

a strong south wind (from the desert in the Negev) portends a heat spell, then why are they not able to discern the present as a time of crisis? Why do they remain blind to what is happening in their midst? Common sense says to settle with your accuser before you get to court and risk being thrown into jail (vs. 57-59). Common sense also says to repent in face of the coming judgment.

While the words of the text are not very palatable to those seeking safety and security, calls to change are reminders that judgment need not be the last word, that destruction is not inevitable.

PROPER 16

Ordinary Time 21

*Sunday between
August 21 and 27 inclusive*

In Luke 13:15, Jesus addresses his opponents as he had addressed the crowds in 12:56, "You hypocrites!" The effect is to portray the healing that Jesus has just performed as a call to decision, a call to "repentance and changed lives," as suggested in the commentary on the Gospel lection.

The lesson from Heb. 12 also contains a summons to response (see v. 25). The call to repentance—to a transformed existence—makes sense only in the presence of a transforming power that is accessible to those called. Thus, the author of Hebrews proclaims to the readers that they "have come . . . to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (vs. 22, 24). For Luke, it is precisely Jesus and his wonderful works that signal the accessibility of God's transforming power, and thus that signal also the time for repentance.

The accessibility of God's transforming power is evident in the lessons from Jeremiah and the Psalms, although these lessons do not involve a call to decision. In fact, in Jeremiah's case, Jeremiah has no choice! The decision about Jeremiah's vocation was made by God before Jeremiah was born (Jer. 1:5). Like it or not, Jeremiah will be transformed from an inexperienced boy into "a prophet to the nations" (1:5; see v. 10). The transformation has to do with the accessibility of God's power—"I am with you . . . , says the LORD." Like Jesus and like the Hebrews, Jeremiah will experience severe opposition; but he will be able to endure it, because he belongs to God.

The same is true of the psalmist. In fact, it is easy to imagine Ps. 71 as a prayer of Jeremiah. Amid opposition from the wicked, the psalmist affirms what Jeremiah had been told by God—that his life from its very beginnings has belonged to God.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

This day's Old Testament lection is the first in a series of nine consecutive Old Testament passages associated with Jeremiah (the book of Lamentations, which provides the lection for Proper 22, was once thought to have been composed by Jeremiah). In addition to being the longest book in the Bible, the book of Jeremiah provides more insights of a personal nature into the life of the prophet who stands behind the literature than does any other book in the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament. Therefore, an expansive range of human emotions is laid before the reader, alongside Yahweh's word to the people, as that word is mediated through the heart and mind of the prophet.

The three sections of the passage (Jer. 1:4-5, 6-8, 9-10) stand out clearly in the NRSV text. Verses 4-5 appear abruptly, without attempting to provide any context in the life of the prophet. (If one momentarily sets aside the editorial introduction to the book, vs. 1-3, these lines form the beginning of the book proper.)

This quality of suddenness is quite different from the accounts of call experiences of some other major Old Testament figures (Ex. 3:1; Isa. 6:1-2), but we may assume that the year is 627 B.C. (the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign, Jer. 1:2) and that Jeremiah is either a "boy" (v. 7) like Samuel (1 Sam. 3:2-9) or a young man at the home of his priestly father, Hilkiah (Jer. 1:1; the name of Jeremiah's mother is unfortunately never provided) in Anathoth, a village quite near Jerusalem. What external stimulus, if any, ignited Jeremiah's sense of call is not clear, but 1:11-13 suggests that he was responsive to such things. One interesting suggestion is that, as this date is near that of the death of Ashurbanipal, the last strong ruler of the dominant Assyrian Empire, the passing of that monarch, with its portents for fundamental changes in the lives of the nations of the Near East, may have been the spark that ignited Jeremiah's sense of Yahweh's involvement in his life (compare Isa. 6:1).

In any event, the thrust of v. 5 is enormously sobering. That Jeremiah is to be the mouth of Yahweh during the last decades of the life of the Judean monarchy and on into a future that many could hardly imagine would be a difficult enough reality in itself. But the word of Yahweh is clear that this is no recent decision on Yahweh's part. To be Yahweh's prophet at this juncture in history is the very reason for which Jeremiah has been born. It is his very purpose for being! This startling declaration underscores the fact that, without Jeremiah's interpretation of the destruction of the nation and his

words concerning Judah's future (texts explored in coming weeks), the Judeans of the sixth century might not have had the conceptual and theological tools with which to comprehend their monumental tragedy and to move beyond it. In a very real sense, therefore, it may be said that Jeremiah is the (human) savior of the people of God.

The final phrase of v. 5, "prophet to the nations," is probably a reference to Judah and its principal neighbors, Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia (note 25:1-29). But the larger meaning of these words is obviously a reference to their role in lives of people far removed from that small arena of human history.

In this connection it is puzzling that, given the monumental role of Jeremiah in Judah's life, this prophet is never mentioned in 2 Kings. (Nor, for that matter, are Amos and Hosea.) This is in spite of Jeremiah's life are closely scrutinized in this part of the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kings 22-25), and in spite of the fact that the Deuteronomistic History places great value on the office of the prophet, as the stories about Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha attest.

It is small wonder, then, that young Jeremiah repudiates Yahweh's call (vs. 6-8). One is reminded of Moses' reluctance to lead the people of God (Ex. 4:10) and of Isaiah's efforts to spurn Yahweh's initiatives (Isa. 6:5). But Yahweh will not take no for an answer. Instead, Yahweh promises not only to strengthen the prophet but to provide the message that Jeremiah is to deliver. The assurance that "I am with you to deliver you" is recalled over and over again, as Jeremiah is rescued from life-threatening situations (as, for example, Jer. 26:16-19). Yet the prophet often must have doubted the sincerity of Yahweh's intentions, for he was frequently in anguish over the prophetic role (Jer. 15:15-18; compare 8:18-9:1, Proper 20).

Jeremiah is "ordained" as Yahweh's prophet with the touch on his lips of Yahweh's hand (1:9-10). This symbolic internalizing of the word of Yahweh reminds the reader of similar "ordinations" of Isaiah (Isa. 6:7) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:1-3). The role of Jeremiah is to assist Yahweh in the twin tasks of destruction and reconstruction:

to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.

That four verbs are devoted to judgment and only two to redemption may be interpreted as a reference to the immediacy of the fall of the nation. But the last, and thus the enduring, words are of restoration!

Jeremiah's work as a prophet is thus inaugurated. He is to suffer greatly in the years ahead, and the nation is to suffer even more. Yet out of their suffering will emerge a new day in the life of the Jews and in the life of humankind. God's acts of judgment always are intended to redeem.

Psalm 71:1-6

See the discussion of this passage under the Fourth Sunday After Epiphany.

Hebrews 12:18-29

A question about eschatology in the New Testament would probably send most preachers and teachers to consult with the apostle Paul, or the author of the Apocalypse, or perhaps the evangelists (as in Mark 13 and its parallels). The author of Hebrews would not readily come to mind, for much of Hebrews seems to have a timeless quality that runs against the grain of early Christian eschatology. Even the frequent contrasts between things earthly and things heavenly (such as sacrifice and temple) have more in common with platonic contrasts between temporal appearance and eternal reality than with the urgency of eschatological writings.

The lectionary reading from Heb. 12:18-29 makes it clear that Hebrews is anything but noneschatological, however. Here, as often in the New Testament, eschatology provides a context within which to discuss ethical behavior. That context serves to warn against the dire consequences of failure to follow through with a Christian life; it also holds out hope of blessings to come for those who endure. In this passage, the two are closely intertwined.

Consistent with the style of argumentation throughout Hebrews, the passage makes use of an *a fortiori* argument. What was true of an earlier generation will be *even more true* of this last generation (see especially v. 25). The author contrasts the generation of the exodus with that of the Christian community; both the challenges and the blessings of the Christian community are greater than those of their predecessors in the time of Moses.

The multitude of images that open the passage creates temporary confusion, for no reference in the preceding lines provides a hint as to what follows. The sudden introduction of "something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and

the sound of a trumpet, and a voice" (vs. 18-19) will bewilder the reader who is not as immersed in biblical tradition as is our author. What this profusion conjures up, of course, is the experience of God's presence by the exodus generation, as Ex. 19 and Deut. 4:11-12 and 5:22-25 depict the giving of the law with just this imagery.

Verses 20 and 21 of Heb. 12 amplify the point in a way that is unmistakable: the presence of God was for that generation a fearsome thing. Even an innocent animal that unknowingly touched the mountain would be put to death (see Ex. 19:12-13). And Moses himself, God's chosen, is said to have been terrified by God's presence (see the earlier discussion of Moses in Heb. 3:1-6).

Until this point in the reading, it remains unclear what exactly the writer intends by recalling this experience of Sinai. Only with v. 22 do we understand that a contrast is under way here. "But" (*alla* in Greek) indicates a sharp disjuncture between vs. 18-21 and what follows. In addition, the words "you have come" (or, more literally, "you have approached") parallel the opening words of v. 18. Both the exodus generation and the Christian generation approach God, but their situations differ dramatically.

Unlike the exodus generation—which could not draw near to God's place, which experienced God's presence only through the darkness and gloom that accompanied that presence, which still had no place of its own—the addresses of Hebrews can expect to enjoy all these blessings of the divine presence. First, they "come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). Second, they enjoy the presence of "innumerable angels" and the "assembly of the firstborn" (see 1:6, which suggests that this is the assembly of those who believe in Jesus), God, and the "spirits of the righteous." Finally, they enjoy the presence of Jesus, "the mediator of a new covenant." Here the contrast with the generation of Moses culminates, for this covenant will not be broken.

In light of this contrast between the experience of the exodus and the experience that awaits Christians, the author moves to a warning: "See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking" (12:25). The Israelites disregarded the warning of Moses "on earth," and the consequences were dire. God now warns from heaven, and God's warning threatens to shake both earth and heaven itself.

This final "shaking" will destroy creation, but "what cannot be shaken" will remain. A review of the content of Hebrews will clarify this comment. Melchizedek "remains a priest forever" (7:3), and Jesus Christ is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8). Christians themselves are in possession of "something better and

more lasting" (10:34), anticipating a lasting home in the "city that is to come" (13:14).

The contrast with the exodus generation comes to an end with 12:27: Christians will enter into the place of God, the very presence of God, and that presence cannot be destroyed. "Therefore," v. 28 exhorts, "let us give thanks."

A list of specific instructions both precedes (12:14-17) and follows this reading (13:1-19), but the first instruction sets the tone for all the rest. The primary duty of the Christian is to acknowledge God's hand in all things. Only in that way is "acceptable worship" possible.

The reading ends with a reminder that "our God is a consuming fire," a clear reference to Deut. 4:24, which brings us back to the "blazing fire" in the opening of the passage. If the experience Hebrews anticipates for Christians differs dramatically from that of the exodus generation, the God they worship remains the same.

Luke 13:10-17

Stories of Jesus' healing carry differing meanings depending on how an incident is related and in what context it appears. Some highlight Jesus' capacity to accomplish remarkable deeds; others precipitate controversies with the religious authorities; still others take on a didactic function as Jesus instructs about the way of discipleship.

Luke 13:10-17 is one of those accounts which reflect at least two "interests." On the one hand, since the healing occurs on the Sabbath it becomes the occasion for a sharp exchange between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue, which puts the latter to shame. It becomes a controversy story and ultimately a judgment on the Jewish authorities. On the other hand, it is the story of Jesus' authority over the forces of Satan that have left this woman badly crippled for eighteen years. It demonstrates the inbreaking of God's rule in human life. The two "interests" of the story, of course, belong together and mesh with the thematic thrust of the context.

First, we look at the conflict between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. The account begins with the observation that Jesus "was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath" (13:10). He was doing what a prophet should be doing on the Sabbath. While we are not told from what text Jesus was teaching, his healing of the crippled woman may have been no more than a carrying out of the implications of the text.

The indignant and persistent protest of the leader of the synagogue ("kept saying to the crowd") was based on a reading of Ex. 20:9 and Deut. 5:13 that categorized Jesus' actions as work that should have been done on a weekday. Challenged, Jesus responds with a sharp criticism of the synagogue leader's reading of the Fourth Commandment. He uses a clear and homely example to expose the fallacy of ignoring the woman's infirmity on the Sabbath. The crowds immediately get the point, and the leader of the synagogue and his cohorts are "put to shame."

But Jesus' retort indicates that the issue is more than an academic difference of opinion about the interpretation of texts. "You hypocrites!" raises the moral issue of interpretation. The charge is leveled in Luke at those who are blind to the real meaning of things, those who cannot perceive their own weakness (6:42) and cannot discern the present evidence of God's rule (12:56).

One of the things to which the leader of the synagogue is blind is the remarkable restoration of a "daughter of Abraham" (13:16). The illness this woman had had meant the disruption and loss of social relationships, exclusion, and therefore loneliness. What Jesus' action did was not only to bring physical wholeness to the crippled woman, but also to reinstate her to legitimate membership in the community of Israel, a fitting behavior for the Sabbath.

A second aspect of the account leads to the other major "interest" of the story. A teaching of Jesus in chapter 12 chided the people for their failure to discern the significance of the present. They knew that a cloud in the west meant rain and a strong wind from the south suggested a heat spell, but they could not perceive the clear signs of God's rule, nor did they realize that the present was a time of crisis, a time for repentance and changed lives (12:54-13:9).

The leader of the synagogue and his colleagues fail to see that Jesus has taken the initiative in releasing the woman from the bondage of Satan. By forbidding such conduct on the Sabbath, they put themselves on Satan's side in the struggle for human lives, and they become enemies of Jesus. They badly misjudge the conflict taking place between the rule of God and the rule of Satan (see 11:20). Not surprisingly, the thirteenth chapter concludes with Jesus' anguish over Jerusalem, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (13:34). The authorities' blindness leads to their final rejection of the prophet who could save them.

It is important that the story leave us with a vivid picture of a divided Israel. The religious leaders are shamed. Their failure to detect the signs of God's presence condemns them. Homiletically, it is easy to let the leader of the synagogue symbolize Israel and stoke

the fires of anti-Judaism. At the same time, the text says that the woman ("a daughter of Abraham") praises God for her healing (13:13) and the crowds rejoice at the wonderful things Jesus is doing (13:17). Rather than a judgment on Israel, the story becomes a fulfillment of the prediction that Jesus brings division (12:49-53), a phenomenon all too modern, when the present is discerned as a time for repentance.

PROPER 17

Ordinary Time 22

*Sunday between August 28
and September 3 inclusive*

The admonition in Heb. 13:2 "to show hospitality to strangers" is vividly illustrated by the advice that Jesus gives to guests and hosts in Luke 14:7-14. The advice to guests leads up to the revolutionary saying in v. 11. As the commentary on today's Gospel suggests, the saying is a summary of the way God works; the effects are profound—"a world is overturned."

In the topsy-turvy world of divine hospitality, everybody is family. The strangers whom Jesus tells us to invite to our parties are not just any strangers; they are those who in Jesus' day were considered unclean and undesirable, and they will never be able to reciprocate. This kind of radical hospitality makes sense only in light of the conviction that God rules the world and therefore that adequate repayment for our efforts is simply our relatedness to God and our conformity to what God intends (Luke 14:14; Heb. 13:5-6). Both Heb. 13 and Luke 14:7-14 are calls to commitment to God's reign rather than to the ways of the world.

Both Jer. 2:4-13 and Ps. 81 also call the people of God back to commitment to God alone, rather than to the gods of the nations and their values (see Ps. 81:8-9; Jer. 2:11). Both texts portray God recalling God's gracious guidance of the people in the past and lamenting their present unfaithfulness. The call to commitment that is implicit in Jer. 2:4-13 is explicit in Ps. 81:8, "O Israel, if you would but listen to me!"

In our day, God is no doubt still lamenting our failure to listen, but is also, no doubt, still inviting us to take our humble place at a table that promises exaltation on a scale that the world cannot even imagine.

Jeremiah 2:4-13

God's people, having been the recipients of a unique relationship with their Creator, have rejected both the relationship and the One