

towns that welcome the Seventy and to the towns that reject them, they are to announce, "The kingdom of God has come near" (10:9, 11). To one it comes as a word of salvation: the inbreaking of God's rule means deliverance and hope. To the other it comes as a word of judgment, a destiny comparable to Sodom. The stakes are high for those who receive or don't receive the laborers sent into the harvest.

The importance of the mission appears again in 10:16, when through a form of juridical identification both Jesus and God become linked with the laborers. The acceptance or rejection of the laborers becomes an acceptance or rejection of Jesus and God. In declaring God's rule, the Seventy are engaged in a life-or-death business.

According to Luke, the Seventy report a joyous and profitable mission (10:17). Their announcement that even the demons are subject to them evokes from Jesus a theological interpretation and a word of warning. On the one hand, Jesus sees that the exorcisms performed by the Seventy constitute an assault on the heart of the opposition, Satan himself. The rule of the enemy is being overcome. The conflict between the lambs and the wolves is a critical stage in the larger war between God and Satan. On the other hand, Jesus warns that they not become too preoccupied with their successes, but instead be content to be numbered among God's people. Their identity comes from their inclusion among a great and honored group.

## PROPER 10

Ordinary Time 15

*Sunday between  
July 10 and 16 inclusive*

Amos 7:7-17 introduces a series of lectionary readings from the prophets. The initial section of the passage is the third in a series of four visions experienced by Amos concerning God's judgment on Israel. Amos appears to have lost all hope that the people would realize the serious nature of their sin and renounce it. Because Amos has now come to terms with this melancholy reality, he also understands that God's judgment must inevitably come. The second section records negative reaction to Amos's preaching on the part of the nation's officials; yet Amos refuses to soften his words in spite of the ominous threats that are implied against him.

Psalm 82 is saturated with the mythological imagery of the world of ancient Israel's neighbors, and because of this feature it may sound strange to modern ears. Yet in its proclamation of the supreme rule of the God of Israel, the psalm delivers a quite contemporary message: those who forfeit loyalty to the true God will only have their lives dominated by false and destructive gods of their own creation.

The Epistle lection, Col. 1:1-14, is the first of several readings from Colossians. After a somewhat typical salutation (vs. 1-2), the text includes a remarkable statement of thanksgiving (vs. 3-8), which emphasizes the crucial place within the Christian life of the qualities of faith, love, and hope. Then the author discusses his prayers on behalf of his readers, prayers that center on their need for the "knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Images of light, power, and redemption conclude the passage, perhaps reflections of a baptism formula.

The parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37, is rendered extremely difficult for the preacher because of its familiarity to modern women and men, both those inside the church and those outside. At the same time, the secularization of the parable has resulted in important distortions of Jesus' message in delivering it.

The Samaritan was an outsider, a person looked down on by "good" Jewish society. Yet in an ironic twist the one who is "good" is this very outsider. The power of the parable does not end there, for as one begins to imagine its larger meanings, one places oneself in the ditch as the victim who is at the mercy of the very outsider who has been rejected. Thus the parable points to the role of Christ himself.

### Amos 7:7-17

With this text from Amos the lectionary begins a series of readings from the prophetic books (in the sense of books associated with individual prophetic figures), which continues for the balance of the liturgical year, the only quasi-exception being Proper 22 (Lamentations is associated with Jeremiah, but is no longer believed to have been written by him). The order is chronological, the first six texts (Proper 10 through Proper 15) being from preexilic prophets.

The passages appointed for this day and for Proper 11 both come from a section of the book of Amos in which four, or possibly five (depending on how one classifies them) related visions are recorded. The sequence of these visions is important and helps to set the theological outlook of the lectionary passages. The first two visions (7:1-3 and 7:4-6) are identical in form. The prophet sees images of destruction (locusts, fire) which indicate God's impending judgment on the people. In each case the prophet successfully intervenes, and Yahweh decides not to pursue the divine purpose. The second set of visions (7:7-9; 8:1-3) is similar in structure to the first pair, in that each begins with a vision of destruction. (The plumb line is obviously Yahweh's standard by which the people's justice and faithfulness are determined. For the reasons why the basket of summer fruit is a sign of judgment, see Proper 11.) But the second set of visions takes an ominous turn in that, following each vision, there is no attempt by the prophet to intervene on the people's behalf. What is more, there is no change in Yahweh's intentions: judgment appears inevitable; the people will be destroyed.

(A fifth vision is found in 9:1-4, but its form is considerably different from any of the visions in chaps. 7 and 8.)

Amos 7:7-9, which constitutes the beginning of the present lection, is thus a sharp turning point in the series of visions. One suggestion is that the prophet has become so discouraged about the possibility that the people will ever pull back from their sinful ways that he makes no effort to dissuade Yahweh from Yahweh's purpose, as he had in 7:2, 5. Amos's complaint is twofold: the people

have turned their worship into a meaningless exercise (4:4-5) and they have replaced compassion with cruelty and greed in their dealings with one another (2:6-7). Those who possess power and wealth are especially condemned (6:4-7), and they and the nation will be forced into exile (note 3:2, Amos's message in a nutshell). The prophet's memorable appeal in 5:21-24, perhaps the most-often-quoted passage from Amos, seems to imply that he still has hope that the nation can be saved. But it lies beside another text, 5:18-20, which suggests that even Amos has lost hope for a reconciliation between the people and their God. Perhaps, then, 7:7-9 marks that moment in time when the prophet surrenders in anger and disgust over the people's ways. It appears to be Amos's way of saying, "You have been patient long enough, O Yahweh. I can no longer ask you to delay the inevitable consequences of the nation's sinfulness."

The balance of our passage, 7:10-17, contains one of the few biographical references to the prophet. (The book of Amos, it will be remembered, is a watershed in the writing of the Bible. Whereas earlier prophets had been remembered anecdotally—the stories about Elijah and Elisha are examples—Israel now begins to collect anthologies of what its prophets have *said*. The book of Amos thus helps give shape to the books of Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the like.)

Amos's preaching (see 1:3-2:16, where we may have an entire sermon by the prophet) had reached the ears of those in high places, and the results were predictable. The prophet's attacks on social predators and on false worship threatened the political-religious establishment, because their interests were vested in precisely those abuses which Amos exposed. Because the temple at Bethel, like the Temple at Jerusalem, was under the protection of the king, the priest Amaziah had no trouble receiving royal sanction for his order to Amos to leave the land. This is a pattern that would be repeated again and again, involving such persons as Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and—of course—Jesus himself. (Also note 1 Kings 22:1-28, which records a similar incident a century before Amos.)

At first glance, Amos's reply in Amos 7:14-15 seems puzzling. How is it that this man could claim to be "no prophet . . ." ? When one remembers, however, that much early Israelite prophetic activity was carried on by groups like the "company of prophets" of Elijah and Elisha (see 2 Kings 2:7; note also 1 Sam. 10:5), it becomes evident that Amos is saying that he belongs to no prophetic band, but has been designated by Yahweh to be a solitary bearer of the divine word. How much lonelier this would have made Amos's task! Amos had obeyed the command of God to assume the pro-

phetic role, not because he cherished it, but because, like Jeremiah (Jer. 20:7–9), he had no alternative. He could not be Yahweh's person and say no to the terrible task to which Yahweh called him. And so he answers Amaziah's demand with a further promise of Yahweh's judgment to come (vs. 16–17). Whether he was punished by the authorities for this faithfulness we can only guess.

## Psalm 82

Psalm 82 may sound strange to many people, since more than any other psalm it gives us a view of the ancient Near Eastern polytheism that formed Israel's religious background. In Canaanite religion, it was the high God El who convened the council of the gods. (For other Old Testament views of this concept, see, for example, Ps. 58:1–2; 1 Kings 22:19–23; and Job 1:6–12.) In Ps. 82:1, it is Israel's God who has displaced El and who convenes what proves to be an extraordinary meeting. Israel's God proceeds to put the other gods on trial. After the gods are indicted (vs. 2–4), the case is summarized (v. 5), and the sentence is announced (vs. 6–7). Verse 8 is the psalmist's plea for God to claim the dominion that the gods had formerly held, and to rule justly. In essence, then, Ps. 82 affirms again what we have identified as the theological "heart" of the Psalter: the Lord reigns (see especially Pss. 96, 97, and 99).

The key issue in the trial of the gods is how they "judge" (v. 2) or administer "justice" (v. 3; note too the two other occurrences of the root *špt*—"holds judgment" in v. 1 and "judge" in v. 8). In a role that combines the functions of prosecutor and judge, God accuses the gods of judging "unjustly" (*'āwel*) and showing partiality (v. 2). The inadequacy of such behavior is also clear in another context, where God commands the people of Israel to "do no injustice [*'āwel*] in judgment [*mišpāt*]" and "not be partial" (Lev. 19:15). The rationale for these commandments involves the nature of divinity. Leviticus 19, part of the Holiness Code, is governed by the opening exhortation, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (19:2). In short, injustice among humans and certainly injustice among the gods violates the very nature of divinity and the divine will for the world.

The importance of justice in the human realm is emphasized in Ps. 82:3–4. The series of imperatives does not really function to exhort the gods, but rather to indict them. The gods have failed to "give justice" and "maintain the right" (v. 3). The roots of these two verbs often appear in noun forms as the parallel pair "justice" and

"righteousness," especially in the prophets (see Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12; and the Old Testament lesson for the day). Justice and righteousness exist where human relationships are ordered properly; the criterion is what is done for the categories of people mentioned in vs. 3–4—the weak, the orphaned, the lowly, the destitute, and the needy. Not surprisingly, another place that justice and righteousness appear as parallels is in the psalms that proclaim the Lord's reign (see Pss. 97:2; 99:4; compare 96:10, 13; 98:9). Again the establishment of justice and righteousness is the measure both of divinity and of human life as God intends it. God intends all persons, especially the powerless, to have access to the resources that make life possible.

The speaker in 82:5 could be the psalmist as narrator, but it seems more likely that God continues to speak. The case against the gods is summarized, and the result of their failure is stated. The shaking of "all the foundations of the earth" represents a worst-case scenario. According to the ancient view of the world, the mountains were the foundations that held the sky up and held the waters back from flooding dry land. For the foundations to be shaken meant that the whole creation was threatened by chaotic collapse (see Isa. 24:18–19; Ps. 46:1–3). In other words, v. 5 suggests that injustice destroys the world! Because the gods have failed to do justice, they are guilty of destroying human life as God intends it, and thus they deserve to die (vs. 6–7). The death of the gods opens the way for Yahweh's reign of justice (v. 8).

How do we hear such an overtly mythological text in our very different world? Needless to say, Ps. 82 is a poetic profession of faith, not a literal description of a trial in heaven. In other words, without adopting the ancient Near Eastern worldview, we can still appreciate the conviction that injustice destroys the world. In fact, we can see it happening around us in the chaotic conditions that exist in our world, in our cities and neighborhoods, in our schools and churches and homes. The fact that the foundations of the earth are still shaking in our day suggests again that Ps. 82 does not literally describe the death of the gods, but rather denies them ultimacy. As the apostle Paul put it in 1 Cor. 8:5–6: "Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Paul elsewhere refers to these "so-called gods" as "the rulers and authorities" (Col. 2:15; compare RSV "the principalities and powers"; see also Eph. 3:10); and they are still with us in many forms—wherever and whenever some persons benefit by denying

the God-given humanity of other persons. As James L. Mays suggests, "As long as nations and their peoples do not see the reign of God as the reality that determines their way and destiny, there will be other gods who play that role" (*Psalms*, Interpretation series; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994).

For followers of Jesus Christ, the gods are dead; all "rulers and authorities" other than the Lord have been dethroned. We profess to live solely under the reign of God that Jesus announced and embodied, in a ministry of justice and righteousness that was especially directed to the weak and the needy. Thus we cannot help hearing the plea of Ps. 82:8 in terms of the prayer Jesus taught: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10, emphasis added).

### Colossians 1:1-14

This lection opens in a familiar way, both for its initial recipients and for contemporary readers. Whether or not the original audience had previously received letters from a Christian apostle, they certainly knew what to expect from the beginning of a letter. Even the thanksgivings of early Christian letters, which may sound odd to modern ears, were standard fare. "I thank the lord Serapis [that is, the god] that when I was in peril on the sea he saved me immediately," writes one young man to his father. Another writes to his mother: "And continually I pray that you may be in health. I make intercession for you day by day to the lord Serapis." (These letters may be found in Howard Clark Kee, *The Origins of Christianity*; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973, pp. 264-65.)

For contemporary readers, the familiarity stems from our knowledge of the Pauline letters as a whole. In this particular instance, of course, there has been considerable debate regarding the authorship of Colossians. While the details of that debate have no place in the pulpit, the discussion itself does illuminate certain aspects of this letter (for example, the very high Christology of Col. 1:15-20 and the identification of the church with Christ's body in 1:24). Suggesting that the letter could have been written by a student or disciple of Paul may also be a way of highlighting the impact of Paul and the collegial nature of his ministry.

The thanksgiving of this letter (1:3-8) consists of one long Greek sentence, although English translations will not reflect that fact. It moves almost in a circle, from thankfulness for the faith, love, and

hope of the Colossians to the growth of the gospel, and back to the love of the Colossians (as reported by Epaphras). To put it somewhat differently, the thanksgiving begins locally and specifically, with its focus on the Christian life and experience of this particular audience. Then it moves in a more general direction, toward the "bearing fruit and growing" of the gospel in the whole world (v. 6). Finally, it returns to the specific experience of this local group with the ministry of Epaphras.

With vs. 9-14, the author takes up his prayers of intercession on behalf of this congregation. He prays that they will have knowledge and strength. In light of the remainder of the letter, with its concerns about some false teachers who might mislead the Colossians, this prayer for knowledge and strength has a very special force to it. Although the problem at Colossae cannot be reconstructed precisely, glimpses through the letter suggest that the deceivers (2:4) who threaten have emphasized their own knowledge and their own strength. They introduce "plausible arguments" (2:4) and parade their own "philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition" (2:8). They encourage some teachings with "an appearance of wisdom" (2:23).

The intercessory prayer that begins in 1:9 ably responds to this emphasis on human wisdom, a temptation in every age. The writer prays for knowledge, but knowledge of a particular sort: "knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9). This knowledge does not exist for its own sake or as an end in itself, but "so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord" (v. 10). Likewise, the strength the writer seeks on behalf of the Colossians is a strength that comes from God and enables its recipients to endure and give thanks to God (vs. 11-12). Only such knowledge and strength genuinely deserve to be called by those names.

The prayer concludes with traditional language that may have been drawn from a baptismal liturgy. Three powerful images about God's action on behalf of humankind come together here. First, God "has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light" (v. 12). We find this imagery of light not only in Judaism and Christianity, but in many other religious traditions. It stems from the experience, universal in a world without artificial illumination, of stumbling in the dark of night versus walking with confidence in the light of day.

Second, God has "rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (v. 13). The contrast between two realms of power strongly suggests that the

"power of darkness" here is not simply the darkness of night but the realm of Satan, who takes advantage of the night (compare Luke 22:53). God has literally moved people from one region to another.

Third, by means of this movement "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Elsewhere, outside the New Testament, redemption refers to release from imprisonment or slavery. In the Pauline letters, however, it takes on an eschatological flavor, as in Rom. 8:23 and Eph. 4:30. The fact that Colossians refers to redemption as a present state may weigh against its having been written by Paul.

Surely the joy and confidence of this letter prompted a joyous and confident response on the part of its first audience. From the vantage point of the church at the end of the twentieth century, however, an element of irony intrudes when Col. 1:6 refers to the gospel's growth "in the whole world." By the time this letter was written, of course, the gospel was spreading rapidly, but a generous amount of hyperbole is involved in the phrase "the whole world." By contrast with our crisis of confidence over the future of the church, the author of this letter knew that the gospel could not ultimately be defeated.

### Luke 10:25-37

What possibly new and fresh word can one say about the parable of the good Samaritan? No portion of scripture is so widely known and quoted as this story of Jesus. What makes preaching on it so difficult is the fact that the good Samaritan has become a secularized saint. Hospitals, helping groups, and civic awards are named after him, without much attention to who he is or who introduced him into the literary world in the first place. To be a good Samaritan is shorthand for helping once a week at the local soup kitchen, going out of one's way at the Christmas season to see that the food baskets get delivered to the neediest people, sacrificing five Saturdays in a row to work on a Habitat for Humanity project.

There is nothing wrong with lending a helping hand, mind you. It is just that our secularized saint has little resemblance to the character in Jesus' story. Wrenching him out of his context and making him a symbol for do-goodism (usually the favored fortunate doing good to the unattractive, less fortunate) misses the sharp bite of the parable and helps us avoid its shocking and threatening challenge. The task the preacher faces is to find a means to displace the distorted image of popular piety (Christian and non-Christian)

and invite the congregation to hear the disturbing tale afresh. Maybe a paraphrase like that of the *Cotton Patch Version* would help.

It is essential to begin with the lawyer's initial interchange with Jesus (Luke 10:25-29). While his question about inheriting eternal life is raised "to test Jesus," the mood of the scene does not seem peculiarly combative. When directed by Jesus to the Torah, this expert in the Torah provides the right answer. He is commended by Jesus, but then, lest he think this a purely academic debate, he is also told, "Do this, and you will live" (10:28).

"Wanting to justify himself," the lawyer poses the question, "And who is my neighbor?" Does this mean that he is a bit embarrassed by his previous question about eternal life, which Jesus made him answer for himself? Does he want to "justify himself" by raising another, more complex issue? Or is his counterquestion a way of avoiding the personal directness of Jesus' response ("Do this, and you will live")? It is hard to tell. In either case, his second question is a legitimate one, debated often by the scribes, especially since the original command to love the neighbor specifies "your kin" and "any of your people" (Lev. 19:17-18; compare Matt. 5:43).

Instead of a direct answer, the lawyer gets a parable—maybe a more direct answer than he bargained for. Four features of the story need to be underscored. First, the priest and the Levite ought not to be immediately turned into bad guys—either hardhearted and calloused or too prissy to get their hands dirty. Their decision to pass by on the other side would not have been a surprise to, nor would it likely have been condemned by, Jesus' hearers. The victim in the ditch no doubt seemed to be dead ("half dead"), and priests were forbidden from going where there was a dead body, even when the dead body was a parent (Lev. 21:10-11). The priest and Levite simply represent the traditional way religious figures would deal with a situation like this.

Second, the Samaritan really was a despised person. Adding the adjective "good" (not in the parable) to Samaritan has tended to reduce the element of racial tension that underlies the story and gives it its force. To the lawyer, to the Jews in Jesus' audience, and to Luke's readers, there was no misunderstanding about Samaritans. (After all, in the narrative a Samaritan village had just denied welcome to Jesus and the disciples, and James and John wanted to call down fire to consume it, Luke 9:52-54.) They were half-breeds, who had refused to participate in the restoration of Jerusalem and had aided the Syrian leaders in their wars against the Jews. Their temple had been destroyed by a Jewish high priest. Anyone else

might have been the third character coming along the road to Jericho, but Jesus' choice of the Samaritan, the ultimate outsider, to help the victim, was (and is) a stunner. To miss this is to miss a major feature of the story.

Third, the question "Who is my neighbor?" gets asked again, this time by Jesus, and answered by the lawyer (10:36-37). He, a Jew, has to acknowledge that the despised Samaritan plays out the role of neighborliness by all he does for the victim. He becomes then the object of the command of Lev. 19:17-18, not just "your kin" and "any of your people." The result is to destroy any parochial understandings of God that presume God's interest is limited to "me and my family" and to expose deep-seated hatreds between individuals, races, and nations that have become an accepted way of life.

Finally, a parable is meant to arouse the imagination in ways that cannot always be anticipated or, as C. H. Dodd said in his classic definition, it leaves "the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 5). One way the imagination is stirred is by the invitation the parable makes to the hearer to identify with the victim in the ditch. Instead of being the favored fortunate who helps the less fortunate, the hearer begins to sense himself or herself as the needy at the mercy of the outsider, who is otherwise thought of as the enemy. It is certainly not the way the lawyer expected things to turn out.

Another way the imagination has been stirred by interpreters all the way back to patristic times is to recognize the Samaritan as Christ, the ultimate helper, who sees, has compassion for, and restores the beaten, naked figure whom religious figures have ignored. Rather than being a secularized saint, the Samaritan symbolizes the divine Prophet.

## PROPER 11

Ordinary Time 16

*Sunday between  
July 17 and 23 inclusive*

Amos 8:1-12 is, in certain respects, a companion piece to 7:1-17 (see Proper 10), in that both texts record visionary experiences of the prophet which become vehicles for delivering words of profound judgment. In the present Old Testament lection, the vision of judgment (vs. 1-3) is followed by a statement of God's impending justice, which forms an important bridge between Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic.

Psalm 52 is quite curious in that it is addressed to some anonymous tyrant who, out of love for evil, has worked against God. But God will not allow such tyranny to go unchecked (v. 5) and will ultimately vindicate those who have lived faithful lives. Such faithful persons are compared to "a green olive tree" (v. 8), their sustenance coming from the permanent, enduring love of a God who will never tolerate tyrants or their ways.

It is probably a pupil of Paul, rather than the apostle himself, who is responsible for reinterpreting an existing hymn in Col. 1:15-28. The purpose of the hymn (vs. 15-20) is to praise a cosmic Christ, but the author of the letter has reshaped the hymn so as to heighten the connection between the cosmic Christ and the church, his earthly body. Verses 21-27 form a kind of commentary on the reshaped hymn and reinforce the images of a transcendent, yet indwelling Christ.

The familiar complaint of Martha directed against her sister, Mary, constitutes the Gospel lection for this day, Luke 10:38-42. It is easy to misunderstand this incident and see it as the result of Martha's whining nature. On the other hand, if placed in its larger context, the pericope is seen as balanced by 10:25-37 (see Proper 10). The parable of the good Samaritan suggests that listening without doing is an empty exercise. The story of Martha and Mary maintains that doing without listening is equally futile.