

In either case, the church is not a place of repose, but a community engaged in mortal conflict. It anticipates, even prepares itself for, vigorous opposition. Its clear confession of the crucified and risen Jesus threatens those who choose a more palatable creed and capitulate to the apparent finality of death.

Third, *the church is entrusted with the keys to God's reign, symbolizing the ultimate victory over death.* The graphic verbs "bind" and "loose" (16:19) tantalize. Whatever their origin, they conjure up the notions of restraining this person or freeing that person, of forbidding this action or permitting that action. They describe the functions of "keys" in excluding or admitting people to God's reign. Since they are backed with the authority of heaven, they are not functions to be taken lightly. Peter initially carries the "keys," but in light of Matt. 18:18 they are democratized and given to the whole church.

What a power to have in the midst of conflict! The "keys" become weapons of war in the struggle with the forces of death. Death is a powerful antagonist, with an array of tactics, mocking and intimidating the reality of life—only death fights with one hand tied behind its back. It has no access to the rule of God. Whatever the church binds, death cannot loosen, and whatever the church loosens, death cannot bind. Death is destined to lose, because its opponent has been given the decisive weapon.

PROPER 17

Ordinary Time 22

*Sunday between August 28
and September 3 inclusive*

The readings for this Sunday invite the listening church into the fullness of covenantal existence. That peculiar way of life is marked by celebrative gratitude and willing obedience. These are the only two matters that count for the church, gratitude and obedience.

The familiarity of the story of the burning bush in Ex. 3 should not be permitted to obscure the terrifying, yet liberating, event it remembers. Moses is attracted to inspect the bush because it is an oddity, but the real miracle he encounters is the presence of the living God, the God of Israel's ancestors. Not even Moses, however, could be prepared for the challenge that ensues: that he must return to Egypt to liberate his people, God's people. That Moses shrinks before such a chilling prospect is understandable; but the God-of-the-bush will not take "no" for an answer.

Psalms 105 is an exuberant recital of God's great acts of mercy in Israel's life (note Propers 12 and 14), in this instance focusing on Moses and Aaron (note v. 26). The key verb here is "sent" and its subject is, of course, God. There should be no mistaking the source of Israel's salvation, and in recognizing that source Israel sings the ultimate word of praise (v. 45c).

In the text from Rom. 12, Paul has taken the notion of covenant demand and has expounded it with daring and imagination. Obedience in covenant is not merely a matter of keeping rules. It is an act of being massively and completely transformed, readied for a new life in the world, which is marked by liberality and hospitality. Paul provides an inventory of new life for those who are changed and renewed by the gospel.

The Gospel reading from Matt. 16 is one of Jesus' most acute reflections on the obedience expected of the faithful. On the one hand, Jesus announces his own destiny of suffering obedience. On the other hand, Jesus invites his disciples to share in that radical destiny

of obedience to death, promising that such willing and total obedience is the door to new life.

It is clear in all these readings that there is for the faithful no "business as usual" permitted. The genuinely liberated are mandated to a new, costly way of life in the world. All of life is reshaped in response to the God who liberates and who continues to preside over that liberation with definitive and uncompromising demands. The required move from liberation to demand anticipates the Gospel announcement that obedience is a mode of freedom, that death is the way to real life.

Exodus 3:1-15

First, the miracle. The bush that is being burned but not consumed is one of those seminal emblems in the Bible for the presence of God. It is symbol of an irresistible Being, whose energies cannot be contained but who Itself/Himself/Herself (no pronoun is adequate) is not subject to decay or deterioration. This is the God whose self-description, "I AM WHO I AM" (v. 14), suggests a God who is so completely unlike all other existing persons and things as to make comparisons meaningless. This is the God who generates, but who also stands outside, the spheres of generation and degeneration.

Moses, whose eye is caught by the visible miracle, moves in for a closer inspection only to be seized by the larger miracle of the nature of this Diety. The command to Moses that he remove his sandals serves to remind him (and to remind us, as well) that the real wonder here is not that of a shrub that refuses to be burned up, but that of a God unlike any other. Yet a new surprise follows: Moses' awe is immediately brought up short by a second declaration from the God-of-the-bush. This is no mountain jinni, no spirit of the rocks and sand. The terrible God-of-the-bush is also the familiar God of the Hebrews' ancestors. The Unknown One is none other than that One who clearly showed abundant compassion to the generations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Second, the declaration. This God-of-the-incredible-bush, this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a God who cares about the sufferings of people (vs. 7-9). Moses, who himself knew what it meant to protect and defend others, would resonate to this aspect of God's personality, because Moses, of all people, knew that caring for others was expensive and hurtful (note Ex. 2:11-22). And so it would have been with great joy that Moses heard God's declaration, "I have

observed the misery of my people . . . ; I have heard their cry . . . I have come down to deliver them." If the promise of a land of milk and honey seemed too good to be true, that would have been beside the point. The God-of-the-incredible-bush cared about Israel, and about justice, and about protecting those who couldn't protect themselves. And that made all the difference.

But then, the challenge! Moses is openly astonished that what this compassionate, justice-loving God-of-the-bush intends to do is to be done by none other than Moses himself. "So come, I will send *you* to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (v. 10, emphasis added). To Moses' mind, such a plan of action must have presented at least two difficulties, but he verbalizes only one of them. If you are a consuming-God-who-is-not-consumed, why not take care of this yourself? Moses must have wondered. Still, he gives voice only to the more uncomfortable question: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (v. 11). God's response to Moses' understandable reservation is, of course, to say that Moses will not be alone. The awesome God-of-the-bush will be with him, so that not even Pharaoh need be feared.

This seems to be the force of the puzzling statement, "This shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you" (v. 12). Although NRSV and other translations render the English in such a manner as to cause the demonstrative pronoun "this" to refer to the people's act of worship on the mountain at a future time, "this" almost certainly is a reference to the burning bush. A different translation might be:

He said, "I will be with you, and this [experience of the burning bush] will be the sign for you that it is I who have sent you. [Thus,] when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain [in commemoration of the encounter with God here in the burning bush]."

No one is a witness to this sign but the solitary Moses, yet its meaning will be in his heart in the days to come when he stands before Pharaoh. He has been commissioned to lead his people out of bondage by none other than the terrible God-of-the-bush, the faithful God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I AM WHO I AM. When faced with such a commission from such a Being, not even the trembling Moses could say no. Like many faithful people since (cf. Jer. 20:9), Moses' instincts for comfort and safety are brushed aside by the terrible presence of the living God, a God whose call to service he could not bring himself to ignore.

Psalm 105:1–6, 23–26, 45c

As in Propers 12 and 14, this Psalm reading is a recital of Israel's normative memory, this time focusing on the experience of Israel in the abuse of Egypt, the house of bondage.

On the hymnic introduction of Ps. 105:1–6, see Proper 12. Israel is invited to awe and wonder at God's transformative interventions.

The brief portion of the body of the psalm that is our reading concerns the transition of Israel in Egypt, from welcomed guest to exploited labor (vs. 23–26). The beginning point for Israel in Egypt, as this psalm reckons it, is not the coerced arrival of Joseph sold as a slave, but his father, Jacob, drawn to the food of Egypt by the famine of Canaan (Gen. 45:9–47:4). Thus, "Israel" in v. 23 is parallel to "Jacob" and refers to this man who is father of a large, extended network of tribes represented by his sons. Jacob and his family came to Egypt ("land and Ham") as fugitives from famine. Though Jacob was received by Pharaoh and welcomed with great pomp and proper protocol befitting a chieftain (Gen. 47:7–12), he was nonetheless an outsider without property or political rights. The term "alien" (which is often translated as "sojourner") is a legal classification that means that one lives at the behest (whim) of those in power, thus always in a position of vulnerability and political and economic jeopardy (cf. Gen. 47:4).

Two things happen to this man and his family, finally recognized as happening at the behest of Yahweh, whose "guests" they turn out to be (cf. Ps. 39:12). First, Yahweh, the Lord of all lands and Lord of creation, made the people of Jacob fruitful, numerous and strong. The narrative telling of Ex. 1:7 uses the phrasing of the Creation narrative (Gen. 1:28), suggesting that all the power of blessing in the process of creation is here assigned to his singular family. This family is the carrier of blessing with enormous potential, which turns out to be a threat to Pharaoh.

Second, the subject "he" in Ps. 105:25 is also Yahweh. It is Yahweh who caused the foe to hate Jacob and his people, so that they become the object of rage and resentment, which issues in imperial policies of exploitation. In the larger narrative of Exodus, two reasons are given for the hostility of official Egypt: Israel is so numerous as a result of God's blessing that they constitute a population threat to the settled population (see Ex. 1:9–10). The second reason for abuse is that the Israelites are a supply of cheap labor and must not be permitted to escape (see Ex. 5:4–9). Thus, the two reasons are mutually exclusive. Because too numerous, it would be better if they left; but as cheap labor, they must not leave. It is noteworthy, however, that

the version of this emergence of hatred in the psalm is credited to neither of these reasons. Rather, it is Yahweh who turned (inverted) the hearts of the Egyptians (Ps. 105:25). The same sentiment is elsewhere expressed, that Yahweh "hardened" their hearts (cf., e.g., Ex. 7:13; 8:32). The same God who makes prosperous is the God who sponsors anger and an adversarial relationship. Because of Yahweh's inscrutable negative activity, Egypt deals deceptively with Israel, rendering Israel ever more helpless and dependent.

But then, in v. 26, Yahweh intervenes once again, with the decisive word "sent," as in vs. 17 and 20, on which see Proper 14. Moses and Aaron, servants of Yahweh, are chosen for a special work, namely to extricate Jacob's family from their enslavement. Our reading is terse concerning Israel's future opened by Moses and Aaron, on which see vs. 27–44, part of which appears in Proper 20.

These verses of the psalm thus witness to three actions of Yahweh:

- (1) positive: Yahweh made Israel fruitful;
- (2) negative: Yahweh turned hearts to hate;
- (3) positive: Yahweh sent Moses and Aaron.

Israel, in telling its tale of faith, finds it necessary to tailor God's story to the intractable realities of experience. God governs, but in no single, clean line of success. All is in God's good hands. The outcome is glorious, but the "road is stoney."

On v. 45 and the conclusion of obedience, see Propers 12 and 14. This leads to the ultimate response of praise: "Praise the LORD!"

Romans 12:9–21

This lection consists of a series of loosely connected exhortations, each of which provides a glimpse into what is meant by presenting the body "as a living sacrifice" (12:1; see the comments for Proper 16). Those who have been transformed in this way are enabled to discern God's will (12:2) and to act on behalf of the larger community (vs. 3–8). These specific instructions, then, serve to illustrate what has been identified already as the nature of Christian life.

The particulars of vs. 9–21 derive from a variety of sources. Several come from the Jewish wisdom tradition. Verse 15, for example, echoes Sir. 7:34: "Do not avoid those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn." When Paul warns, "Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil," he clearly recalls Prov. 3:7: "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away

from evil." Romans 12:20 directly quotes from the Septuagint of Prov. 25:21.

Some of these admonitions have close parallels elsewhere in the letters of Paul. For example, Rom 12:9 closely follows the sense of 1 Thess. 5:21–22, though not the actual wording. Second Corinthians 8:21 is echoed in v. 17; and 2 Cor. 13:11 in v. 18. Perhaps most surprisingly, given how seldom Paul appeals to the teachings of Jesus, at least one of these instructions (v. 14) recalls a saying of Jesus (Luke 6:28).

Identifying these various sources and parallels does not clarify the task of preaching from this passage, of course. If anything, it increases the sense that the passage is a disjointed hodgepodge of ethical instructions, which overwhelms the reader by its lack of focus. The temptation may be to domesticate it by appealing to a vague and sentimentalized form of love.

One alternative approach might be to explore the connection made here between the believer's love of God and service in the human community. The opening of the chapter has already made clear, at least implicitly, that the proper response to "the mercies of God" is one that serves both God (12:1–2) and other human beings (vs. 3–8). The link between the two continues in this lection, where being ardent in spirit and serving the Lord (v. 11) stand alongside mutual affection and contributions for the saints (vs. 10, 13). Over against the tension in contemporary Christianity between those who would emphasize one side of that imperative to the exclusion (or apparent exclusion) of the other, Paul sees them as intimately connected.

Another alternative might be to focus on what Paul says here about dealing with evil, since that concern appears in several of the exhortations. Initially, Paul admonishes that Christians should "hate what is evil" and "hold fast to what is good" (v. 9). No expansion explains the directive or justifies it. Evil is simply to be avoided or rejected.

Paul returns to the topic, although this time in a more specific form, in v. 14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Here he addresses not evil in a general sense, but the particular instance of those who persecute the faithful. Consistent with the teaching of Jesus (see Luke 6:28), the persecutor is to be blessed rather than hated. As in the first instance, however, no elaboration justifies or explains this directive. Verse 17, while lacking the positive note about "blessing" of v. 14, again simply instructs that evil is not to be exchanged for evil.

With vs. 19–21, however, explanations enter the picture. One of these explanations is entirely theological; the other might be termed

"pragmatic." The reason that Christians are not to "repay anyone evil for evil" or avenge themselves is that God alone has the right to vengeance. Consistent with Paul's notion that judgment is reserved for God (see, for example, Rom. 14:10–12), he here insists that vengeance also is reserved for God. In other words, Christians have no need to seek revenge or repayment of wrong. That is God's prerogative, and God's alone!

With the use of Prov. 25:21–22 in Rom. 12:20, however, Paul does offer a solution for the short term: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Rather than seeking revenge, Paul sagely encourages the doing of good to the enemy, for the impact of that good promises to be far more humiliating—far more effective!—than sheer repayment of evil. Verse 21 seems to make it clear that this is his understanding. To "overcome evil with good" is not to lie down before evil so that it simply has its way, but to conquer it by the skillful use of good.

So familiar is the "doormat" version of Christianity, in which Christians are taught that their duty is to accept whatever evil comes their way, that the craftiness of Paul's words here slips by. Evil *need not* be passively accepted, nor need it be avenged, when we understand that, finally, God is the one who judges all humankind. In many forms, evil can also be thwarted in the meantime by those who understand the capacity of good to humiliate and expose evil for what it truly is.

Matthew 16:21–28

This Sunday's reading from the Gospel can hardly be separated from the reading for last Sunday. The two belong very much together. For example, Jesus' anticipation of his suffering, death, and resurrection in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21) is particularly important because it follows Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God in 16:16. The sayings about self-denial and cross bearing become critical in light of Jesus' earlier conversation with the disciples in vs. 13–20. And perhaps most of all, Peter's exchange with Jesus in vs. 22–23 cannot be severed from Peter's previous confession of and commendation from Jesus (vs. 16–19).

Peter's conduct throughout the passage is intriguing. We are not surprised in v. 16 when Peter is the one to respond to Jesus' question. After all, he is the first disciple to be called (4:18), and his name heads the list of the Twelve when they are commissioned (10:2). He alone

of the disciples walks on the sea to meet Jesus, if only a few fearful steps (15:28–31). In one sense, in responding to Jesus, Peter acts as spokesperson for the other disciples, but in another sense he speaks for himself. It is he alone to whom the divine revelation has been given; he is the only one about whom the special beatitude is spoken. He is singled out as distinctive, honored by being the peculiar recipient of a heavenly gift.

Then something drastic happens in the narrative. Jesus begins to talk to the disciples about the immediate future, the journey to Jerusalem, his suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter again becomes a participant in the conversation, in fact an aggressive participant. He feels strongly that he must dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem and meeting such a dire fate. "This must never happen to you!"

In an instant, Jesus and Peter are on opposite sides of a conflict. Colleagues have become opponents. "You are a stumbling block to me," Jesus says. "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." The prophet who has received the special revelation from God becomes immediately mired in a human way of thinking. The one especially blessed by Jesus is now called "Satan." The rock on which the church is to be built turns out to be a stumbling block for Jesus.

What precipitates Peter's change? He *does* nothing wrong. According to Jesus' verdict, Peter simply begins to think the wrong thoughts. The imagination that once was attuned to the divine revelation becomes domesticated. He cannot bring himself to contemplate that suffering and death are a part of the vocation of the Messiah. Peter's rebuke of Jesus might be rendered, "Certainly God will be gracious to you, Lord, and will not let this happen!" His human viewpoint wants to exclude vulnerability, to pull down the blinds on the distasteful, and to see Jesus through to a successful Messiahship. Setting the mind on earthly things hardly seems a dastardly deed, but it proves ultimately decisive.

The dramatic shift in Peter's place in the narrative makes a powerful impact on the careful reader. Nothing in the text attributes the shift to a defective trait, to a fickle or impulsive personality. To dismiss Peter as a wishy-washy type who speaks before he thinks misses the point. It fails to take seriously both Jesus' commendation of Peter (16:17–19) and his rebuke of Peter (v. 23). Peter really does occupy a special spot as the recipient of divine revelation, but it is just this privileged place that fails to grasp the reality of Jesus' suffering and death. Peter has his followers in every generation, reli-

gious people who give the right answers (and genuinely so) but who find a crucified Christ offensive.

Jesus' sayings about denying self and bearing the cross hit home in light of Peter's domesticated mind-set. What is true for the Messiah is also true for the Messiah's disciples. The language sounds almost too radical to be realistic, too sharp and demanding to be taken seriously. The coopted imagination assumes that there is a way to gain life other than by losing it, a way to Easter other than through Good Friday, an avenue to messiahship other than through suffering and death. But the rhetorical questions of v. 26 powerfully expose the presumptuousness of any other alternative to the cross.

The two final verses set the whole passage into an eschatological context. The Son of Man, about whom the disciples were initially queried (v. 13), turns out to be both the judge who calls to account all God's people and the inaugurator of God's sovereign rule (vs. 27–28). What disciples think and how actions and thoughts cohere, then, are not trivial matters. They are the concern of the returning Son of Man, who himself resisted the allures of the tempter Peter and fulfilled his vocation at Jerusalem.