

a prophet (Deut. 18:15, 18), and his words become decisive for the destiny of the people of God (see Acts 3:22–23). The rhetorical question of those at table, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49), hangs in the air for the reader to decide.

It is intriguing in the parable Jesus tells to find forgiveness of sins depicted by forgiveness of debts, an experience no doubt well known to Galilean peasants. Their whole lives as well as their futures were bound up with their fiscal obligations. Pardon of debts, then, has nothing to do with guilt but rather with the restoration of life and the renewal of hope.

The suggested reading for this Sunday goes on to include 8:1–3, one of Luke’s typical summaries. In many ways it serves to introduce a new section more than it does to conclude chapter 7. It includes among Jesus’ followers not only the Twelve, but also three women by name and “many others” who serve as benefactors to the group. There is no historical or literary reason to connect the nameless woman of 7:36–50 whose sins are forgiven with Mary Magdalene, “from whom seven demons had gone out” (8:2).

PROPER 7

Ordinary Time 12

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

Over and over, biblical writers remind us that it is only in the acknowledgment and service of God that human beings find their rightful place in the order of creation. Yet those same writers also recognize that the acknowledgment and service of God brings with it powerful threats to the way in which the world generally does its business.

Precisely because he has done the Lord’s bidding in killing all the prophets of Baal, Elijah must flee from Jezebel’s wrath (1 Kings 19:1–3). Utterly discouraged by the limitations of his own resources, Elijah proposes that he be allowed to die. God’s response comes, not in the form of words of encouragement, but in the form of nurture (vs. 4–9), God’s own presence (vs. 11–13), and finally in the form of yet another summons to work (vs. 15–18).

Psalms 42 and 43 might well be read as Elijah’s own thoughts during this period of dismay. The psalmist portrays the human need of God’s presence, as real as the need for food and water, and the human cry in the face of God’s apparent absence. The reading ends with the assurance that God will again be present for those who praise him.

The words of Gal. 3:23–29 have become exceedingly familiar because of their implicit call to liberation from anthropological boundaries of race, class, and gender. We rightly hear in them the assurance that the reign of the gospel of Jesus Christ brings with it freedom. That freedom is threatening and costly, however, since the freedom of the gospel is freedom to be in Christ, to belong utterly to him and to his cross.

The Gospel lection provides yet another instance in which the liberating gospel poses a threat to the status quo. For the man possessed of demons, the arrival of Jesus Christ means freedom and the opportunity to serve. For those standing by, however, this man’s freedom brings with it an economic threat: the destruction of an

entire herd of pigs will not be perceived by everyone as liberating! Jesus' power to do good carries with it a threat to those for whom possession is all.

1 Kings 19:1-4 (5-7) 8-15a

The Old Testament lection for this day is to be read in the light of the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:17-46; note Proper 4). In that celebrated episode, Elijah not only cuts down the flower of the Baal "clergy" (18:40), but does so in a manner that attacks the hubris of the royal house of Israel. Elijah's declaration to Ahab that the drought that Yahweh has sent is a personal matter between the king and the God of Israel is sufficient to make of the prophet an enemy of the court in Samaria (18:1, 17). Thus when the Baal prophets are killed, the reader is not surprised to learn that Jezebel has put a price on Elijah's head (19:1-2). The fact that it is now the queen rather than the king who asserts the royal power seems consistent with the personality of this Phoenician princess (compare Jezebel's and Ahab's response to Naboth's refusal to sell his vineyard in 21:5-14; see Proper 6). She appears at this distance as a person who brooked no opposition and, what is more, as a Phoenician she was perhaps more personally attached to the prophets of Baal than was Ahab.

Elijah's terrified response (19:3) is understandable, and the prophet flees to a spot that is as remote from Samaria as it is possible to be and still be in the land of Yahweh: Beer-sheba, in the far south of Judah. (A note about versification: in spite of the paragraph division in NRSV, v. 3 is best seen as a part of the section vs. 3-9a. The decision of the lectionary to place vs. 5-7 in brackets is not a fortunate one, in that these verses provide part of the reason for the prophet's extended journey down to Mount Horeb/Sinai. And as these verses are quite brief, the parentheses may be ignored when reading the text aloud in public worship.)

In the section vs. 3-9a, Mosaic covenant theology begins to emerge as the pattern for Elijah's own prophetic role. Verse 4 may best be understood as "I am not as good as my ancestors," the "ancestors" in mind being Moses and Joshua and their generations. It is clear from other texts of a north Israelite provenance, notably the books of Deuteronomy (1:1) and Hosea (12:13), that Moses and the Mosaic covenant occupied a central place in the faith of true Yahwists in the north, similar to that which David and the Davidic

covenant occupied in the hearts of loyal Yahwists in the south (2 Sam. 7:1-17). The fact that Mount Horeb (the name used in north Israelite circles for the site where Moses received the commandments) is Elijah's ultimate destination (1 Kings 19:4-8) leaves little doubt as to who the "ancestors" of v. 4 are. In v. 4, then, Elijah is confessing, in effect, "I have failed to provide the kind of leadership for the people of Yahweh that Moses provided in an earlier day."

The reader will not wish to accept such an evaluation from this selfless man of God, however, and apparently Yahweh does not accept it either. For instead of permitting Elijah to die, Yahweh sends an angel who, as the ravens had done earlier (17:1-7), provides the prophet with nourishment and who, in addition, urges Elijah to continue his journey (19:5-7). The prophet does so, and after an extended time ("forty days and forty nights") the prophet arrives at "Horeb the mount of God," where he beds down in a cave (vs. 8-9a).

The climax of this lection is achieved in vs. 9b-15a, in which Yahweh reveals Yahweh's self to Elijah. As has often been pointed out, the parallels between this passage and Ex. 33:17-23 are striking, once more revealing that the figure of Moses is in the mind of the writer(s) and thus, one may suppose, in the mind of Elijah himself. The similarities between these texts are not limited to the details of the theophany (the location at Sinai/Horeb, the cleft in the rock/cave, the unseen face of the Deity, and the like), but extend to the purpose of Yahweh's self-revelation. In both instances the prophet is reequipped and remotivated to do Yahweh's will. In Moses' case this is to return to the people with new tablets of the law. In Elijah's case it is to return to the struggle with Ahab. To be more specific, Elijah is directed to set in motion that series of events which will bring about the downfall of Ahab's family (19:15b-18; compare 2 Kings 9).

Great interest has been expressed by interpreters over the years in the manner in which Yahweh ultimately speaks to Elijah. It is not in a great wind, or in an earthquake, or in fire that Yahweh speaks. It is in, as the King James has it, "a still small voice" (v. 12, as also the RSV). The literal Hebrew means something like "a thin whisper," so REB and JB are probably near the mark with "a faint murmuring sound" and "a light murmuring sound," respectively. NRSV is decidedly incorrect in its "sound of sheer silence." The contrast is between the violence of the wind, quake, and fire, on the one hand, and, on the other, the gentle cadences of Yahweh's whisper. (One may—or may not—wish to reflect on the fact that the contrast presented to Moses in Ex. 33:17-23 was between the dazzling glory of Yahweh's face and the more subdued effect of Yahweh's backside.)

The result of the theophany at Horeb is to reenergize a downcast Elijah and to place him again in the role of the leader of those who are attempting—against great odds—to be faithful to Yahweh. Elijah is a new Moses, raised up by God to lead the people in the time of their peril.

Psalms 42 and 43

The early Christians found in Ps. 42—43 a symbol for baptism: "The hart [42:1, NRSV "deer"] . . . was the emblem of those thirsting souls who, in the cooling streams of the baptismal font, drank freely of the fountain of eternal life" (Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life and Experience*; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1903, pp. 9–10). When Augustine was baptized on Easter Sunday in 387, Ps. 43 was sung (Prothero, p. 29). The symbolism is appropriate, for Pss. 42—43 affirm what we Christians profess in the sacrament—that each human life derives from and belongs to God and is lived authentically only in relationship to God. In other words, human life depends on God; we need God.

This need is expressed poetically in the opening simile and then more directly: "My soul thirsts for God" (Ps. 42:2; see Pss. 63:1; 143:6). Thirst is not simply a desire; the human body cannot survive without water. For the psalmist, God is not an option; God is a necessity. The question in 42:2 may suggest that the psalmist is exiled and cannot make a pilgrimage to the Temple to "behold the face of God" (v. 2). In any case, the psalmist desires a depth of communion with God that does not seem available. The mention of the "face of God" in v. 2 and "bread" (NRSV "food") in v. 3 suggests again that the desire for communion with God is expressed in terms of a wish to visit the Temple, which housed the "bread of the face" (NRSV "bread of the Presence"; see Ex. 25:30; 1 Sam. 21:6; 1 Kings 7:48). Denied this opportunity, the psalmist's "bread" has been his or her own tears; and the grief has been exacerbated by the question of others, "Where is your God?" (Pss. 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2; Joel 2:17; Micah 7:10).

Apparently, the only thing the psalmist can do is to "remember" (v. 4), and so he or she recalls the joy of past visits to "the house of God" (v. 4). This memory leads to the first occurrence of the refrain (v. 5; see v. 11; 43:5), which seems to be a sort of inner dialogue that expresses both the temptation to despair as well as the possibility of help and hope.

The beginning of the second section (42:6–11) emphasizes the note

of despair as it echoes the first line of the refrain. Again, all the psalmist can do is to "remember you" (v. 6; compare v. 4). The geographical references in v. 6 may be understood literally, in which case they would locate the psalmist outside of the homeland, or they may be understood as an imaginative way to introduce the metaphors of v. 7. In contrast to the scarcity of water in vs. 1–2, there is too much water in v. 7; the "deep" represents the chaotic forces that are overwhelming the psalmist (see Ps. 69:1–3). Verse 8 seems surprisingly hopeful, but it may refer to an aspect of a bygone era that the psalmist is remembering. In any case, it leads to further complaint in vs. 9–10. The psalmist's remembering leads to the conclusion that God has forgotten (v. 9), a situation that does not escape the notice of the enemies (v. 10), who repeat the haunting question of v. 3. The juxtaposition of this question with the second occurrence of the refrain again emphasizes the note of despair.

Psalm 43:1–5, the third section of Pss. 42—43, moves beyond complaint to petition. "Vindicate me" in v. 1 could also be translated "establish justice for me"; and "defend my cause" could be paraphrased in the contemporary idiom "get on their case." While questions still remain (v. 2; compare 42:9), the psalmist's tone is more hopeful. He or she can envision being led by God's "light" (see, for example, Pss. 27:1; 44:3; 89:15) and "truth" (or "faithfulness"; see, for example, Ex. 34:6; Pss. 40:10–11; 54:5; 71:22) to the temple to "praise" God (v. 4). The word "praise" anticipates the final occurrence of the refrain, and serves to emphasize this time the hopeful aspect—"I shall again praise."

The powerful refrain of Pss. 42—43, while it appears intensely personal, may actually be more liturgical than autobiographical, as James L. Mays suggests: "In it the ego who speaks to the downcast soul is the liturgical and confessional ego speaking to the consciousness shaped by a society and circumstances that do not support faith" (*Psalms*, Interpretation series; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994). In other words, the refrain professes the faith of the whole people of God, the church. That it does so in a hostile environment makes Pss. 42—43 very timely, for, as Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon have recently reminded us, the church is in a sort of permanent exile. Christians now live as "resident aliens" in a culture that clearly does not support faith. Instead of affirming that human life derives from and depends on God, our culture teaches us that "it is all up to us" (*Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 36). In this cultural context, Pss. 42—43 suggest that the most important thing we can do is to "hope in God" (42:5, 11; 43:5), that is, to claim the baptism that marks us as

children of God, whose souls will not rest until they rest in God. The spirit of Pss. 42—43 pervades the opening paragraph of Augustine's *Confessions*: "The thought of you stirs him [the human being] so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you" (Book I, 1; trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin; New York: Penguin Books, 1961, p. 21). As children of God, we shall understand what the world cannot begin to fathom: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt. 5:6; see also John 4:14; 6:35; Rev. 21:6).

Galatians 3:23–29

This lection forms the climax of the argument that began in Gal. 3:1 (or even in 2:15!) opposing the law with faith in Jesus Christ. Over against those in the Galatian churches who affirm that Christians must obey the law of Moses in order to participate fully in the Christian life, Paul insists that the two, the law and Christ, are incompatible. In 3:1–5, Paul argues his case on the basis of experience, and in 3:6–18, on the basis of exegesis.

With 3:19, Paul takes up the purpose of the law. It was given "because of transgressions" (3:19), but it could not "make alive" (3:21). With our passage, Paul continues this line of argument. The law held people "imprisoned and guarded" (3:23). It was a "disciplinarian until Christ came" (3:24). "Disciplinarian" translates the Greek word *paidagōgos*, which refers to a particular kind of household slave, one who was charged with overseeing the behavior of a boy on his way to school and back. The *paidagōgos* had a largely protective role and his services were temporary, no longer needed when the boy attained manhood. Elsewhere Paul suggests a more positive interpretation of the law (for example, Rom. 7:14–21; 9:4), but here the law's role is essentially negative and temporal. It served to protect from harm until "faith would be revealed" (v. 23).

Does that last phrase suggest that there is no faith under the law, that belief itself is only possible in the Christian era? The example of Abraham in vs. 6–9 argues against that view. Instead, the faith that Paul speaks of in v. 23 abbreviates the phrase of v. 22—"faith in Jesus Christ." Thus, v. 24 identifies Christ as the one who arrived. What has changed is not that people who were previously unable to believe are now able to do so, but that Christ arrived and rendered futile all previous allegiances and commitments.

Not only did Christ appear on the scene, but also believers are

profoundly connected with him. The spatial imagery of the passage vividly makes this point. Before the arrival of Christ, "we were imprisoned and guarded *under* [*hypo*] the law" (v. 23, emphasis added), but now "we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian" (literally, *under* [*hypo*] a disciplinarian). Believers have moved away from the sphere in which the law is in charge.

They have moved into (or they have been moved into) the sphere of Christ Jesus. They are "*in* Christ Jesus" and have been "baptized *into* Christ" (emphases added). They have even "clothed" themselves "with Christ." Here it becomes clear that the language Paul applies to himself at the end of chapter 2 applies equally well to all believers. Christ lives in and through them, and they live in Christ. What this means for the law, as for any other loyalty, is that its role has been displaced by the centrality of Jesus Christ.

With 3:28, Paul states in extremely forceful terms (terms that may be drawn from an early Christian baptismal formula) the implications of this exclusive relationship: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." With these three brief phrases, Paul encompasses the three fundamental anthropological divisions known to his world. "Jew or Greek," the Jew's version of "Greeks and . . . barbarians" (see Rom. 1:14), identified the world along ethnic-religious lines, dividing those who were within one's circle from the outsider, the other. "Slave or free" identified the world along socioeconomic lines, dividing those who possessed a measure of freedom from those who possessed very little. (The nature of slavery in the Greco-Roman world is far more complicated than was previously understood.) "Male and female," which follows Gen. 1:27 and therefore does not exactly conform to the other divisions, identified the world along gender lines determined at birth.

"For all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28). These previous identifications and divisions, the most powerful known in the ancient world (or in the present), have ceased to exist because of the single identity "in Christ Jesus." Verse 29 applies this general statement to the specific issue at hand: Who can rightfully be called a child of Abraham? Those who are "in Christ" are the children of Abraham, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. The only identification that counts is that of baptism in Christ.

Since this passage has become a hallmark of the church's discussion of the limits and responsibilities of women, it may seem superfluous to discuss it yet once again. What often is overlooked in those discussions, however, is that this passage operates something like a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it profoundly undercuts

the way in which we persist in distinguishing among human beings on the basis of gender, race, class, or any other anthropological identification. In the sphere of Jesus Christ, these distinctions have no place.

On the other hand, this passage confronts us with the claim that Christians are *one in Christ Jesus*, insisting that we are radically united on the basis of Christ Jesus. The solipsism that allows others to divide up again on the basis of ethnic or gender experience cannot be countenanced in the Christian community. Here, identity in Christ Jesus is the only identity that matters. As so often, Paul manages to offend virtually everyone with his insistence on the prior and exclusive claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Luke 8:26–39

It may be appropriate from time to time in preaching on texts from the Gospels to deal with the phenomenon of demon possession. The so-called scientific mind today often finds the stories in which Jesus exorcizes an evil spirit to be primitive and unsophisticated. One can always offer a brief explanation by pointing to the common experience shared by ancients and moderns of unexplained terrors that create enormous emotional, if not physical, havoc in the lives of individuals and communities. But most of the exorcism stories found in the Gospels really need little explanation. They make themselves remarkably immediate to modern audiences without extended clarification of the first-century worldview.

Such is the case with the longest of the exorcism stories, the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. The vivid narrative relates powerful conflicts, transformations, rejections, and resolutions, and leaves the interpreter with more than enough relevant material to deal with.

Right away the reader encounters *the conflict of authority between Jesus and the demons* (Luke 8:26–31). It is not surprising, since this is the second of four vignettes in which Jesus' authority is displayed (calming the storm, exorcizing the demons, healing the woman with the hemorrhages, and raising Jairus's daughter), culminating in his delegating authority to the Twelve as they begin their mission (9:1–6). Despite their number, the demons here are no match for Jesus. They fall before him and beg that he not send them back to the abyss. Their end comes, rather ironically, in the sea, since demons assiduously avoid the water (compare 11:24).

We dare not downplay the element of conflict. At Jesus' command

that the unclean spirit leave, the demon-speaking man replies, "Do not torment me" (8:28–29). He rightly perceives Jesus as a menace who will engage destructive forces and destroy them. It is the nature of Jesus' authority that he threatens inhumane and oppressive powers, sometimes directly, sometimes subversively. Not every individual or institution is ready for the overhaul that Jesus always brings.

Jesus' authority effects *an amazing transformation from terror to wholeness*. The details of the "before" and "after" are stunning. Once naked, banished from the city, living in the caves, convulsive, kept unsuccessfully under guard, totally uncontrollable, he becomes a disciple of Jesus, sane and appropriately clothed. The Greek participle translated "in his right mind" (8:35) is the same characteristic Paul urges for all Christians ("sober judgment," Rom. 12:3). It is hard to improve on the pictures of transformation painted in the narrative itself.

It is critical that this transformation occurs in the country of the Gerasenes (Luke 8:26). Considerable textual and geographical confusion prevents a certainty of the location on a map, but the presence of the pigs feeding on the hillside assures us that we are talking about a predominantly Gentile territory and the restoration of a non-Jewish person. Here Jesus' saving arm reaches beyond the national bounds of Judaism, anticipating the broader mission to the Gentiles so prominent in the book of Acts.

The transformation of the demoniac leads to *discipleship*. Luke alone describes the healed man as "sitting at the feet of Jesus" (8:35). At Jesus' departure, the man begs that he might accompany Jesus, as other disciples have done. Instead, he is sent home (that is, back into the city) to "declare how much God has done for you" (8:39). He is commissioned to bear his personal witness in the Gentile area, and does so in response to Jesus' direction.

The movement from the exertion of Jesus' authority to the transformation of the Gerasene demoniac results in a new disciple, who becomes a model for mission. But the story also has its down side. There is *the fearful rejection of Jesus* by the people of the area. The "happy ending" of the eager evangelist is countered by the pressure of his peers, who force Jesus to leave the area.

It is striking that the folks who come from the city and the country around to see the restored demoniac exhibit no sense of amazement or awe, much less belief. They are overcome with fear (8:35, 37). The transformation leaves them terribly afraid. Why? We are not told explicitly what caused their fear and why they wanted Jesus to leave, but one cannot help drawing a connection between Jesus' act of

healing and the destruction of a herd of pigs. Someone's assets are sharply reduced by the action of Jesus, and it may be that other acts of kindness will further threaten economic stability. It often happens.

Whatever the reason for their rejection of Jesus, the Gerasene people represent a tough mission field for the healed demoniac to tackle.

PROPER 8

Ordinary Time 13

*Sunday between June 26
and July 2 inclusive*

The sequence of lections from the Elijah-Elisha cycle continues with the account in 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 of the transition of leadership from master to chief disciple, a theme prominent in other parts of the Bible. This (quite literal!) assumption of the mantle of Elijah's prophetic authority by Elisha finds its closest parallel in the Moses-Joshua relationship. However, echoes of the account in Acts 1 of the ascension of Jesus will not escape the reader. The passing of a great leader of God's people is necessarily the occasion of a crisis of sorts, for only the work of the Spirit of God can supply a newly empowered person around whom the people may rally. That God does not abandon the people and the fruit of the work of the Spirit may be seen in the authorization of Elisha to fill the void left by the passing of Elijah.

Psalm 77 is a cry of distress from one in trouble, but the bulk of the verses chosen, 77:1-2, 11-20, have to do with the psalmist's meditation on the goodness of God, especially on God's saving deeds in the past. References to God's mastery over the waters in vs. 16-20 make this psalm an appropriate companion piece to the passage from 2 Kings 2, where the parting of the waters of the Jordan occupies a climactic moment in the narrative (2 Kings 2:14). The memory of God's saving deeds in the past makes it possible for women and men of faith to embody the reign of God even in the midst of circumstances that suggest that God does not reign. Out of the memory of the community of faith emerges hope.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25, an important statement on Christian freedom, is also an important statement on the work of the Spirit. Freedom in Christ must not be confused with irresponsible license, basically for the reason that it is a freedom grounded in Christ and it therefore involves obligations to Christ and to others. In what manner, then, is this freedom to be lived? Through reliance on the Spirit, for the "fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,