

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.

Psalms 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.

## Amos 8:1-12

This lection begins with the fourth in a series of four visions (8:1-3) in the book of Amos and, like the third vision, this one carries a message of unrelieved judgment (see the discussion of 7:7-9, Proper 10). It is almost impossible to reproduce in English translation the Hebrew wordplay on which the vision is based (NRSV marginal notes for 8:2 point to the homophonic quality of the Hebrew terms: *qayis*, meaning "summer fruit," and *qēs*, "end"). The Revised English Bible catches the flavor of the passage, if not its precise meaning, with this rendering of v. 2:

"What is it that you are looking at, Amos?" he said. I answered, "A basket of ripe summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel. Never again shall I pardon them."

(Comparison may be made with a similar translation in the Jerusalem Bible.)

There is no effort on the part of the prophet to dissuade Yahweh from the terrible tragedy to come, as there was in 7:1-3 and 7:4-6. It is as if the prophet has lost all hope that the people will turn from their wickedness; Amos has become resigned to the self-destruction of Yahweh's beloved nation (compare 3:2). The use of the phrase "songs of the temple" (v. 3) reminds one of 5:23, part of what is probably the most-often-cited passage from the book of Amos (5:21-24). In that verse, "noise" (*hāmôn*) in the phrase "noise of your songs" is sometimes used in the sense of "great racket" or "cacophony." Amos thus already has a negative opinion of the liturgical music used in the royal sanctuary at Bethel (see 7:10), and he here declares that it will be transformed into "wailing" in the coming Day of Yahweh (see Amos's seminal description of the Day of Yahweh in 5:18-20). Death and destruction will be on every hand.

The relationship between 8:1-3 and the balance of the passage appointed by the lectionary is not altogether clear, but vs. 4-12 should probably be viewed as being a commentary on the vision, or perhaps a sermon inspired by the vision, and not part of the vision itself. The reason for arriving at this conclusion goes something like this:

The first two visions are positive in tone: the nation will be allowed to live. It is not until the third vision with its damning indictment ("the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste," 7:9) that the authorities protest. Thus, according to this manner of looking at

the text, 7:10-17 is not just an autobiographical digression, but is organically related to the third vision. In other words, Amos's declaration of the vision precipitates the enraged response of Amaziah. Following this line of reasoning farther, 8:4-12 may be viewed as the prophet's own expansion of Yahweh's message in 8:2b-3. Just as 7:7-9 led to the events/words of 7:10-17, so 8:1-3 inspired the prophet's message in 8:4-12.

Amos 8:4-12 contains some of the most terrifying words of judgment in all of the Old Testament, and it is in passages such as this that one senses that prophecy is being transformed into apocalyptic. The passage begins in a concrete enough setting: the contemporaries of Jeroboam II live lives characterized by such greed and oppression that Yahweh simply will not delay imposing judgment. Merchants fret that the arrival of a holy day ("new moon," "sabbath" of v. 5) closes their markets, and they can hardly contain themselves until the resumption of their crooked trades ("ephah" of v. 5 is a measure of quantity, "shekel," of course, a monetary unit). The language of v. 6 seems, at first glance, to suggest slavery, a terrible reality in the nations of the ancient world, including Israel. But the slave images here are probably metaphors for economic conditions, generally, that dehumanize women and men.

Verses 7 and 8 spell out the consequences of such immoral activity. Yahweh is a God of justice, and will brook no violation of that basic principle by which both Yahweh and Yahweh's people are to live. (Notice that Amos, like other prophets, feels no need to argue for the basic justice in Yahweh's nature. That reality is assumed, because it was made quite clear when the nation was [re-]constituted on Mount Sinai.) The "pride of Jacob" in v. 7 might also be translated (as in REB) the "arrogance of Jacob." In other words, the false pride of the nation is bringing about its downfall. But the phrase may also be understood positively: the "majesty" or "wealth of Jacob," in which case it becomes a euphemism for Yahweh. Read in this manner, the passage is stating that, because of the kind of being Yahweh is, judgment will surely transpire.

In vs. 9-12 the language begins to hint at apocalyptic. The text is moving us beyond a specific point in time, c. 750 B.C., and is beginning to view a cosmic judgment. This is especially so in vs. 9 and 12. Cosmic portents of God's final judgment are often cited in apocalyptic literature (compare Joel 2:30-31). As for the quality of God's judgment, v. 12 indicates that this is to be more than the violent intrusion of a foreign army. It will be nothing other than alienation from God, the most dreadful judgment of all.

## Psalm 52

Unlike most other psalms, Ps. 52 is neither prayer nor praise directed to God. Rather, vs. 1–5 are addressed to a “mighty one”—apparently a wicked, powerful person who intends to do violence to the psalmist and perhaps others of “the righteous” (v. 6) or “the faithful” (v. 9). Verse 6 is an affirmation about the righteous, who are then quoted in v. 7. Verse 8 is the psalmist’s profession of faith. Only in v. 9 is God addressed directly. The uniqueness of Ps. 52 means that it “resists form-critical analysis”; it is sometimes categorized as a prophetic exhortation or “communal instruction” (see Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 1*; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, p. 216). The content of this exhortation or instruction focuses on the nature of true security, wealth, and power.

The alternatives for seeking security are clearly contrasted in v. 1, although the NRSV obscures the matter. Marvin Tate (*Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20; Dallas: Word, 1990, p. 32) translates v. 1 as follows:

Why brag about evil, you hero!  
—God’s loyal-love [*hesed*] does not cease.

As this translation and the subsequent verses suggest, security may be sought in self-assertion at the expense of others. This is what the “mighty one” does; he has no qualms about lying, cheating, and stealing in order to get ahead (see the description of the perpetrators of evil in Amos 8:4–6, part of the Old Testament lesson for the day). In Tate’s translation, “hero” is used sarcastically; others suggest the derisive term “big shot.” In any case, this person *loves* (vs. 3, 4) “evil” (v. 3; the word “mischief” in v. 1 is the same Hebrew root) and is willing to use any means to get his or her own way, regardless of how destructive (v. 2; the same Hebrew word “destruction” appears in v. 7, where NRSV translates it as “wealth”) or manipulative (see “treachery” in v. 2 and “deceitful” in v. 4; these words are from the same Hebrew root). The “mighty one” shows no concern for doing what is “good” (v. 3; see also v. 9 and Pss. 34:15; 37:3, 27; Amos 5:14–15; and Micah 3:2) or speaking what is “right” (Ps. 52:3; NRSV “the truth”). As James L. Mays puts it, “The portrait is that of a person who turns human capacities and possession into the basis of his existence” (*Psalms*, Interpretation series; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994). In short, the “mighty one” embodies what is the essence of wickedness in the Psalms—autonomy, “self-rule” (see Ps. 1, Sixth Sunday After Epiphany).

The alternative to autonomy is dependence on God and God’s *hesed* (v. 1; “steadfast love,” “loyal love”). Verse 1 already suggests that this alternative is the only true and enduring one, and v. 5 tells why (see Ps. 73:18–20). The affirmation that God “will uproot” the wicked anticipates the image of the psalmist as a stable, fruitful tree in 52:8, which also contains the psalmist’s explicit assertion that she or he has chosen the proper alternative—“I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.” The psalmist knows the secret of life that has eluded the wicked: life depends ultimately on God, not on ourselves and our possessions (see Luke 12:13–21, especially v. 15).

The judgment announced in Ps. 52:5 will be witnessed by “the righteous” (v. 6), who will take it as confirmation of their choice of dependence on God. Their laughter will echo God’s laughter at those who oppose the divine will (see Pss. 2:4; 37:13; 59:8; see Prov. 1:26). To “take refuge” (Ps. 52:7) or seek security in “riches” or in self-assertive attempts to destroy others (NRSV “wealth”) or in anything less than God is finally futile (compare Pss. 37:1–11, 37–40; 49:5–6). Psalm 52:5–7 does not describe a reward/punishment scheme that operates in an overtly tangible way. The punishment of the wicked is that they cut themselves off from God, who is the source of life, and the reward of the righteous is that they are grounded in God and thus connected to life’s source and destiny (see above-mentioned commentary on Ps. 1).

Verse 8 of Ps. 52 articulates the psalmist’s connection to the source of life. Like a tree growing on the Temple grounds, the psalmist is rooted in God (see Pss. 1:3; 92:12–15; Jer. 17:5–8). In explicit contrast to the “mighty one,” the psalmist’s trust is placed not in the self or in riches, but in God’s *hesed*, which is “forever and ever” (52:8; see v. 1; and note “forever” in v. 5). Consequently, while the existence of the wicked is characterized by greed (vs. 2–4, 7), the life of the psalmist is characterized by gratitude to God (v. 9). His or her life becomes a witness to others—“the faithful” (v. 9)—of God’s “name” or character. Thus, he or she promotes the “good” that the wicked spurn (vs. 3, 9). The NRSV’s “proclaim” is literally “wait for,” “hope.” The psalmist is an example of those who, surrounded by opposition, live by faith and hope.

The title of the psalm attributes it to David at a point when Saul was seeking to kill him and when Doeg, one of Saul’s servants, informed Saul of David’s locale (see 1 Sam. 21:1–22:19; 22:9 is quoted in the title). This attribution should be taken illustratively rather than historically. Other servants of God were also threatened by rich and powerful enemies—for instance, Amos (see Amos 7:10–17), Jeremiah (see Jer. 26:10–19 and 38:1–13), Jesus. For those of us called

to follow Jesus, the alternatives presented in Ps. 52 are still very real. We can live for ourselves, or we can live for God. "In the midst of the growing secularism of North American society, and the culture's increased hostility to the gospel," the choice to trust God will be both increasingly difficult and increasingly important (quoted from "The Report of the Special Committee to Study Theological Institutions to the 205th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)").

### Colossians 1:15–28

One particularly sensitive focal point for the church's quarrels regarding the use of inclusive language has been the hymnal. Some Christians press for editing traditional hymns so that they will reflect the presence of both genders among the children of God and the presence of both maternal and paternal characteristics in God, while others resist any alteration to familiar wording. The importance of the hymns used in corporate worship may be gauged by the intensity of this debate, as both sides understand the ability of words sung as proclamation and confession to shape developing faith.

Both sides in the debate might be surprised to realize how early in the church's life theological debate was carried on through hymns, for there is evidence of such debate even in the New Testament itself. In Col. 1, the writer (probably a student of Paul's) employs what may well have been a familiar hymn, but he edits and interprets the hymn so as to make a particular point for this congregation.

Despite many careful scholarly attempts at historical reconstruction, the situation at Colossae remains very much an enigma. Some comments in the letter suggest that the writer's opponents insist on various ascetic practices (2:16–19), and others seem to assume highly abstract philosophical speculation that would be compatible with Gnosticlike thinking (2:8). *Perhaps* some at Colossae advocate a mystical approach to Christianity, with asceticism as a means of enhancing one's mystical access to God. Read in that context, the hymn of Col. 1 grants some of what the opponents are arguing but also provides a serious challenge to their presuppositions.

The hymn, which constitutes 1:15–20, interprets Christ in exalted and cosmic language. He is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (v. 15). "All things have been created through him and for him" (v. 16), and "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (v. 19). If this sort of thinking sounds foreign to the ears of contemporary Christians, it would not have seemed odd in the first century. Already Proverbs speaks of the figure of

Wisdom as the first of God's creatures (Prov. 8:22–31) and the means by which God founded the earth (Prov. 3:19); rabbinic tradition will later refer to Torah as God's instrument of creation. By referring to Christ in this way, then, early Christians confess that they cannot imagine a time, even the time of creation, without Christ.

The writer of Colossians endorses this viewpoint, but he also edits the hymn. Scholars differ in their analyses of the redaction, although they generally agree on at least two additions: "the church" in v. 18 and "through the blood of his cross" in v. 20. Importantly, each of these additions has the effect of connecting the "cosmic Christ" firmly with earthly existence.

The statement that Christ is "the head of the body, the church" (v. 18) has received much attention because the genuine Pauline letters speak of the church as Christ's body (for example, 1 Cor. 12:12–31) but not of Christ as its head. What may be more important for understanding the passage than this variation, however, is the fact that the reference to the church firmly connects Christ with earthly existence. Christ is not a cosmic presence, abstracted from the level of everyday life and accessible only to the spiritually elite; he is present in the church, which is nothing less than his own body.

Similarly, the addition of the phrase "through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20) recalls the fact that the human existence of Jesus Christ culminated in a violent, physical death. Blunt as the language is, it has the effect of pulling the Colossians back down to earth. The Christ-event has its origin before Creation and it has cosmic implications, but its intersection with human history was real, concrete, and brutal.

Verses 21–23 reinforce this general direction in the interpretation of the hymn. Here the reconciliation of "all things" (v. 20) becomes concretized in the reconciliation of "estranged and hostile" humanity through the death of Jesus Christ. Moreover, that reconciliation has ethical consequences. Those who have been reconciled must "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith" (v. 23). The exaltation of the cosmic Christ is not some grand and glorious scene to be witnessed by a passive, unchanged humanity, but an exaltation that manifests itself in a reconciled and faithful humankind. Here the writer resumes the language of rescue and transfer that introduced the hymn in vs. 12–14.

The lesson continues through 1:24, but v. 24 actually introduces a new section that continues through 2:5, as the NRSV paragraphing indicates. Here the writer turns to Paul's ministry as a concrete instance of the reconciliation brought about by Christ. The perplexing statement that Paul's ministry involves "completing what is

lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body" (v. 24) has raised a number of questions. Since the word the NRSV translates as "affliction" (*thlipsis*) elsewhere has strong apocalyptic connections (see, for example, "suffering" in Mark 13:19 and "the great ordeal" in Rev. 7:14), the "afflictions" may refer less to physical suffering than to the turmoil that accompanies the apocalyptic events. That is, Paul's ministry is part of the final revelation of God's ultimate mysteries.

### Luke 10:38–42

The Gospel readings for the past three Sundays have come from the beginning of Luke's travel narrative (9:51–19:27) and have concerned the theme of discipleship—the sharpness of the call, the vulnerability of those sent, and the practicality of helping and being helped. At a first reading of the story of Martha and Mary (10:38–42), one might reasonably ask what this incident has to do with discipleship? It seems more like a typical family squabble that Jesus settles by giving each participant the right to do her own thing. A careful examination not only of the story but of its location following the parable of the despised Samaritan, however, yields a different conclusion.

Martha comes on the scene first, as a woman who welcomes Jesus into her home. Though the phrase "her home" can be questioned on textual grounds, Martha's action establishes her as the leader of the household. She is clearly in charge, as women in the first century usually were in the limited world of the home. But the *responsibilities* of the household also fall on Martha. We are not specifically told that a meal is being prepared, but it is not hard to imagine, since the words behind "many tasks" and "to do all the work" (*diakonia, diakoneō*) are commonly used for "waiting tables."

Martha very naturally becomes upset that her sister, Mary, spends all her time with Jesus and does not help with the family chores. We miss the point if we caricature Martha as an obsessive type who gets angry because she wants to be sure that everyone works as hard as she does. For the narrator, there clearly are many chores to be done, and Martha seems more distracted by the work that has piled up, with guests in the house, than by some inner need to see to it that if she is working, then, by golly, Mary is going to work too. There are apparently no servants to help, as Martha is working by herself.

Why does Martha go to Jesus with her complaint rather than to

Mary? Who knows? Maybe there is a history of Mary's not helping with the housework. Maybe there has been a family rift. Maybe it is simply the narrator's way of having Jesus confirm Mary's choice. In any case, Martha's preoccupations with the household responsibilities are given secondary priority by Jesus' statement that "Mary has chosen the better part" (10:42).

What is "the better part" Mary has chosen? Interestingly, the narrator tells us only two things about Mary. She "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying" (10:39). Her posture is a way of declaring her a disciple (see Acts 22:3). She has made herself a learner of Jesus. Hearing what he says means that she has received Jesus as a prophet. She is doing what loyal disciples should do—she is listening.

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of "hearing and doing the word" in the Lukan narrative. It is the decisive activity in building on a solid foundation (Luke 6:46–49), in maturing as in good soil (8:15), in being a member of Jesus' family (8:21), in being truly blessed (11:27–28). Mary, in listening to Jesus' word, has at least begun where faithfulness begins, and this warrants the commendation of Jesus in the face of Martha's complaint.

But what does this suggest? That the life of contemplation is preferred over the life of action? Hardly. The literary context here becomes critical. At 10:25 we encounter the lawyer who ultimately answers his own question to Jesus about eternal life by citing the two commands to love God and to love one's neighbor. Then follows the parable highlighting the action of the Samaritan, who assists the victim left in the ditch by tending to his wounds, carrying him on his donkey to an inn, and paying the costs incurred (10:29–37). He is a model for loving one's neighbor (as well as identifying who the neighbor is).

Then comes Mary, who is distinguished not for her action, but for her attentive listening to the word of Jesus. Her place alongside the Samaritan affirms that discipleship has to do not only with love of neighbor but also with love of God, not only with active service but also with a silent and patient waiting upon God's supreme prophet. The Samaritan and Mary belong together. Doing without listening can easily degenerate into busyness that loses its purpose. Listening without doing soon becomes no more than a mockery of the words.

Consider a footnote that perhaps should be a prelude: The story of Martha and Mary is one in which a stereotypical role of a woman (Martha's concern for the household tasks) is given secondary status. Many women in the congregation can identify with Martha and feel put down by the way she is treated, as if her complaint is

only neurotic whining. The critical point is that the text does not so much "put down" Martha (who certainly is not a neurotic whiner) as it honors Mary's ministry of the word, a ministry Luke consistently elevates to a place of priority and sets alongside the ministry of the Samaritan. It is proper for a woman to leave the stereotypical role for that of a full and faithful disciple.

## PROPER 12

Ordinary Time 17

*Sunday between  
July 24 and 30 inclusive*

The series of texts from the preexilic prophets continues with Hos. 1:2-10, a passage that has intrigued and—in certain respects—baffled interpreters over the years. Although specific details are unclear, the larger import of the lection is quite evident: the relationship between God and Israel is similar to a marriage that has been ruined by an unfaithful spouse. Yahweh, who has patiently wooed, has been scorned by the object of the divine love, and the pain of judgment is at hand. Yet even in announcing this terrible verdict the prophet implants a reminder that Yahweh's final word is not destruction, but redemption.

Psalm 85 reveals a community of God's people who are suspended between the "already" and the "not yet." On the one hand, God's people are deeply aware of God's mercies in the past—mercies that have transformed the life of the community. On the other hand, there is a pressing need for some new outpouring of God's grace, some intervention in the lives of the people that will rescue them from their present peril. Precisely because of their experience of God's love in the past, they are now motivated to pray urgently for a fresh infusion of it. Their anxiety and concern are evident, yet even their very expectation of God's mercy results in peace.

The sequence of readings from Colossians moves to 2:6-15 (16-19). The passage begins by reminding the readers of this letter of the tradition concerning Christ in which they live. In remembering this tradition they are moved to thanksgiving, the appropriate response to their reception of Christ. After warning the readers against some unspecified danger, the author of Colossians returns to the nature of the relationship Christians have with Christ. There is no other force or personality that may compete with Christ, for Christ, and only Christ, embodies "the whole fullness of deity." Baptism is the means by which Christians are joined to Christ, and the evidence of this