

Furthermore, there is a clear affirmation that taking a carefree stance toward one's personal needs and giving alms to the poor result in heavenly treasure. A reward is promised, but one that demands rejection of the strategy of the rich fool and his ilk, "who store up treasures for themselves" (12:21). To be sure, the pursuit of wealth has its rewards, but they are ephemeral, fleeting, and at the mercy of the acquisitiveness of others more greedy, in contrast to purses "that do not wear out" and treasures "unfailing."

The theme of almsgiving is, of course, persistent in Luke (14:33; 18:22) and paves the way for the picture of the ideal community in Acts 2:45; 4:34–37, where a regularized program of caring for the needy is instituted. The Christian community cannot contemplate the meaning of discipleship apart from considering how it will serve the poor and less fortunate. It lies at the heart of faithfulness.

Third, the section Luke 12:35–40 talks about perpetual readiness for the Son of man, adding a new dimension to the importance of almsgiving. The initial vignette depicts a master returning from a wedding feast and finding alert servants, immediately opening the door on his arrival. The master is so delighted at their watchfulness that he exchanges roles with them and, like another master (*kyrios*) we know, becomes their servant (see 22:27). The second vignette describes an unfortunate homeowner whose house has been broken into. Had he known when the thief was coming, he would certainly have been prepared for him.

All life is lived in expectation of the Son of man's return. The time of the arrival is unknown, but the coming is sure. This eschatological anticipation sets the talk about possessions in a new context. One's attitude toward wealth and its enticements and one's actions with the money he or she has are not trivial matters. They are part of the disciple's readiness and watchfulness.

PROPER 15

Ordinary Time 20

*Sunday between
August 14 and 20 inclusive*

Isaiah 5:1–7 and Ps. 80:8–19 employ similar images to represent the people of God—a vine or a vineyard. The image clearly communicates the careful commitment that God shows to God's people. Unfortunately, the people do not respond in kind (see Isa. 5:7), so God must destroy the vineyard (Isa. 5:5–6; Ps. 80:12–13). In Isa. 5:1–7, the judgment is announced. In Ps. 80, it has already occurred, and the people plead for restoration (vs. 1, 3, 7, 14, 19). As suggested in this Sunday's Psalm comments, on the basis of Ps. 80:14 the future life of God's people will depend not on their repentance, but rather on God's repentance!

An important canonical insight is achieved when this remarkable conclusion is heard in juxtaposition with Jesus' radical call for human repentance in Luke 12:49–56—namely, while God demands obedience and calls humanity to repentance, it is ultimately God who will bear the burden of human disobedience and whose gracious turning to humankind makes life possible. The clearest sign of God's gracious turning is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is also the cross that indicates the radical demand that repentance and discipleship involve, suggesting why repentance is so difficult and why faithfulness so rarely characterizes the life of God's people (see Luke 12:51–53).

Nevertheless, Heb. 11 demonstrates that the story of God's people does contain outstanding episodes and exemplars of faith, and Heb. 12:1–2 suggests that God never gives up on calling us to follow, to run the difficult race that leads to life. There is nothing easy about the course we are called to follow, and great perseverance is required (12:1). The good news, however, is that God does not ask us to go anywhere that God has not already gone in Jesus Christ, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2).

Isaiah 5:1-7

One of the most intriguing prophetic statements concerning the Lord's judgment on Israel is made so, not because its theological force is significantly different from other such statements in this section of the lectionary (note, for example, Amos 8:1-12, Proper 11), but because of its literary character. The central image of Israel as the unproductive vine and Yahweh as the disappointed vintager is enhanced by a literary structure characterized by frequent and surprising shifts, so that the attention of the reader is over and over again renewed.

It is often observed that Isa. 5:1-7 may have originally been inspired by a peasant song sung at the time of the autumn harvest (also the time of the Festival of Booths), in which the powers of the vine and of the grape were celebrated. While that is quite possibly true, the very first words suggest the beginning of a love song. "Let me sing for my beloved" invites the listener to (or reader of) the song to expect a statement of amorous intent (compare S. of Sol. 4:1-8). But in the first of several surprises, we are quickly informed that the song is really about the loved one's vineyard. In the balance of the initial section (v. 2) we are told that the beloved vintager did everything possible to ensure a sweet crop, but was rewarded with the failure of the vineyard:

He expected it to yield *'ānābīm* (edible grapes),
but it yielded *bē'ušīm* (stinkers).

The Hebrew term used to characterize the rotten fruit is also, for example, used in Isa. 50:2 to describe decayed fish (compare Ex. 7:18, 21).

A second section (stanza ?), vs. 3-4, contains the next important surprise, for the voice we hear is no longer that of the vintager's lover, as in vs. 1-2, but that of the vintager himself. What is more, the immediate hearers of the song are for the first time identified as the people of Jerusalem and of all Judah. They are asked to stand in judgment on the unproductive vineyard, and to them is put an inescapable conclusion: there is no more that can be done other than to tear out the vineyard root and branch. Yet the mood of the owner of the vines is less one of anger than of pained puzzlement, for the statement that concludes the first section is recast in the form of a plaintive inquiry:

When I expected it to yield *'ānābīm*,
why did it yield *bē'ušīm*?

This is perhaps not quite the broken heart of Yahweh so movingly described by Hosea (Hos. 11:1-11, Proper 13), but the words may certainly be understood to imply Yahweh's despondency.

In the third section (or stanza), vs. 5-6, the immediate impression is that the vintager is still speaking and is now promising to carry out the sentence demanded in vs. 3-4. The "hedge" and the "wall" of v. 5 make it clear that the vineyard owes its very existence to the protective care of the vintager and that, once that care is withdrawn, the vineyard will cease to exist. In the place of an ordered garden there will be "briers and thorns."

Yet it ultimately becomes apparent that this voice in vs. 5-6 is not that of a human farmer, but the voice of none other than Yahweh, for only Yahweh can command the clouds "that they rain no rain upon it." And so all of vs. 5-6 is suddenly cast into a new perspective, for this is no Judean landowner planning to reshape his acreage; this is Israel's God about to bring terrible justice to the nation.

In the final section (v. 7), the song of the vineyard—now a song of judgment—achieves its climax. The allusions of vs. 1-6 are now fully revealed: the vintager is Yahweh, the vineyard is Israel/Judah. The judgment that the nation was asked in v. 3 to render is really a judgment on itself. (Compare the manner in which Nathan manages to elicit from David a judgment on himself, 2 Sam. 12:1-12.)

Notice that the speaker of v. 7 is different from the vintager of vs. 3-4 and Yahweh of vs. 5-6. Perhaps the voice we hear is that of the female lover of the vintager, whom we heard in vs. 1-2, but more likely it is that of the prophet who now steps forward—in the manner of the chorus in a Greek tragedy—to pronounce Yahweh's judgment.

Yet it is still more in sorrow than in anger that Yahweh stands as judge over this sinful people, for the "refrain" that closed the first and second sections (vs. 2, 4) is now recast (v. 7). A disappointed Yahweh had "expected" (NRSV reflects the fact that the Hebrew verb —*qāwāh*—is the same in all three verses) one thing, but had experienced another. Notice the powerful wordplay.

He expected *mišpāt* (justice),
but saw *mišpāh* (bloodshed);
šēdāqāh (righteousness),
but heard *sē'āqāh* (a cry)!

One cannot help being struck by the dramatic quality of this passage. Isaiah of Jerusalem lived three hundred years before the golden age of Greek drama, yet Isa. 5:1-7 could be easily and powerfully staged, with four speakers delivering their lines:

The female lover of the vintager: vs. 1-2
 The vintager: vs. 3-4
 Yahweh: vs. 5-6
 Yahweh's prophet: v. 7

Perhaps this setting would be an effective manner of introducing this lection to a worshipping congregation.

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

Psalm 80:1-7 was the reading for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. After repeating vs. 1-2, today's lesson resumes following the second occurrence of the refrain (vs. 3, 7, 19) and includes the remainder of the psalm. After the opening plea (Ps. 80:1-2) and initial complaint (vs. 4-6), each of which is followed by the refrain (vs. 3, 7), vs. 8-13 contain a historical allegory or parable. Verses 14-18 then return to petition and complaint before the final occurrence of the refrain.

The allegory of the vine in vs. 8-11 serves to remind Yahweh of past actions on behalf of Israel, and such recollections are typical in communal prayers of complaint and petition (see Pss. 44:1-8; 74:2, 12-17; compare Ex. 32:11-12). Verses 8-11 of Ps. 80 offer a brief overview of Israel's history from the exodus (the verb "ordered . . . to set out" in Ex. 15:22 is the same as "brought . . . out" in Ps. 80:8a), to the conquest (v. 8b; see "drove out" in Josh. 24:12, 18; Ps. 78:55), to the growth and culmination of the Davidic empire that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River (Ps. 80:9-11).

The Old Testament lesson for the day (Isa. 5:1-7) is a reminder that Ps. 80 is not the only text that likens Israel to a vine or vineyard. The image suggests careful planning, preparation, and patient nurture that make growth and fruitfulness possible. Thus, it is an appropriate one for representing the commitment that God shows to God's people (see the vine metaphor also in Jer. 2:21; 6:9; Ezek. 17:1-10; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1; 14:7; John 15:1-11; and note the use of the verb "plant" even where the vine imagery is absent, as in Ex. 15:17 and Ps. 44:2, for example).

The allegory continues in Ps. 80:12-13. In view of God's careful planting and nurture, the question is, "Why . . . ?" (v. 12), recalling the question in v. 4, "How long . . . ?" After all God had done, why would God break down the walls around the vineyard (see Isa. 5:5; Ps. 89:40), and allow the vine to be devoured (see Ps. 89:41; and note "How long . . ." in 89:46)? The word "feed" in Ps. 80:13 is particularly poignant in light of v. 1, where "Shepherd" is literally

"Feeder." The one who is supposed to feed Israel is allowing Israel to be fed upon.

The question raised in v. 12 receives no answer. Rather, vs. 12-13 are followed by renewed petition, "Turn again," or as the imperative phrase could be translated, "Repent, O God of hosts" (v. 14). The sequence is reminiscent of Ex. 32:11-12, where two questions (see "why" in v. 11 and v. 12) lead immediately to Moses' request that God "turn" (v. 12). The request in Ps. 80:14 at least implies an answer to the question in v. 12, especially when Ps. 80 is heard in conjunction with Isa. 5:1-7 and Ex. 32:11-12; that is, God is punishing Israel for its sin. The people's promise that "we will never turn back" (Ps. 80:18a) also implies that the people have sinned previously, but there is no direct confession of sin.

This fact, plus the placement and construction of v. 14, places the initiative for restoration exclusively on God. Verse 14 occurs at a point where one might expect the refrain again (and indeed, some older commentaries actually amend the text to make v. 14 consistent with vs. 3, 7, 19); and the word "Turn" is a different form of the *same* Hebrew verb as "Restore" in vs. 3, 7, 19. This seemingly intentional variation in construction has the effect of emphasizing v. 14. Coupled with the absence of any confession of sin by the people, the message is clear: If there is to be life (v. 18) and a future for the people of God, it will result from *God's* repentance rather than the people's repentance. The fourfold imperative in v. 14 also has an emphatic effect. Not only does "Turn" recall the earlier exodus event, but so do "see" (Ex. 3:7, NRSV "observed"; 4:31) and "have regard for" (Ex. 3:16; 4:31, NRSV "given heed"). As in both major episodes of the exodus event—the deliverance from Egypt and the forgiveness following the construction of the golden calf—God's activity is determinative.

The petition in Ps. 80:17 reinforces v. 14. To have God's hand upon one is to experience protection and deliverance (see Ezra 8:31). The "one at your right hand" and "the one whom you made strong" are sometimes understood as references to a king or future king; however, these phrases probably refer to Israel. The Hebrew underlying "one whom" in the second phrase is literally "son of a human," and Israel is elsewhere referred to as God's son (see Hos. 11:1; see also Gen. 49:22, where Joseph, represented by a plant, is called a "son of a fruit-bearer"; in the NRSV "fruitful bough"). The final petition is the refrain in v. 19, which is slightly different from vs. 3, 7, by inclusion of the more personal divine name, Yahweh.

Psalm 80 provides a helpful perspective in relation to the Gospel lesson. Luke 12:49-56 is a radical call to repentance. More trouble-

some, perhaps, than the "family values" implications is the danger that repentance will be perceived as a meritorious work. Of course, the Gospels ultimately demonstrate what Israel's history demonstrates again and again—namely, humanity's failure to repent and be faithful as well as God's willingness to bear the pain of loving wayward children. Psalm 80 and the cross proclaim that our lives ultimately depend on God's willingness to repent (v. 14). What human repentance amounts to, at best, is turning to accept the loving embrace of God, which gives us life (see Luke 15:11–32). As Jesus suggested in extending the vine image, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

The elaborate praise of the faith of Israel's past generations in Heb. 11 does not lend itself readily to the needs of the lectionary for readings that are succinct and manageable. The sheer power and familiarity of the passage, however, make it difficult to omit altogether. Presumably it is as a result of these conflicting needs that the editors of the lectionary have decided to incorporate part of the opening of Heb. 11 in one reading (Proper 14) and part of the closing of Heb. 11 in this reading. Although that decision nicely presents the context of the athletic image of Heb. 12:1–2, the end of Heb. 11 becomes somewhat disjointed.

Hebrews 11:29–31 belongs with the preceding section about Moses (vs. 23–28), as is clear not only from the content but from the change from "by faith" (see vs. 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31) to "through faith" in v. 33. The crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of Jericho both belong, at least in a general sense, to the period associated with Moses.

With v. 32, the pace changes, as is clear from the conventional question and explanation that introduce this section ("And what more should I say? For time would fail me . . ."). Instead of detailing the faithful deeds of individuals, the author lists them and refers more generally to their accomplishments. Initially, in vs. 32–34, these are military or political deeds born of faithfulness: conquering of other nations, ruling with justice, triumph in war.

At v. 35 the subject changes. Instead of celebrating the triumphs of Israel, vs. 35–38 recount the faithfulness of the martyrs during the Maccabean period. Because no specific names are mentioned and this history is less familiar than that of earlier periods, the allusions may be missed, but the events depicted here may be found in the

Maccabean writings, especially 1 Macc. 1:60–63 and 2 Macc. 6:18–31; 7:1–42. The general point is clear, however, and prepares the way for the reference to Jesus in Heb. 12:2; faithfulness consists not only of triumphal behavior in battle and conquest but also of the faithful endurance of persecution.

With 11:39–40, Hebrews begins the transition to the hortatory section of chapter 12. Even these heroes and heroines of Israel's past did not attain the full victory for their faith, because "something better" had been promised them. That "something" now appears in the person of Jesus Christ.

The use of athletic imagery is a rhetorical convention (compare its use in the Pauline letters: 1 Cor. 9:24–29; Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16) that the author of Hebrews plays with effectively in Heb. 12:1–2. All the necessary elements of a race are included: the spectators, possible encumbrances, the trials involved in running a marathon, the lead runner, and the finish line. Together these features summon Christians to their own life of faithfulness.

The reference to the "cloud of witnesses" works on two levels. First, taking "witness" in its simplest sense, these are onlookers, presumably those invoked in chapter 11 who serve largely as spectators of the race. They stand along the route to encourage the efforts of the runners. Second, however, the "witnesses" are those approved by God. The Greek noun *martys* used here is anticipated in Heb. 11 when the writer describes the forerunners of Christian faith as "approved" or "commended" (see 11:2, 4, 5, 39). In other words, this "cloud of witnesses" is not an indifferent gang of spectators who turn out on a pretty day to see who might win the race. On the contrary, this particular group of observers is anything but neutral; having already won God's commendation, they line the roadway to encourage those who follow.

The precise meaning of "every weight and the sin that clings so closely" is a little unclear, as the footnote in the NRSV indicates. Given the use of the race image, probably what is envisioned here is anything that might hamper the runners in their course. What is clear, at the end of 12:1, is that the race is a long one, for it calls for "perseverance."

Hebrews is throughout concerned with articulating the role of Jesus Christ, so it comes as little surprise that the lead runner in this race is Jesus himself. He is the "pioneer" or leader of the race. Already in 2:10, Hebrews has designated Jesus as the pioneer, and there also he is said to have become such through his sufferings. And he is the "perfector of our faith," the one who so well embodies faithfulness that believers learn its meaning from observing him.

With the remainder of 12:2, Hebrews summarizes the way in which Jesus became "pioneer and perfecter." His own "race" consisted of enduring the cross and its shame. Because we have become accustomed to the cross as a rather innocuous piece of religious symbolism, contemporary Christians may too quickly read over this phrase, but the stigma attached to death on a cross was severe. Even this brief reference to the shame of the cross would not have been overlooked by a first-century audience.

By virtue of this endurance, however, Jesus has crossed the finish line. He has "taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." Once again the author of Hebrews draws on Ps. 110:1 (see Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12) to refer to the triumph of Jesus.

The race image here drops out of sight, so that the finish line that awaits Christians is unnamed. In the conclusion to the book, of course, the "finish line" does emerge in terms of the new city that awaits (12:22; 13:14). In the meantime, what matters is that Christians understand that they are not alone; the heritage of Israel lines up along their course and the Son himself runs on ahead.

Luke 12:49–56

If one were to list ten of the hardest sayings in the Gospels, the first portion of the selection for Proper 15 would undoubtedly be on the list (Luke 12:49–53). The statements that Jesus came to bring fire, a distressful baptism, and division, even among families, are hardly welcome words for any congregation. We are happier with Jesus as a peacemaker than as a home breaker.

The passage comes in a larger section where the talk becomes sober and the reality of judgment is clear. Following the admonitions to readiness in preparation for the advent of the Son of man (12:35–48) come these forceful words about Jesus' destiny and the implications for others (vs. 49–53), and then a chiding of the crowds for their failure to discern the times (vs. 54–56). Defendants are enjoined to settle out of court with their accusers (vs. 57–59). Two recent tragedies are recounted in order to urge those who have escaped them to repent (13:1–5). A bit more time has been granted the barren fig tree in hopes that it will finally bring forth fruit (13:6–9). The present is depicted as a time of crisis, demanding repentance and changed lives.

One immediately senses the passion and drama of 12:49–53. The first-person language, the anguished wish that the fire were already kindled, the admission of distress, the question posed in such a way

that every single reader wants a yes answer, only to find it a no, the vivid description of the divided families (three against two and two against three, parents against children, children against parents)—it all adds up to an ominous scene, pictured in evocative terms. Appropriately, the translators punctuate each sentence with an exclamation point.

What is the fire Jesus wishes were already kindled and the baptism that causes such anxiety? Fire occurs repeatedly in Luke as an image for judgment (3:9, 16; 17:29), the flames that destroy and refine. Baptism is best understood in light of Mark 10:38, where it is associated with the cup and symbolizes Jesus' coming death. The two belong together. The days ahead are fraught with peril and judgment. Such a prophetic mission as Jesus has embarked on provokes sharp division—acceptance by some and rejection by others. It is a moment of painful crisis.

At the time of Jesus' presentation in the Temple, readers learn that he is "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed" (2:34). The very presence of Jesus precipitates a crisis, a division among people in terms of how they respond to him. His death epitomizes the crisis, but the crisis continues in the families and communities that are torn by conflict and disagreement. What is more, the way the text puts it, the divisions are not merely an unhappy consequence of human resistance, but a piece of Jesus' vocation. Robert Tannehill comments, "This extreme language emphasizes the inescapability of these experiences if God's plan is to be realized" (*The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986, vol. 1, p. 252).

From the beginning of Luke's story, promises of peace have been central to the presence of Jesus (1:79; 2:14; 8:48; 19:38), and peace is the message the Seventy are commissioned to preach (10:5–6). But disciples, both ancient and modern, are eager for an instant peace, a trouble-free fulfillment of the promised salvation. Jesus' words are jolting because they make it plain that there is no peace without conflict, no salvation without rejection. Jesus himself faces that at Jerusalem, and the disciples need expect nothing different. But rather than being signs of defeat, rejection and conflict are incorporated into the divine plan.

The concluding paragraph serves as a wake-up call to prod the readers into a sensitivity to the various expressions of God's rule in human life (12:54–56). If they (people somewhere on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem) are smart enough to know that a heavy cloud in the west (from the Mediterranean) means rain is on the way and that

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.