

cost. God knows what it takes to build a tower. God knows how strong the enemy's forces are. The rule God has inaugurated will not be left unfinished. It may have a rather unpromising beginning, but do not be deceived: God means to win. It is just this certain and conclusive cause we are called to join.

PROPER 19

Ordinary Time 24

*Sunday between
September 11 and 17 inclusive*

The Old Testament commentary summarizes the apparent message of Jer. 4:11–12, 22–28 in two words: “total despair.” But then it observes that there is a “soft note of grace” in 4:27. In other words, while Israel’s foolishness, stupidity, and skill in doing evil are very real (v. 22), God’s redemptive purposes for the people will not ultimately be thwarted.

The first three verses of Ps. 14 suggest that the same sort of foolishness and perversity characterizes all humanity—“there is no one who does good” (vs. 1, 3). But in an apparent contradiction to vs. 1–3, vs. 4–6 give testimony to God’s ability to gather from among sinful humankind a community of people who will find their refuge in God. Verse 7 suggests again that God’s redemptive purposes will not ultimately be thwarted.

In 1 Tim. 1:12–17, Paul points to his own life as an example (v. 16) of God’s ability to reclaim and redeem persons. Formerly immersed in ignorance and evil, Paul has now been appointed to Christ’s service (vs. 12–14). This transformation is not testimony to Paul’s own sufficiency or merit. Rather, he has “received mercy” (vs. 13, 16). His story is evidence of God’s gracious will and ability to redeem (v. 14), and it gives reason to glorify God (v. 17).

Luke 15:1–10 suggests just how far God is willing to go to reclaim the lost. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, God is portrayed as remarkably and even recklessly active in pursuit of wayward persons. God does not just wait for people to return. Rather, God goes after them. In a striking way, Luke 15 reinforces the good news of the preceding lections: God’s redemptive purposes will not ultimately be thwarted.

Jeremiah 4:11–12, 22–28

Two words appear to characterize the Old Testament lection for this day: total despair. Although the text is set in a larger context that

finds the prophet still believing that the people may repent and that Yahweh's judgment may be averted (4:1-4; 5:1), the mood of the verses appointed for this lectionary passage seems completely negative. But are they?

The theme of the Day of Yahweh is in the prophet's mind in vs. 11-12, which serve as an introduction to the larger lection. As best we know, it was Amos who, among the prophets, first described this day (Amos 5:18-20), and in doing so he warned the people to prepare themselves for a terrible surprise. The implication of Amos's words is that the Day of Yahweh was an occasion to which his contemporaries looked forward with great anticipation, perhaps expecting a stunning military victory or some new outpouring of the grace of Israel's God. But it would be just the opposite, said Amos, a time of unimagined terror sent by Yahweh.

Jeremiah knows the lessons of Amos. "On that day" of Jer. 4:9 clearly has Amos's preaching in mind, and the horror described there will be so great that even those closest to Yahweh will not be prepared: "the priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded." "At that time," the words with which the present lectionary passage begins (v. 11), stands in direct reference to "On that day" of 4:9, the Day of Yahweh. The metaphor of judgment here is that of the hot east wind, which on occasion blew off of the high Transjordanian plateau, searing everything in its path. The Day of Yahweh will be like that terrible wind in its ferocity.

The lectionary passage now skips to v. 22, a brief statement that, as the arrangement of lines in NRSV indicates, is more closely linked to vs. 13-21 than it is to vs. 23-28. The prophet enters the thought-world of the wisdom philosophers and borrows their terminology and conceptualization to make an important statement about the state of the people's relationship to Yahweh. They are "foolish," "stupid," without "understanding." They are like those described in the second line of Prov. 1:7 (compare Ps. 111:10):

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

"They do not know me," complains Yahweh. "[They] do not know how to do good." Then, in a fine use of irony, Jeremiah employs the adjectival form of the very word that means wisdom, *hākmaḥ*, to describe the inventiveness of the people's evil. NRSV's "They are skilled in doing evil" (emphasis added) does not catch this play on words as does Jerusalem Bible's "they are clever enough at doing wrong" (emphasis added).

Jeremiah 4:23-26 is composed of four sentences, each of which begins with a single Hebrew word meaning "I looked." (We are reminded again of how many of those in Israel's prophetic tradition responded to the sights and sounds of the surrounding world; see the discussion of Jer. 18:1-11, Proper 18.) The reader is signaled straightaway that what Jeremiah is witnessing is nothing other than the undoing of the created order. "I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void" (v. 4:23). This is the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where there occurs the phrase of Gen. 1:2 that describes the chaotic state that prevailed before God began to create the world: *tōhū wābōhū*. (The Septuagint renders Jer. 4:23 even more bluntly: "I looked upon the earth and, behold, it was not.") The earth before creation is the spectacle that terrorizes Jeremiah's vision, as does the sight of the heavens with no light (Gen. 1:3, 14), an earth with no living creatures (Gen. 1:20, 24, 26), a desert instead of fruitful land (Gen. 1:11). All of creation must suffer because of the sinfulness of Yahweh's people. (Compare similar treatments of this theme in Gen. 6:5-8; Zeph. 1:2-3.)

Jeremiah 4:27-28 completes the passage. The desolation is to be total. There is no changing Yahweh's mind! To paraphrase Eccl. 1:2: "Despair of despair, says the prophet. All is despair."

But in the midst of this terrible clamor over Yahweh's anger, there is one soft note of grace. It is so inconspicuous as to be easily unnoticed, yet it is there, crouching in Jer. 4:27: "The whole land shall be a desolation; yet *I will not make a full end*" (emphasis added). So astonishing is this note of mercy, so out of character with the rest of the passage, that the editors of the standard critical edition of the Hebrew Bible, usually so insightful in their suggestions, propose that the Hebrew text is defective here and that it should read "The whole land shall be a desolation, and I will make *of it* a full end" (substituting *lāh* ["of it"] for *lō'* ["not"]). (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, p. 789. Note "a" in the critical apparatus to Jer. 4:22.)

Perhaps they are right. Perhaps this passage does reflect a time when Jeremiah had grown so weary with the waywardness of the people and so despondent over their deafness to his message that he saw no hope that things would ever be right again (compare Jer. 20:14-18).

But as the record of this prophet's oracles has come down to us (through who knows how many editorial hands) the very idea of the Day of Yahweh, linked so fundamentally to Yahweh's coming judgment, is transformed into a message of redemption. "The days are surely coming, . . ." says the prophet over and again (Jer. 31:27, 31, 38), when judgment will be overcome by restoration.

The days are surely coming . . . when . . . just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. (Jer. 31:27-28)

(Compare Jer. 1:10, Proper 16.)

Total despair? It is understandable that Jeremiah would sink into such desperate moods. Yet Jeremiah knew Israel's God as have few mortals, and Jeremiah knew that Yahweh's final word is not judgment, but redemption.

Psalm 14

The first verse of Ps. 14 is one of the most memorable in the book of Psalms, and it is probably also one of the most misunderstood. Contrary to popular opinion, the issue is not atheism, in the sense of the denial of God's existence on philosophical grounds. There were very few, if any, of that sort of atheists in ancient Israel; and there are still relatively few today. The issue is what is often called "practical atheism"—that is, *acting* as if there is no God. And when atheism is so defined, then *all of us* are "fools." Indeed, vs. 2-3 suggest this conclusion rather explicitly. When God "looks down from heaven on humankind, . . . there is *no one* who does good, *no, not one.*" As H.-J. Kraus says in regard to this conclusion: "Finally, one must come to realize how shocking the assertions of Psalm 14 actually are" (*Psalms 1-59*, trans. H. C. Oswald; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988, pp. 223-24).

What is so shocking and disturbing about Ps. 14:1-3 is that foolishness amounts to what the psalms elsewhere call "wickedness," which is to be understood essentially as autonomy—literally, to be a law unto oneself. The dimensions of the problem become clear when we consider that our culture considers autonomy one of the highest virtues. To be a functioning adult, one must be self-sufficient, self-directed; and the goal of life is often understood to be self-fulfillment or self-actualization (see the commentary on Ps. 1, Sixth Sunday After Epiphany). To be sure, all this makes some sense on the psychological level, but often our psychological formulations translate subtly into a theological conclusion—namely, we don't need other people, and we don't need God! Such a conclusion does not deny the existence of God, but it does effectively eliminate God as an essential, functioning aspect of our daily reality. For us, *in effect*, "there is no God" (see Ps. 10:4).

The assertion "There is no God" has behavioral consequences: "There is no one who does good" (Ps. 14:1, 3). The repetition is emphatic, as is the final phrase of v. 3, "no, not one." The verbs in vs. 1 and 3 recall two crucial episodes in the Pentateuch—the beginning of the Flood story (see "corrupt"/"corrupted" in Gen. 6:12) and Israel's worship of the golden calf (see Ex. 32:7, where the verb here translated "corrupt" appears as "acted perversely," and Ex. 32:8, where the verb here translated "gone astray" appears as "turn aside"). Both these episodes culminate in the establishment of a covenant (Gen. 9:8-17; Ex. 34:10-28), based on God's willingness to forgive and restore. And both these episodes prove paradigmatic; that is, the history of Israel and history in general reveal a remarkably persistent perversity on the part of God's people and humanity as a whole. In looking back over Israel's history, for instance, the book of Isaiah also uses the vocabulary of Ps. 14:1-3. The people "deal corruptly" (Isa. 1:4; compare Ps. 14:1) and "continue to rebel" (Isa. 1:5; compare "gone astray" in Ps. 14:3). Like the two key episodes in the Pentateuch, the book of Isaiah also culminates in the restoration of relationship (see "covenant" in Isa. 54:10, where it is linked to the Flood story, as well as in 55:3; 56:4; 59:21; 61:8), based not on the people's willingness to obey, but rather on God's willingness to forgive (see Isa. 40:1-2).

It is this message of universal human perversity that Paul utilizes in Rom. 3:10-18, quoting portions of Ps. 14:1, 3 and several additional verses of a longer version of Ps. 14 that is found in the Greek Old Testament. Paul's initial point that all people "are under the power of sin" (Rom. 3:9) is followed by the good news that "all . . . are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-24). As in the Old Testament, relationship is restored by God's gracious action. Salvation is not and can never be a human achievement, despite our persistent attempts to make it so. We contemporary, sophisticated human beings do not like to think about such "foolishness"; but then again, we do not like to think of ourselves as sinners either. Psalm 14 tells us that we are. Lest we think our enlightened era has left perversity behind, all we need to do is read the headlines of recent years or days—hunger, homelessness, political corruption, interminable warfare in our inner cities as well as around the world. Although our rugged individualism (that is, autonomy) usually leads us to deny it, there is not one of us who remains uninvolved in or unaffected by these realities—"no, not one."

Verses 4-6 offer a perspective that seems to contradict that of vs. 1-3, since these verses distinguish between "all the evildoers" (v. 4)

and those called "my people" (v. 4), "the company of the righteous" (v. 5), and "the poor" (v. 6). Verses 4–6 may reflect a divided society in which a strong elite fed upon the oppressed (see Micah 3:1–4); however, as James L. Mays suggests, "theologically we would do well to let the tensions stand unresolved" (*Psalms*, Interpretation series; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994). On the one hand, it would be dangerous to ignore vs. 1–3 and thus to assume that we are not sinners (see Luke 18:9–14). On the other hand, it would be a denial of the biblical good news to conclude that God cannot gather sinners into "the company of the righteous"—Israel, the church. To be sure, our righteousness is not an achievement, but a gift. We remain sinners and victims of sin; we know, however, that our own insufficiency and destructive acts are not the final word. There is a source of life beyond ourselves; in short, the Lord is our "refuge" (v. 6; see Ps. 2:12). This is true "knowledge" (14:4), the wisdom for which God is looking (v. 2; see Ps. 2:10, where the admonition to be wise means to acknowledge God's rule rather than one's own power). To be sure, it is this very wisdom that appears foolish to the world. For us Christians, this wisdom takes finally the shape of a cross, which reveals clearly the two realities with which Ps. 14 confronts us—the reality of human sin and the reality of God's grace. To live among "the company of the righteous" is to trust that the reality of God's grace is the ultimate reality. Thus, we live not by what we see so pervasive around us, but rather by what we believe and what we hope for (see v. 7).

1 Timothy 1:12–17

Most letters in the New Testament throw us immediately into a conversation among early Christians. Even if only one partner in the conversation is speaking, we hear something of the faith and struggle of a congregation of real people. By contrast, the body of 1 Timothy opens with a set of general warnings that offer modern readers little opportunity to hear from or about a group of believers. Vague warnings about "certain people" and "endless genealogies" and "meaningless talk" scarcely allow us an avenue into identification.

With 1:12–17, we suddenly feel at home. Here is Paul (or, more likely, a follower of Paul's who speaks with Paul's voice to a later generation) talking about his conversion. Having read the accounts in Acts 9, 22, and 26, and the brief references in his other letters (for

example, Gal. 1:11–17; Phil. 3:2–11), we know what to expect. Paul is "telling his story," to use the contemporary parlance.

To "tell one's story" in the church of our time is to focus on our experience. One's own life, or some aspect of it, becomes the beginning point for reflection on what it means to live faithfully in the world. Because of our capacity to identify with the experiences of others, "telling one's story" can serve to forge a crucial connection among individuals.

Despite our interest in this mode of reflection, the notion of having individuals narrate their own stories (in the sense of autobiographical accounts) is largely absent from the New Testament. Paul has very little to say about his own conversion. Even in the passages where he does touch on it, few details permit us access to the event. That has not prevented, but rather has encouraged, endless speculation on the cause and nature of Paul's conversion.

Here in 1 Timothy, by contrast, the conversion seems to come front and center. The Paul of 1 Timothy is not only not reticent, but seems to exaggerate: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (1:13). Nothing in Paul's letters supports the claim that he blasphemed, and the claim to ignorance later in the verse contradicts this assertion. Perhaps it appears here largely to anticipate the situation of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20). That he was a violent persecutor the letters attest, but they do not draw such attention to "violence" as is the case here.

Not only did Paul persecute the church but he was, according to vs. 15–16, the "foremost" among sinners. This assertion contradicts Phil. 3:6, where Paul claims that he was "blameless" with respect to the law. The exaggeration of Paul's standing as persecutor prepares for this claim that he is the "foremost" among sinners.

In just this way, Paul now becomes the leading example for others. He received mercy so that Jesus Christ might make him "an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life" (v. 16). If Christ showed mercy on Paul, then Christ might show mercy on anyone, no matter what sins have been committed.

Looked at in this way, this passage is primarily about Paul. Paul (or his interpreter) tells the story of Paul in order to assist others. That way of looking at the passage, however, omits certain crucial elements. The passage begins, after all, with a statement of thanksgiving: "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service" (v. 12). And the passage ends with a doxological assertion (v. 17).

The opening and closing might be regarded as merely matters of form, less significant than Paul's own remarks about himself, but v. 15 indicates otherwise. Here, in the middle of the passage, we find the dramatic claim: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Four other times, the author of the pastoral epistles uses such a declaration (that is, "the saying is sure"), in 1 Tim. 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; and Titus 3:8. In every case the assertion being underscored has to do with salvation (even in the case of 1 Tim. 3:1, which probably belongs with the end of chapter 2 rather than the beginning of chapter 3, as the NRSV note indicates).

What primarily concerns the author is the salvation brought about by God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is but an example of the workings of that gospel, not a hero figure whose behavior must be emulated. After all, Paul did not bring about his own conversion. He was "judged . . . faithful and appointed" (v. 12), he "received mercy" (v. 13), and he was made an example (v. 16). Truly it is God who deserves the honor and glory, as the passage concludes.

With this lection, as with others from the pastorals, the preacher will have to determine how to refer to the author. Many factors, including the nature of the congregation and its readiness to venture into what may be unfamiliar territory, need to be taken into consideration. Although differences of opinion remain, many scholars regard the case against Pauline authorship of the pastorals to be strong (as the commentaries will indicate). As noted above, the author may well have been a student of Paul who believed himself capable of faithfully addressing new situations with Paul's voice. In the first century, such practice would not have occasioned the outrage that it would in our own time. When preachers explain the undertaking of the author in this positive light (and with humility and brevity), their congregations often respond in kind.

Luke 15:1-10

Luke 15, with its moving parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two lost sons, comes in an interesting location in the Gospel narrative. For at least three chapters, the themes developed have been the demand for repentance (13:1-9) and the costliness of following Jesus (12:49-53; 14:25-33). Even when healings have been recounted, they have become the occasion for conflict with the religious authorities, who are adamantly opposed to deeds of mercy on the Sabbath (13:10-17; 14:1-6). Jesus the prophet joins the dinner

party given by a prominent Pharisee and confronts the guests and the host with their need for humility and their failure to attend to the weak and marginalized people of the town (14:1-24). The tone of the narrative has been one of unrelenting warning and critique in an effort to redirect the focus of the disciples and the crowds.

But in Luke 15, in response to the persistent grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus offers these memorable stories of divine mercy, of the unbounded joy of God when the lost are found. The stories are not without their subversive word of judgment to the grumblers, but before they are judgment they are good news. Whatever warning they contain is bounded by the gentle and unforgettable figures of the shepherd/woman/father searching for their lost treasures. (The third story, of the loving father and his two sons, is the assigned lection for the Fourth Sunday in Lent.)

What do these two stories, of the last sheep and the lost coin, depict for us? The first and most obvious element common to both parables is *the compassionate concern of a searching God*. The details heighten the importance and intensity of the protagonists' efforts. The shepherd risks temporarily abandoning the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness (a decision many would no doubt question), and when he finds the straying sheep "he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices" (15:5). The woman is described as lighting a lamp and taking broom in hand in her attempt to recover her missing coin. Neither the shepherd nor the woman has a moment's hesitation as to what to do; neither forsakes the search until the sheep/coin is found.

God is like that, the stories say, meticulously pursuing confused and rebellious creatures. Such searching gives value to those being sought. They become treasured and significant because they are not left for lost, but are made the objects of divine concern.

The second striking image is that of *heaven's delight in the recovery of the lost*. So overcome are the shepherd and the woman with the success of their search that they call their friends and neighbors to come for a party. Neither wants to celebrate alone. As commentators note, the expense of the entertainment may have been more than the value of either the sheep or the coin, but that possibility only adds to the extravagance and joy of the occasion.

It is an unusual picture of God—throwing a celestial party, which the angels dare not miss. It may be an arresting depiction of God for those who imagine a stern taskmaster or a vindictive judge or a divine scorekeeper who is bound to pull for the other side.

It is true that the narrator makes a point of speaking of heaven's joy "over one sinner who repents" (15:7, 10). But the stories are not primarily calls to repentance. Sheep and coins can't repent. The

image of a merciful and joyful God completely overshadows any interest in the behavior or remorse of the lost creatures.

Having seen the good news in these stories, with their vivid characters and powerful plots, we must not ignore their immediate context. They function as a *disturbing response to the complaints of the Pharisees and scribes*. Both the shepherd and the woman connote figures from the underside of Jewish society. Shepherds had notorious reputations and were generally avoided as outcasts. Women were treated as second-class citizens. The mere choice of the two as images for God must have caused a shock among the listeners, and especially among those who grumbled because Jesus was welcoming (the Greek verb suggests the offering of hospitality) and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

The listeners are immediately thrust into the middle of the parables: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep . . . ?" (15:4). They are asked to reflect on their own experiences of losing a valuable article, of the search, and of the delight in finding it. By association they are invited to share with God and the angelic host in the celebration over the reclaiming of a lost sinner.

In answer to the complaint that Jesus has overstepped the boundaries in having table fellowship with sinners, the parables implicitly beckon the Pharisees and the scribes to join him, to be a part of the searching, because God is a searching God. Jesus' subtle response coheres with his earlier answer to similar charges: "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (5:32).

As with most parables, the text is open to multiple meanings. It offers good news to those who feel themselves unredeemably lost and who can delight in a God who patiently searches, not only for them, but also for others like them. It subverts and disorients, however, those offended by the remarkable generosity of God, especially when it reaches out to tax collectors and sinners.

PROPER 20

Ordinary Time 25

*Sunday between
September 18 and 24 inclusive*

Intercessory prayer is a difficult task for most Christians. Sometimes we simply do not know what to ask for and feel helpless in presenting to God a troubled friend or family member whose need baffles us. At other times we become fearful of asking for too much, lest our very prayers begin to make sharp demands on us to supply the needs of those for whom we pray (like food to the hungry and companionship to the lonely). Three of the texts for this Sunday deal with intercession, and although they certainly will not make praying any easier, they may make it more hopeful.

The readings from both Jeremiah and the Psalms depict the anguish of one who identifies with the pain of God's faithless people. Israel has created a situation of alienation and isolation. There appears no relief in sight for its hurt as it mourns the absence of God. Prophet and psalmist grieve with and for the people and join in the persistent and impatient plea for health and renewal. Only God's return can restore joy.

In the text from Jeremiah, however, we are surprised to discover that God is not absent at all, but in fact is also grieving over the plight of the people. The words that convey the prophet's hurt convey also God's pain over Israel's disobedience. God turns out to be, not an impassive or distant deity, but one bound up with the anguish of the prophet and the anguish of the people. Likewise, the psalmist discovers that the God who refuses to tolerate Israel's faithlessness nevertheless cannot finally abandon the chosen community.

First Timothy also challenges readers to offer prayers of intercession and specifies that they be made for those in positions of political leadership (without indicating their party affiliation). Lest this seem a hopeless venture, the text nudges our self-righteousness by reminding us that God's intent is that all should be saved—both pray-ers and politicians.