sober reminder that those included in the mission carry the potential to oppose the very Christ who commissions them.

Fifth, Jesus' speech (10:5–23) depicts a mission fraught with rejection and opposition, hardly a grand success story. The image of "sheep [in] the midst of wolves" carries a variety of connotations, few of them positive. But the promise is the coming Son of Man (10:23), whose presence symbolizes vindication and restoration for the people of God.

## PROPER 7

Ordinary Time 12

*Sunday between  
June 19 and 25 inclusive  
(if after Trinity Sunday)*

An essential biblical dynamic of threat and promise characterizes the readings for this Sunday. Implicit in the story of Hagar and Ishmael is the threat—here relieved—to Isaac and to God's promises to Abraham and Sarah. The psalmist vividly captures the terror by unnamed forms of destruction that may threaten an individual or people (note v. 16, which forms a link to the Genesis lection). More systematically, Paul raises the specter of that most universal threat—death—but does so within the context of the new life won by Christ's resurrection. Matthew describes various ways in which the enemies of Jesus threaten his disciples because of their association with him.

Despite the reality and power of each of these situations, God's intervention proves to be more powerful still. The dynamic of God's threatened people always carries with it the assurance of God's presence. Matthew 10, with its familiar words of assurance concerning God's care even for the sparrows—even for the hairs on the head of a single human being!—promises God's continual connection with humanity. Paul's elaborate logic in Rom. 6:1b–11 labors to assert that life in Christ is even more powerful, even more pervasive, than the power and pervasiveness of death. The psalmist displays a faith in God's protection for those who trust in God. Isaac is redeemed by Abraham's harsh treatment of Hagar and Ishmael, but they in turn are redeemed by the promised protection of God.

God's presence in all these situations in turn makes a claim for faithfulness and loyalty. Faithfulness and loyalty are not preconditions for God's presence; nevertheless, the presence and promise of God assert God's claim in human life. In the terms of Matt. 10, the disciple and the teacher are profoundly connected. The disciple cannot rightly seek the protection of the teacher without also living in the light of that connection.

## Genesis 21:8–21

This story is a difficult text from which to preach, for it appears to approve of the harsh treatment of Hagar and her son, Ishmael, a treatment many modern readers would consider unjust. The ancient writer (the Elohist, in the view of many Old Testament scholars), however, had a different perspective and seems to have recounted the story as an example of God's mercy.

There can be little doubt that the narrative reflects ethnic and geographical distinctions of which most (if not all) ancient Israelites would have been conscious. A group of nomads, who probably spoke in a Semitic tongue closely skin to Hebrew, roamed the southern deserts. These "Ishmaelites" were traders (note Gen. 37:25), but because they were closely associated with another group, the Midianites (Judg. 8:24), it may be that they, like the Midianites, also lived as predators and raiders. In Ps. 83:6, Ishmaelites are listed among the enemies of God and of Israel.

Yet the Old Testament lectionary passage for this day is aware of a deep kinship between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites. And it affirms that, just as Isaac—and thus Israel—received life as a result of God's mercy, the same is true for Ishmael and his descendants.

The narrative rings with authenticity as a portrait of the patriarchal society that existed in the ancient Near East during the early second millennium B.C. Abraham, as the senior male figure, exercises life-and-death authority over the members of his family. Sarah, for her part, is queen of the harem and is thus able to wield influence over Abraham as Hagar cannot. Jealousy over Hagar and fear that the older child, Ishmael, might someday lay claim to his patrimony in such a manner as to exclude Isaac—these are the compelling reasons why Sarah demands their expulsion from the family. Yet even as God consents to the plan, God assures Abraham that Ishmael, too, will be the ancestor of a "nation" (Gen. 21:13).

The emotions of the reader are intensified as the sufferings of the mother and child increase. With their water and food exhausted, Hagar and Ishmael face a certain death, and the mother cannot bear to watch her child's final moments. But God responds to their peril and opens Hagar's eyes so that she can see the nearby well. (Interestingly, the narrative describes *Hagar's* weeping in v. 16, but in v. 17 reports that God heard the voice of the *boy*.)

The saving of Ishmael's life and his subsequent marriage to an Egyptian woman fulfill God's promise to Abraham recorded in v. 13. And so Abraham is on the way to becoming the father of not one, but

two nations, an understanding reflected in the modern Arab view that Abraham is the father of both Jews and Arabs.

## Psalm 86:1–10, 16–17

This rich psalm is a characteristic song of complaint, composed of a series of imperative petitions addressed to God, supported by a set of motivations introduced by the preposition "for," which might be rendered "because." The petitions ask (demand?) that Yahweh should reverse the present, unspecified threat and trouble. The reasons offer God motivations for acting in positive response to the imperative prayer.

The first set of petition and reason is stated in vs. 1–4. The series of imperatives—"incline . . . answer . . . preserve . . . save . . . be gracious . . . gladden"—all are the yearning, hopeful, insistent speech of someone in deep trouble who prays with urgency and confidence and with a sense that one has the right to ask for God's intervention. The petitions are supported with a series of reasons:

for I am poor and needy  
for I am devoted to you  
[Your servant] trusts in you  
You are my God  
for to you I cry all day long  
for to you I lift up my soul

This series suggests *great trouble*, with which God should be mightily impressed. It also affirms *deep trust* in God and honest, complete dependence on God.

These two elements, petition and reason, constitute Israel's most elemental prayer. Beyond the rhetoric, we may notice that this is a powerful act of faith. The speaker is completely confident that as God intervenes the trouble will be overcome. God is indeed interested in the troubles, and God is fully competent to overcome them.

Verse 5 is a momentary intrusion into the recital of petition and reason. This verse is a doxology which serves to remind God who God is, and how God characteristically and faithfully acts. This verse and the fuller version in v. 15 quote or at least allude to Ex. 34:6–7a, one of Israel's most preferred phrasings of faith, which is often and regularly reiterated. It asserts that the primary qualities of God are fidelity, forgiveness, and generosity. The prayer voices the hope that

God will bring precisely fidelity, forgiveness, and generosity to this particular circumstance of crisis, as God has done characteristically. In its present context, the doxology functions as a sweeping motivation offered to God, derived from Israel's primary confession of faith (cf. Num. 14:17–20). God is asked to be the same God here as God has been in the past.

Verses 6 and 7 resume the standard pattern of prayer we have already witnessed in vs. 1–4, a series of petitions followed by a motivation. The petitions are “give ear . . . listen . . . I call,” all seeking to get God's helpful attentiveness. The reason, “for you will answer,” is a statement of great confidence, which is based on the affirmation of v. 5. God will answer because God is “good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love.” God will act in God's characteristic way, it is affirmed, and overcome the problem.

After this second set of petitions, the psalm moves to a second lyrical doxology, something of a counterpart to v. 5. The doxology begins with a statement of God's incomparability. There is no other God and no other source of help that is as sure and reliable and powerful as is Yahweh (v. 8). There is no other God who is so ready to forgive and intervene.

Because of this doxological certitude, the speaker anticipates that all nations will eventually come to trust in and serve this God. Thus the psalm moves from the quite particular to a very large vista of adherence to Yahweh. The reason the nations will trust and serve this God is that the nations will, sooner or later, notice that their other gods, by contrast, are neither powerful nor faithful. Eventually all will recognize the splendor of Yahweh, about which this speaker already knows. The ground on which the nations shall come to faith in Yahweh are Yahweh's glorious deeds of creation, liberation, and transformation, which no other god can do.

The final verses now offer a third group of petitions plus reason (vs. 16–17), thus paralleling vs. 1–4 and 6–7. This series of petitions now provides descriptive references to the needful speaker, moving progressively from “me” to “your servant” to “the child of your serving girl.” Thus the speaker is one without social standing or power, and therefore utterly needful and dependent. The final lines of the psalm seek a complete inversion of circumstance, whereby the powerful shall be shamed and the little one helped and comforted. This assertion of the last becoming first and the humbled becoming exalted includes important echoes of the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:5–8) and the song of Mary (Luke 1:51–53).

This prayer breathes a piety of great confidence in Yahweh, utter

trust that Yahweh has the capacity and authority to make life whole, no matter what the problem in the life of the pray-er may be.

### Romans 6:1b–11

In Rom. 3:21–5:21, Paul had developed the theme of God's gracious gift of righteousness. Human beings, who are universally under the power of sin, are also the object of God's actions in Jesus Christ, actions that reveal the extent of God's grace. The claim that righteousness comes to humanity as a genuinely “free gift,” to use a contemporary redundancy, inevitably prompts some questions. Surely some in Paul's Roman audience found these remarks offensive, for they blur the cherished distinction between “good” people, who are thought to have “earned” God's favor, and those who are understood not to be good, to have “earned” God's displeasure. If none of Paul's contemporaries accused him of espousing “cheap grace,” that is only because the phrase was not yet familiar. The facetious question he himself imagines someone asking in 6:1b reflects the response that Christians have made throughout the centuries to the radical notion of grace: “Does that mean that it doesn't matter what I do?”

The answer to that question carries Paul throughout Rom. 6, but it begins with the emphatic “By no means!” of 6:2. Paul's response has two major foci: the believer's union with Jesus Christ, and the believer's freedom from sin. At first glance, Paul's reference to baptism in 6:3 appears to be abrupt. Not only has he not spoken of baptism earlier in the letter, but this is the only place in which Romans refers to baptism. The reference here is essential, however, since Paul sees baptism as incorporating believers “into Christ” (see Gal. 3:27) and bringing about the union with Christ that serves as the basis for Paul's comments in vs. 3–11.

Because baptism connects the believer's life with that of Jesus, it also connects the believer with Jesus' death. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (v. 3). However, the death of a believer is not physical; it is instead a death to the “old self” (v. 6), a death to sin (v. 11). Just as death can no longer have power over Christ, so sin no longer has power over the life of the believer. As is often the case in Paul's letters, the imagery here is physical in nature. The believer, by virtue of baptism, is *moved* from one arena of power to another. Baptism brings about a real and concrete change of location, so that the

believer is no longer in the arena that belongs to sin. For that reason, to say that one can be in the arena of grace, the arena of Jesus Christ, and at the same time in the arena of sin is for Paul an impossibility. Paul operates with a theological version of the physical law that the same object cannot occupy two places at once.

Baptism not only incorporates the believer in the death of Christ but also in Christ's resurrection. Here Paul chooses his language with very great care, perhaps because at least some believers at Corinth had concluded that their baptism meant that they had already been resurrected. The first half of v. 5 ("For if we have been united with him in a death like his") leads one to expect that the second half will affirm that "we have also been united with him in a resurrection like his." Since the death of the believer is not a physical death, Paul might also refer to a kind of resurrection that has already taken place in the life of the believer. He carefully avoids making that statement, however, by anticipating the resurrection of the believer at some future time. Nevertheless, baptism already inaugurates a new or renewed life (vs. 4, 11). If believers are not yet resurrected, they are already "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). Having been removed from the arena of sin, the power of sin, believers now inhabit the arena that belongs to God.

Within the context of the believer's dying and rising with Christ, Paul refers to slavery and freedom. The one who is crucified in baptism is no longer enslaved to sin but has been given freedom from sin (v. 7). Perhaps because of modern preoccupation with and understanding of freedom as a kind of license to do whatever one wishes, it is easy to read Paul's discussion of freedom as simply a freedom *from* the power of sin. But looking at the text that follows today's lection, we see that Paul's comments on freedom in 6:15-23 make it clear that Paul has in mind both freedom *from* the power of sin and freedom *for* obedience (see, for example, v. 17). In fact, v. 22 refers to Christians as having been "freed from sin and enslaved to God." The notion of enslavement, even enslavement to God, falls harshly on modern ears, but Paul does not operate with a generalized notion of freedom, in which human beings achieve a kind of independence from all powers and authorities. For Paul, humankind is always and inevitably enslaved to something or someone. The decisive question is not whether one is enslaved, but what form that slavery will take. The appropriate answer, in Paul's view, is that slavery to God stems from creation itself. God as the creator and redeemer of humankind rightly claims that humankind for God. At the same time, that profound enslavement means a profound liberation for genuine life and for service.

## Matthew 10:24-39

Some scriptural texts are harder to handle than others. None, however, may be more difficult than the texts that depict a dire role for the followers of Jesus—trials, sufferings, betrayals, threats, and even death. What are modern readers to do with such words? Most of the time, I suppose, we try to keep the texts at a great distance. Their words of warning about opposition and danger may have had significance for one group of disciples at a particular moment in time, we reason, but they are really not relevant to life in the world of North America at the end of the twentieth century. In a condensed version of the Bible, they would be the parts we would eliminate. They have historical value to tell us how dangerous it must have been to follow Jesus in the environment of the first century, but we do not live in the first century, and we sense an enormous gap between the readers Matthew addresses and ourselves. We find it hard to imagine ourselves as "sheep [sent] into the midst of wolves" (Matt. 10:16).

At the same time we dare not dismiss a text like Matt. 10 too quickly. It speaks a pointed message to the particular readers the evangelist projects; we do well to listen in on that conversation, to eavesdrop as Matthew conveys Jesus' charge to the disciples. The text says a lot about fidelity and fear, about the present and the future. In the particularity of the text may be a needed word for modern disciples.

The assigned reading for Proper 7 (Matt. 10:24-39) breaks down into four distinct movements. First, there is the close connection drawn between the disciple and the teacher, the slave and the master (10:24-25). Already, in the charge, the authority and mission of Jesus have been transmitted to the disciples (9:35-10:1); now the consequences are also transmitted. "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!" (10:25; cf. 9:34). There is an understated "logic" here. Why should disciples who have heard the words "Follow me" expect a different reception from the one Jesus receives? The details spelled out in 10:16-23 should not come as a big surprise for people who are "coming after" Jesus.

The second move in the text reassures the perplexed reader who begins to understand what being "like the master" implies. Three times in the paragraph (10:26-31) the command is given "Do not fear." (a) Do not fear, because the meager beginnings of the message of the kingdom will have grand consequences. What has been quietly spoken as a secret will be shouted from the housetops. A reality,

powerful and conclusive, has been launched, and there is no turning back the clock. (b) Do not fear those whose power is limited to the body. They can wreak their havoc, but they cannot ultimately destroy. Instead, be in awe of God, who finally controls the destinies of body and soul. The old adage finds scriptural warrant here: "Fear God, and fear no human authority." (c) Do not fear, because as heavenly Father, God knows and cares about every family member. If the sparrows get the divine attention, how much more will daughters and sons?

The third move in the passage is from reassurance to the reminder that human behavior ultimately matters (10:32–33). What is done or not done today in the project of being "like the master" has eternal consequences. There is no evading responsibility or claiming exemption because the issues were cloudy or the context uncertain. Matthew's Gospel in one sense is a long commentary on what it means to acknowledge or deny Jesus. From the call of the disciples to the Great Commission, the text confronts readers with characters who say yes or say no, with vignettes of faithfulness or unfaithfulness, with parables exposing devotion or defiance.

The fourth move in the passage is to the jagged words of Jesus, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (10:34). The advent of the new order Jesus brings, so radical in its message of love and freedom, challenges the structures and arrangements of the old order. The old wineskins cannot contain the dynamic of the new wine (9:17). The result is conflict ("a sword").

To change the image, when a blast of cold, arctic air moves south from Canada and meets the hot, humid air from the Gulf of Mexico, along the edge of the encounter a front forms, usually marked by storms and volatile weather. Jesus' word states that there is no encounter between the new order and the old that will not at some level be fraught with conflict, division, and pain. It is not simply that the old is threatened and resistive to the new; the new challenges the old and precipitates the strife.

The citation of Micah 7:6 (in Matt. 10:35–36) is a startling move by the narrator. In its context in the Hebrew scriptures, the passage describes the corrupt predicament in Judah when all the righteous people have perished and all productive social relationships have come to an end. The words in the Matthean context are now employed to depict what happens when the gospel is preached. The sacred institution of the family is singled out as the place where the conflict rages most severely, an area where loyalties run deep. In the text from Matthew the first commandment of the Decalogue is applied here as in other arenas of human life.

Jesus' message, then, does not provide an unequivocal reinforcement of family cohesiveness. It does not suggest that the sticking together of families necessarily reflects faithfulness or that by family solidarity society's ills will be remedied. Instead, Jesus calls into question an idolatry of the family and warns that the gospel may divide rather than unite the home. The sharp either/or of 10:37–38 is supported by the paradox of 10:39. The losing of life for the sake of Christ (and in Matthew's context, explicitly including vulnerability to martyrdom) is how life is experienced and truly discovered.