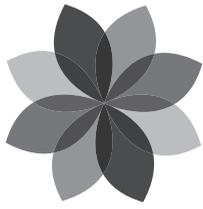


Year B, Volume 3

Season after Pentecost



Connections

A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship

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Publisher's Note

“The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God,” says the Second Helvetic Confession. While that might sound like an exalted estimation of the homiletical task, it comes with an implicit warning: “A lot is riding on this business of preaching. Get it right!”

Believing that much does indeed depend on the church's proclamation, we offer *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. *Connections* embodies two complementary convictions about the study of Scripture in preparation for preaching and worship. First, to best understand an individual passage of Scripture, we should put it in conversation with the rest of the Bible. Second, since all truth is God's truth, we should bring as many “lenses” as possible to the study of Scripture, drawn from as many sources as we can find. Our prayer is that this unique combination of approaches will illumine your study and preparation, facilitating the weekly task of bringing the Word of God to the people of God.

We at Westminster John Knox Press want to thank the superb editorial team that came together to make *Connections* possible. At the heart of that team are our general editors: Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, and Carolyn J. Sharp. These five gifted scholars and preachers have poured countless hours into brainstorming, planning, reading, editing, and supporting the project. Their passion for authentic preaching and transformative worship shows up on every page. They pushed the writers and their fellow editors, they pushed us at the press, and most especially they pushed themselves to focus always on what you, the users of this resource, genuinely need. We are grateful to Kimberley Bracken Long for her innovative vision of what commentary on the Psalm readings could accomplish, and for recruiting a talented group of liturgists and preachers to implement that vision. Rachel Toombs did an exceptional job of identifying the sidebars that accompany each worship day's commentaries. At the forefront of the work have been the members of our editorial board, who helped us identify writers, assign passages, and most especially carefully edit each commentary. They have cheerfully allowed the project to intrude on their schedules in order to make possible this contribution to the life of the church. Most especially we thank our writers, drawn from a broad diversity of backgrounds, vocations, and perspectives. The distinctive character of our commentaries required much from our writers. Their passion for the preaching ministry of the church proved them worthy of the challenge.

A project of this size does not come together without the work of excellent support staff. Above all we are indebted to project manager Joan Murchison. Joan's fingerprints are all over the book you hold in your hands; her gentle, yet unconquerable, persistence always kept it moving forward in good shape and on time. We also wish to thank Pamela Jarvis, who skillfully compiled the dozens of separate commentaries and sidebars into this single volume.

Finally, our sincere thanks to the administration, faculty, and staff of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, our institutional partner in producing *Connections*. President Theodore J. Wardlaw and Dean David H. Jensen have been steadfast friends of the project, enthusiastically agreeing to our partnership, carefully overseeing their faculty and staff's work on it, graciously hosting our meetings, and enthusiastically using their platform to promote *Connections* among their students, alumni, and friends.

It is with much joy that we commend *Connections* to you, our readers. May God use this resource to deepen and enrich your ministry of preaching and worship.

ROBERT A. RATCLIFF
WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS

Introducing Connections

Connections is a resource designed to help preachers generate sermons that are theologically deeper, liturgically richer, and culturally more pertinent. Based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which has wide ecumenical use, the hundreds of essays on the full array of biblical passages in the three-year cycle can be used effectively by preachers who follow the RCL, by those who follow other lectionaries, and by nonlectionary preachers alike.

The essential idea of Connections is that biblical texts display their power most fully when they are allowed to interact with a number of contexts, that is, when many connections are made between a biblical text and realities outside that text. Like the two poles of a battery, when the pole of the biblical text is connected to a different pole (another aspect of Scripture or a dimension of life outside Scripture), creative sparks fly and energy surges from pole to pole.

Two major interpretive essays, called Commentary 1 and Commentary 2, address every scriptural reading in the RCL. Commentary 1 explores preaching connections between a lectionary reading and other texts and themes within Scripture, and Commentary 2 makes preaching connections between the lectionary texts and themes in the larger culture outside of Scripture. These essays have been written by pastors, biblical scholars, theologians, and others, all of whom have a commitment to lively biblical preaching.

The writers of Commentary 1 surveyed five possible connections for their texts: the immediate literary context (the passages right around the text), the larger literary context (for example, the cycle of David stories or the passion narrative), the thematic context (such as other feeding stories, other parables, or other passages on the theme of hope), the lectionary context (the other readings for the day in the RCL), and the canonical context (other places in the whole of the Bible that display harmony, or perhaps tension, with the text at hand).

The writers of Commentary 2 surveyed six possible connections for their texts: the liturgical context (such as Advent or Easter), the ecclesial context (the life and mission of the church), the social and ethical context (justice and social responsibility), the cultural context (such as art, music, and literature), the larger expanse of human knowledge (such as science, history, and psychology), and the personal context (the life and faith of individuals).

In each essay, the writers selected from this array of possible connections, emphasizing those connections they saw as most promising for preaching. It is important to note that, even though Commentary 1 makes connections inside the Bible and Commentary 2 makes connections outside the Bible, this does not represent a division between “what the text *meant* in biblical times versus what the text *means* now.” Every connection made with the text, whether that connection is made within the Bible or out in the larger culture, is seen as generative for preaching, and each author provokes the imagination of the preacher to see in these connections preaching possibilities for today. Connections is not a substitute for traditional scriptural commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and other interpretive tools. Rather, Connections begins with solid biblical scholarship then goes on to focus on the act of preaching and on the ultimate goal of allowing the biblical text to come alive in the sermon.

Connections addresses every biblical text in the RCL, and it takes seriously the architecture of the RCL. During the seasons of the Christian year (Advent through Epiphany and Lent through Pentecost), the RCL provides three readings and a psalm for each Sunday and feast day: (1) a first reading, usually from the Old Testament; (2) a psalm, chosen to respond to the first reading; (3) a second

reading, usually from one of the New Testament epistles; and (4) a Gospel reading. The first and second readings are chosen as complements to the Gospel reading for the day.

During the time between Pentecost and Advent, however, the RCL includes an additional first reading for every Sunday. There is the usual complementary reading, chosen in relation to the Gospel reading, but there is also a “semicontinuous” reading. These semicontinuous first readings move through the books of the Old Testament more or less continuously in narrative sequence, offering the stories of the patriarchs (Year A), the kings of Israel (Year B), and the prophets (Year C). *Connections* covers both the complementary and the semicontinuous readings.

The architects of the RCL understand the psalms and canticles to be prayers, and they selected the psalms for each Sunday and feast as prayerful responses to the first reading for the day. Thus, the *Connections* essays on the psalms are different from the other essays, and they have two goals, one homiletical and the other liturgical. First, they comment on ways the psalm might offer insight into preaching the first reading. Second, they describe how the tone and content of the psalm or canticle might inform the day’s worship, suggesting ways the psalm or canticle may be read, sung, or prayed.

Preachers will find in *Connections* many ideas and approaches to sustain lively and provocative preaching for years to come. But beyond the deep reservoir of preaching connections found in these pages, preachers will also find here a habit of mind, a way of thinking about biblical preaching. Being guided by the essays in *Connections* to see many connections between biblical texts and their various contexts, preachers will be stimulated to make other connections for themselves. *Connections* is an abundant collection of creative preaching ideas, and it is also a spur to continued creativity.

JOEL B. GREEN
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Introducing the Revised Common Lectionary

To derive the greatest benefit from Connections, it will help to understand the structure and purpose of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), around which this resource is built. The RCL is a three-year guide to Scripture readings for the Christian Sunday gathering for worship. “Lectionary” simply means a selection of texts for reading and preaching. The RCL is an adaptation of the Roman Lectionary (of 1969, slightly revised in 1981), which itself was a reworking of the medieval Western-church one-year cycle of readings. The RCL resulted from six years of consultations that included representatives from nineteen churches or denominational agencies. Every preacher uses a lectionary—whether it comes from a specific denomination or is the preacher’s own choice—but the RCL is unique in that it positions the preacher’s homiletical work within a web of specific, ongoing connections.

The RCL has its roots in Jewish lectionary systems and early Christian ways of reading texts to illumine the biblical meaning of a feast day or time in the church calendar. Among our earliest lectionaries are the lists of readings for Holy Week and Easter in fourth-century Jerusalem.

One of the RCL’s central connections is intertextuality; multiple texts are listed for each day. This lectionary’s way of reading Scripture is based on Scripture’s own pattern: texts interpreting texts. In the RCL, every Sunday of the year and each special or festival day is assigned a group of texts, normally three readings and a psalm. For most of the year, the first reading is an Old Testament text, followed by a psalm, a reading from one of the epistles, and a reading from one of the Gospel accounts.

The RCL’s three-year cycle centers Year A in Matthew, Year B in Mark, and Year C in Luke. It is less clear how the Gospel according to John fits in, but when preachers learn about the RCL’s arrangement of the Gospels, it makes sense. John gets a place of privilege because John’s Gospel account, with its high Christology, is assigned for the great feasts. Texts from John’s account are also assigned for Lent, Sundays of Easter, and summer Sundays. The second-century bishop Irenaeus’s insistence on four Gospels is evident in this lectionary system: John and the Synoptics are in conversation with each other. However, because the RCL pattern contains variations, an extended introduction to the RCL can help the preacher learn the reasons for texts being set next to other texts.

The Gospel reading governs each day’s selections. Even though the ancient order of reading texts in the Sunday gathering positions the Gospel reading last, the preacher should know that the RCL receives the Gospel reading as the hermeneutical key.

At certain times in the calendar year, the connections between the texts are less obvious. The RCL offers two tracks for readings in the time after Pentecost (Ordinary Time/standard Sundays): the complementary and the semicontinuous. Complementary texts relate to the church year and its seasons; semicontinuous emphasis is on preaching through a biblical book. Both approaches are historic ways of choosing texts for Sunday. This commentary series includes both the complementary and the semicontinuous readings.

In the complementary track, the Old Testament reading provides an intentional tension, a deeper understanding, or a background reference for another text of the day. The Psalm is the congregation’s response to the first reading, following its themes. The Epistle functions as the horizon of the church: we learn about the faith and struggles of early Christian communities. The Gospel tells us where we are in the church’s time and is enlivened, as are all the texts, by these intertextual interactions. Because the semicontinuous track prioritizes the narratives of specific books, the intertextual

connections are not as apparent. Connections still exist, however. Year A pairs Matthew's account with Old Testament readings from the first five books; Year B pairs Mark's account with stories of anointed kings; Year C pairs Luke's account with the prophetic books.

Historically, lectionaries came into being because they were the church's beloved texts, like the scriptural canon. Choices had to be made regarding readings in the assembly, given the limit of fifty-two Sundays and a handful of festival days. The RCL presupposes that everyone (preachers and congregants) can read these texts—even along with the daily RCL readings that are paired with the Sunday readings.

Another central connection found in the RCL is the connection between texts and church seasons or the church's year. The complementary texts make these connections most clear. The intention of the RCL is that the texts of each Sunday or feast day bring biblical meaning to where we are in time. The texts at Christmas announce the incarnation. Texts in Lent renew us to follow Christ, and texts for the fifty days of Easter proclaim God's power over death and sin and our new life in Christ. The entire church's year is a hermeneutical key for using the RCL.

Let it be clear that the connection to the church year is a connection for present-tense proclamation. We read, not to recall history, but to know how those events are true for us today. Now is the time of the Spirit of the risen Christ; now we beseech God in the face of sin and death; now we live baptized into Jesus' life and ministry. To read texts in time does not mean we remind ourselves of Jesus' biography for half of the year and then the mission of the church for the other half. Rather, we follow each Gospel's narrative order to be brought again to the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection and his risen presence in our midst. The RCL positions the texts as our lens on our life and the life of the world in our time: who we are in Christ now, for the sake of the world.

The RCL intends to be a way of reading texts to bring us again to faith, for these texts to be how we see our lives and our gospel witness in the world. Through these connections, the preacher can find faithful, relevant ways to preach year after year.

JENNIFER L. LORD
Connections Editorial Board Member



Connections

Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1–8
Psalm 29

Romans 8:12–17
John 3:1–17

Isaiah 6:1–8

¹In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. ²Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Isaiah 6:1–8 almost certainly originated as the account of Isaiah’s call. Its placement is surprising, since one would expect Isaiah’s call to appear at the beginning of the book, as in other prophetic books (see Jer. 1:4–10). Like other prophetic call narratives, it includes the divine voice and the prophetic response. Unlike the Mosaic model of call narrative found in Jeremiah 1:4–10, Isaiah responds positively, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa. 6:8). This makes the text attractive, but things are not as positive as they may seem when one reads beyond 6:8. Unfortunately, 6:1–8 is ordinarily treated in isolation from 6:9–13, a temptation reinforced by today’s lection and by the frequent use of 6:1–8 in ordination services.

Why is Isaiah’s call not in chapter 1, and what is the effect of its current placement? It is likely that an original form of the book of Isaiah consisted of what is now chapters 6–39. This would

mean that an original book was framed by two narrative sequences (chaps. 6–8 and 36–39), the first from the early career of Isaiah (approximately 740 to 734 BCE) and the latter from the end of Isaiah’s ministry (701 BCE). At some point, an editor or editors expanded the book of Isaiah by adding chapters 1–5 and 40–66. The effect, especially as it pertains to 6:1–8, is to suggest that Isaiah’s call came in the midst of pervasive disobedience on the part of Judah and its leadership. Preachers might reflect at this point on the likelihood that prophetic calls will come in the midst of a disordered and disoriented society, as was the case with Isaiah’s call.

Chapters 1–5 portray Judean worship as misguided and unacceptable to God (see 1:10–20), and the nation as a whole is characterized by systemic injustice and unrighteousness (see 3:13–26; 5:1–23). Such a sorry situation sheds light on Isaiah’s claim that he lives “among a

The Father, the Word, and Love

Now desire tends principally toward what moves it most; but what moves it most is what is loved most, and what is loved most is happiness. But happiness is had only in terms of the best and ultimate end. Therefore human desire seeks nothing except the highest good or what leads to or has some likeness to it. So great is the power of the highest good that nothing can be loved by a creature except out of a desire for it. Creatures, when they take the image and copy for the Truth, are deceived and in error. See, therefore, how close the soul is to God, and how, in their operations, the memory leads to eternity, the understanding to truth and the power of choice to the highest good.

These powers lead us to the most blessed Trinity itself in view of their order, origin and interrelatedness. From memory, intelligence comes forth as its offspring, since we understand when a likeness which is in the memory leaps into the eye of the intellect in the form of a word. From memory and intelligence love is breathed forth as their mutual bond. These three—the generating mind, the word and love—are in the soul as memory, understanding and will. . . . When therefore, the soul considers itself, it rises through itself as through a mirror to behold the blessed Trinity of the Father, the Word, and Love.

The image of our soul, therefore, should be clothed with the three theological virtues, by which the soul is purified, illumined, and perfected. And so the image is reformed and made like the heavenly Jerusalem. . . . The soul, therefore, believes and hopes in Jesus Christ and loves him, who is the incarnate, uncreated, and inspired Word—the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). When by faith the soul believes in Christ as the uncreated Word and Splendor of the Father, it recovers its spiritual hearing and sight; its hearing to receive the words of Christ and its sight to view the splendors of that Light. When it longs in hope to receive the inspired Word, it recovers through desire and affection the spiritual sense of smell. When it embraces in Love the Word incarnate, receiving delight from him and passing over into him through ecstatic love, it recovers its senses of taste and touch.

Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, trans. and ed. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 84–85.

people of unclean lips” (6:5). Perhaps even more important, the extent of Judah’s unfaithfulness and disobedience documented in chapters 1–5 prepares the reader for the difficult commission that Isaiah is given in 6:9–13, and for the opposition that all who are called to prophetic resistance in such contexts can anticipate.

Even with this preparation, however, the connection between 6:8 and 6:9–13 remains difficult. It seems perverse on God’s part to call Isaiah to dull people’s minds, “stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not . . . turn and be healed” (6:10). The difficulty leads many to conclude that 6:9–13 was composed in retrospect to describe the actual response to Isaiah’s proclamation. In any case, while the difficulty of the portrait of a God who wants to stop people’s ears and shut their eyes endures, the connection between 6:8 and 6:9–10 clearly captures a persistent biblical reality: those

whom God calls to speak God’s word are regularly met with powerful opposition by people who are not open to hearing, discerning, or responding faithfully. For all practical purposes, the prophetic word solidifies resistance to God and God’s will! The encounter between Isaiah and Ahaz in Isaiah 7 illustrates this reality, as do thematic connections to other prophetic books.

If the connection between Isaiah 6:1–8 and 6:9–13 highlights opposition and resistance to the prophetic word, then we can identify several connections to other portions of the prophetic canon. For example, following closely upon the first version of Jeremiah’s temple sermon (Jer. 7:1–15), the divine instruction to Jeremiah is this: “So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you” (Jer. 7:27).

Like Isaiah, Jeremiah has been called and must speak; but there clearly will be no faithful

response. For all practical purposes, the prophetic word will have solidified the opposition. Jeremiah's "confessions," or better, "complaints," poignantly indicate that the prophetic word was roundly resisted and rejected (see Jer. 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–18).

Another instance of the prophetic word evoking and solidifying opposition is found in Amos 7. We do not have an account of Amos's call, but the vision sequence in Amos 7:1–8:3 may be related to his call. Amos's famous vision of the plumb line (Amos 7:7–9) evokes the vehement opposition of Amaziah, "the priest of Bethel" (7:10). Amaziah confronts Amos; he accuses Amos of blasphemy and treason; and then he basically issues an order for Amos's deportation. Again, the prophetic word has solidified opposition to God and God's word, as if Amos had actually intended to dull people's minds and prevent them from turning to God.

In a powerful oracle that targeted greed and systemic injustice, Micah announced judgment upon eighth-century Judah (Mic. 2:1–5). The response was immediate: "Do not preach—thus they preach—one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us" (2:6). Micah's audience was convinced God was on their side, no matter what (see 3:11). When they heard otherwise, their opposition was swift and resolute. The prophetic word again solidifies the resistance to God.

While the New Testament affirms that Jesus was more than a prophet, it also casts Jesus in the prophetic role. Hence, it is not surprising that Isaiah 6 shows up in the Gospels to characterize the response to Jesus' proclamation. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus alludes to Isaiah 6:9–10 to explain to his disciples that he teaches in parables so that people "may not turn again and be forgiven" (Mark 4:12; see also Matt. 13:13–15;

Luke 8:9–10). As with Isaiah 6, this seems strange, if not perverse. However, the intent of the Gospel writers may be to characterize the typical response to Jesus' proclamation and the embodiment of the realm of God. To be sure, some people responded positively, but Jesus' message and ministry were also roundly opposed. Jesus' very words and deeds solidified the resistance to God's claim and to God's will. So, Isaiah 6 became an appropriate commentary on Jesus' life and ministry.

Perhaps the most prominent homiletical direction to pursue is to affirm that God calls people to say and do things that are richly rewarding but deeply demanding. So, while accepting a prophetic call may be deeply fulfilling, one can anticipate stiff, even violent opposition. The message of Isaiah 6:1–8 and its connections were captured by Reinhold Niebuhr when he wrote the following: "If a gospel is preached without opposition it is simply not the gospel which resulted in the cross. It is not, in short, the gospel of love."¹ Because Jesus invited disciples "to take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34), Isaiah 6:1–8 and its connections invite us to move beyond the priesthood of all believers to what we might call the prophethood of all believers.

Lest all this sound overly discouraging, note that the book of Isaiah makes it clear that it is not ultimately God's intent to evoke opposition. Rather, God wants people with open eyes and ears to experience the saving knowledge that the prophets proclaim (see Isa. 29:18; 32:3; 35:5; 42:16, 18–19; 43:8, all of which reverse Isa. 6:9–10). While taking up a cross may be difficult, it is the way to life (see Mark 8:35). The ultimate intent of Isaiah 6 and Jesus is not to solidify resistance, but to invite faithful discipleship.

J. CLINTON MCCANN JR.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Knowing what to preach on Trinity Sunday is hard. Harder still is knowing how to preach the Trinity from the Old Testament. Inauthentic and

exegetically unsound ways to do so are legion. Fortunately, today's reading from Isaiah lends itself to faithful reflection on the triune God.

1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1929/1956), 140.

Trinity and Mission. Call narratives like Isaiah 6 raise the daunting question of what it means to be chosen to fulfill God's purposes. In Scripture, frequently those who receive the call realize its potential to upend their lives, and so they quite understandably resist. Daunted by his call, Jeremiah objects due to his youth and inexperience in public speaking, believing he will be ineffective as a prophetic witness (Jer. 1:6). Confronted at the burning bush with God's call to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt, Moses issues a series of increasingly desperate questions and excuses, finally pleading with God just to send someone else (Exod. 4:13). God tells Jonah to "go at once to Nineveh, that great city," to indict the Ninevites for their wickedness; Jonah heads out for Tarshish instead, with the express purpose of escaping this responsibility (Jonah 1:1–3). In light of this pattern of prophets seeking to evade their vocations, Isaiah's enthusiastic "Here am I; send me!" stands out for its willing acceptance of the divine commission (Isa. 6:8). Preachers may encourage parishioners to imitate Isaiah in being alert and ready to respond courageously when they discern God's call in their daily lives.

Whether the recipient is willing or not, the divine call lends itself to a simple summary: *Go*. Its focus is outward. God calls us to proclaim, to serve, to follow, always on behalf of others. When God calls us to move beyond ourselves, that call mirrors the life of the Trinity. The distinction between the "immanent" Trinity (the internal relationships among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the "economic" Trinity (the external relationship between the triune God and the world) is contentious.² Yet theologians on all sides of the argument agree that the Trinity involves an unending movement of love and joy toward the created order. Out of the surplus of divine love God speaks the world into existence. At the climax of the Trinitarian narrative, God wholly joins with the sad lot of humanity in love, in order to redeem that world, as the Nicene Creed reminds us:

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
he became incarnate by the Holy Spirit

and the Virgin Mary,
and was made human.

Finally, the incarnate and risen One promises to pour out the Holy Spirit upon his followers for the purpose of empowering their mission to the world (Acts 1:8–9). As we engage in that mission, along with Isaiah we will find ourselves joining the outward movement of God's triune love.

The Pivot Point. Two droids show up at Luke Skywalker's farm on Tatooine. A woman walks into the bar and asks the performer to play "As Time Goes By." A worried police chief says, "You're going to need a bigger boat." Plucked from the fire, a ring reveals strange words long hidden. A giant tells a young boy, "Yer a wizard, Harry." On the day of her coronation a new queen can no longer conceal her magical powers, and discovers she no longer wants to.

These movie scenes are famous because they represent *pivot points*, moments when the arc of the story starts to move in a new and definitive direction. Isaiah 6 begins at just such a moment: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty." Uzziah's death marks a transition from a period of political stability to the looming Assyrian crisis. Yet it is far more about a change in God's time. This is a *kairotic* event in which the will of God can be more clearly seen and the presence of God more keenly felt. God is doing something in the life of the world, and we are called to be part of it.

The preacher should remind the congregation that divine pivot points often do not arrive with burning bushes or smoke and seraphim. When people review their lives, they often remember seemingly unremarkable but decisive moments: they glimpsed someone across a room; a friend mentioned a job posting they had seen; an encouraging word enabled the first step toward recovery from addiction. Ask them how that crucial day had begun, and they will say it was just like any other. No doubt Isaiah thought he would just pop into the temple for a minute. God the Spirit can be sneaky that way. We should be on the alert, lest God's new thing start without us.

2. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970); Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

The Holiness of Divine Love. God's holiness is on full display in Isaiah 6. What is that holiness? To declare something "holy" originally meant to set it apart from ordinary things. Here, the term points at least partially to transcendence. Throughout Isaiah, God is known as "the Holy One of Israel." Here in the temple, the prophet encounters God, who is wholly other.

Isaiah's personal and communal confession brings a moral consideration into the story. Confronted by the presence of God, he is overcome with a sense of unworthiness, not finitude. What made him unworthy? One flawed yet frequent Christian interpretation holds that holiness equates to uprightness or blamelessness. According to this view, the contrast to Isaiah's unworthiness is God's moral purity.

Yet both Jewish and Christian traditions have discovered within the mystery of divine holiness something far richer and deeper than simple blamelessness. For example, in early Eastern Christian theology, *perfection* often stands in for holiness, as both are divine qualities in which humans can participate. The fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa rejects the idea of perfection as the simple absence of flaws,

insisting instead that its essential character is change or, more specifically, growth in love of God and neighbor.³

The desert fathers and mothers extended this conversation by insisting that, given a choice between compassion and uprightness, they choose compassion. One time a member of a monastic community was put on trial for violating his vows. The other monks summoned Abbot Moses, famed for his holiness (that is, his uprightness), to join them in passing judgment. As they saw him approach, they noticed he was carrying a basket with holes from which sand was spilling onto the ground. When asked to explain, Moses said, "My sins are running out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I come to judge the sins of another!"⁴ The accusing brothers thought they were promoting the community's holiness by protecting its good reputation. Yet by identifying with—and hence seeking to reclaim—the erring brother, Moses' action is remembered as the more holy, for it more fully expressed the gracious character of holiness refracted through the prism of divine love.

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3. Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection," in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, The Fathers of the Church 58 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 95–122.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1977), 40.

Trinity Sunday

Psalm 29

- ¹Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- ²Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
worship the LORD in holy splendor.
- ³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
- ⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
- ⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
- ⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- ⁹The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, "Glory!"
- ¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
- ¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Connecting the Psalm with Scripture and Worship

Psalm 29 presents numerous points of connection with the narrative of Isaiah's vision of Yahweh in the temple (Isa. 6:1–13). Both texts picture Yahweh enthroned as a high God among a community of numinous beings. As members of the divine council, these beings attend to Yahweh with praise constantly on their lips. While the texts give glimpses of God's appearance, they also suggest that humans cannot comprehend the power of God with their eyes. Rather, the voice of God emerges as the most powerful divine attribute in each of these texts.

Psalm 29 begins with a series of imperative statements directed to *bene 'elim*, literally, "the sons of gods." This phrase refers to a divine

council (see Job 1–2; Pss. 82:1; 89:6–7), numinous or "heavenly beings" that attend to Yahweh as the high God seated in their midst. The text is not clear who exactly constitutes this community. The "sons of gods" may be understood as the planets, stars, sun, and moon. All of these heavenly bodies were thought to be deities in other ancient Near Eastern religions. "The sons of gods" could also be construed as the "heavenly host" of angels, divine messengers who do the bidding of God in the world (see Ps. 103:21).

The identity of speaker(s) in these opening verses is also unclear (Ps. 29:1–2). Perhaps it is the heavenly hosts summoning themselves to

bear witness to God's power. It may be that it is a human community calling out for God's praise throughout the heavens. In any case, Psalm 29 suggests that the primary function of the divine council is the exaltation of Yahweh. Three times the text calls for them to "ascribe" to Yahweh "glory" and "strength" (vv. 1–2).

This threefold ascription of Yahweh finds a close parallel to the triple declaration of God's holiness in Isaiah 6:3. In the prophet's vision (Isa. 6:1–8), Isaiah can see only the bottommost part of the divine form, the hem of Yahweh's garment that fills the temple (v. 1). Yet Isaiah can see seraphs, six-winged hybrid beings, flying around Yahweh's throne (v. 2).

Such numinous beings are often pictured in ancient Near Eastern art with their wings overshadowing other gods or people in gestures of protection. In Isaiah's vision, however, the seraphs use their wings not to protect someone else. Instead, they use their wings to protect themselves from the glory of Yahweh. God's power is so great that it overwhelms all other sources of power in the heavens and on earth. As if in response to Psalm 29:1–2, these seraphs in Isaiah 6:3 ascribe glory to Yahweh:

And one called to another and said:
 "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts;
 the whole earth is full of his glory."

Psalm 29 and Isaiah 6 thus give us a similar account of what happens in Yahweh's throne room. Praise resounds.

After summoning the voices of the divine council, the psalm then turns to describe the voice of Yahweh (Ps. 29:3–9). This voice (*qol*, literally "sound") is the most powerful force in the world. In the context of the psalm, thunder represents Yahweh's voice (v. 3). Thunder can be a harbinger of destruction and fire (v. 7); it also accompanies the rain that refreshes the land and brings life to the soil. Thus, for the psalmist, thunder is the perfect way to describe the complex range of Yahweh's activity in the world. Yahweh's power issues from heaven, capable of bringing forth both salvation and destruction.

The association of thunder and "the waters" in verse 3 also testifies to God's power. Like the ancient Near Eastern storm gods, Yahweh was understood to be the conqueror of the chaotic sea. Yahweh's power over that primeval force was demonstrated at creation, when Yahweh subdued the sea, bringing order into the midst of chaos. Verse 10 gives yet another picture of God's triumph over the waters of chaos; Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood. Though the sea rolls and threatens to overwhelm the land, the sea also witnesses Yahweh's power and kingship by the very fact that it stays within its borders. These waters also respond to Yahweh in the theophanic storm, becoming agitated and excited when Yahweh's voice thunders.

Yahweh's voice has an effect on everything, not just the waters. It also booms throughout the countryside (vv. 6–7). It shakes even the biggest living things, the colossal cedars of Lebanon (v. 9). No place is beyond the reach of Yahweh's voice. Everything responds to God's voice, including Yahweh's faithful in the temple. The human community in the temple thus mirrors the divine community, the *bene 'elim* (vv. 1–2). All voices glorify Yahweh, whose voice sounds throughout heaven and earth.

The psalm ends with a plea. Verses 1–10 have described the powerful voice of Yahweh, how Yahweh reaches into the world and rules it with unquestioned supremacy. Verse 11 presents the human community making a petition for divine empowerment. Such a plea recognizes that the people exist in great need of God's power. On their own, they are not powerful. They are not at peace. The community needs the blessing of a powerful God to survive and thrive in this world.

Theophanies like the ones described in Psalm 29 and Isaiah 6 overwhelm the senses, even though they grant just a glimpse of the glory of God. When heard in worship, they invite those gathered to revel in the majesty of God; bold, stirring sounds of brass, drums, and pipes are in order, or any combination of instrument that can thunder forth.

Like those in the temple, worshipers may respond in praise. There are numerous compel-

ling choral versions of Psalm 29, as well as hymns that employ its themes. The response may come in a classic declaration such as the Gloria Patri, or a new hymn such as Paul Vasile's rousing "Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me."¹ Of

course, given the pairing of Psalm 29 with Isaiah 6:1–8, the incomparable "Holy, Holy, Holy" is also a fitting congregational response, especially on Trinity Sunday.

JOEL MARCUS LEMON

1. See *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 582.

Trinity Sunday

Romans 8:12–17

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

In today’s lection Paul continues his discourse contrasting life in the Spirit (*pneuma*) with life lived according to the flesh (*sarx*), which begins in Romans 8:1. While this passage is often read as instructive for individual life, it is more accurately interpreted as a call to a way of living as community made possible by *pneumati theou*, the Spirit of God. Throughout Romans 8:12–17, Paul uses the plural form of “you.” So, we can continue to hear Paul’s exhortation to reconsider the way we live our communal life.

Today, members of a congregation are often referred to as a “church family.” This language is consistent with terms Paul uses in Romans to describe common life in the Spirit. He declares those who are led by the Spirit of God to be children of God, to have received the spirit of adoption as children of God. This is no new revelation. Attending to the particulars of Paul’s language can help nuance our understanding of what it means to be *family*. In 8:12, Paul says we are not debtors (*opheiletai*) to the flesh (*sarx*) and are not to live according to the flesh. A clue to interpretation lies in the word *opheiletai*, which refers to social and religious obligations or debts. In Greco-Roman culture obligations were first to gods, then to country, then to parents.¹ For Paul, this ordering of obligations is born of the flesh, the material, the distorted human world. To live life in the Spirit (*pneuma*) is to be obligated first to the one God and then to God’s family constituted

by the Spirit. What, then, is the proper fealty of a Christian to their country? Which family has a primary claim upon our lives—our time, our money, our prayers, our gifts?

Paul includes within God’s family all who are led by the Spirit of God. He echoes Jesus in the Synoptics: “A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:32–35; see also Matt. 12:48–50; Luke 8:20–21). Doing the will of God, being led by God’s Spirit: that makes one kin. Spirit ties supersede blood ties in God’s family. This seems a particularly hard message for contemporary Christians to hear. The nuclear family reigns supreme in American culture. How might the church help reorder our understanding of all who have a claim on our time, love, and resources?

While Paul uses male-gendered terms throughout 8:12–15 to refer to God’s children, he switches to the neuter term *tekna* in verses 16–17. This is also when Paul begins using the language of inheritance, calling the *tekna* of God heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. Paul employs similar language about inheritance, adoption, and children in Galatians,

1. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 493.

but there he uses the phrase, “if a son [NRSV child] then an heir” (Gal. 4:7 RSV). By the time he writes the Letter to the Romans, Paul has adopted the more inclusive term *tekna* to refer to inheritors. By using this word, Paul signals that all God’s children are entitled to God’s inheritance without regard to gender. Together with Christ and without distinction among them, all God’s children witness to God, inherit God’s promise, suffer, and are glorified.

This new family that suffers together and together receives God’s promises of a future, a hope, and a home with God is created by the Spirit. The Spirit enables the community to turn away from living out distorted patterns. The Spirit leads God’s children away from fear and into life. Paul uses the word “Spirit” twenty-two times in Romans 8, more than in any other passage in all his letters.² It is profoundly important to recognize the life-giving, life-ordering role that the Spirit plays in our common life. The proclivity of the Spirit to enable healthy family life is also witnessed to in Galatians 5:22–26, where Paul discusses the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Other important qualities of Spirit can be gleaned by reading this passage in conjunction with the other readings for this Sunday. Romans 8:15–16 says, “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Greek word translated here as “cry” is *krazomen*. It is an onomatopoeic term describing a raven’s cry or caw. It suggests an inarticulate cry or shout full of emotion. A good contemporary illustration of *krazomen* might be the Mexican *grito*: “It is a high-pitched, sustained howl emanating from every corner of the lungs and touching the sky. Heard at family celebrations, usually to the brassy strains of mariachis, the *grito* is a primal shout, a cry for joy that moves the soul and rattles the spirit.”³ When the Spirit witnesses to God, She does not speak in a whisper. She sends up a *grito* from the depths.

While today’s lections from Isaiah and Psalms do not refer to God’s Spirit, they both convey the power of God vocalized. Psalm 29 says that God’s voice “breaks the cedars,” “flashes forth flames of fire,” “shakes the wilderness,” “causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare.” It is powerful and full of majesty. It moves the world. In the lection from Isaiah, the prophet has a vision of being in the temple with God. In Isaiah 6:3, a six-winged seraph calls out, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The verb root for “call” is *qara*, which means to “call, cry, shout, or scream.” Verse 4 says the posts of the threshold were shaken by the *qol*, the voice of the one who cried out.

The voice that witnesses to God is a voice that emanates power, a voice that upsets foundations, a voice akin to God’s own voice. That voice and that power flows through all God’s children via the Spirit. What if God’s children did not hold back, but let their primal shouts loose for the world to hear? What foundations might be moved?

The lection from John 3 has a lot to say about Spirit. Jesus tells Nicodemus one must be born anew to see/perceive the reign of God. Nicodemus does not understand. Jesus explains: “No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit [*pneuma*]. What is born of the flesh [*sarx*] is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5–6). Not only are the children of God *led* by the Spirit; they *become* spirit. This suggests an ontological change to those who do the will of God. It is not just relationships and priorities that are transformed in the family of God, but human beings. Do we know that we *are* spirit, that God saturates our very being? Spirit is what allows us to be a family of hope and promise, a family of world-changers and love-bringers. Together, with Christ, we suffer. Together, with Christ, we cry out and move the world. Together, with Christ, we rise.

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2. Roberto Pereyra, “The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul,” *DavarLogos* 13, no. 2 (2014): 8.

3. Juan Castillo, “Échale! New App Keeps the Cherished Mexican ‘Grito’ Close at Hand,” *NBC News*, October 1, 2015; <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/echale-new-app-keeps-mexican-grito-close-hand-n436966>.

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Flesh/Spirit, debt/debtors, Spirit/children/heirs, slavery/Abba/Father, suffering/glory: double relations and correlating oppositions and connections fill this passage, offering us frames for our own thinking and acting. While our worship, churches, and communities are all part of the same web, flowing through the systems that compose our humanity, we often think in binary terms and not in correlated ways, and we act as if these spheres of life were separated. Paul's binaries expose contradictions we face in our own contexts that threaten separation, and they suggest how we might think constructively in terms of correlating oppositions and connections.

Our spirituality, for example, is often marked by a duality that opposes body and soul, or flesh and spirit. To worship in spirit too often means to worship with our mind, striving after proper knowledge of God. Our bodies are often thought to hinder our spirituality. The flesh is often portrayed as the enemy of what is holy, the source of sinful desires that lead us astray. However, when our bodies and the Spirit of God are understood and felt as living together, as one and in wholesome ways, our faith is strengthened and our desires rest in God. We start to see that the understanding that equates bodies with sin, and desires with a narrow moral code, entails guilt and shame, not freedom and responsibility. So, we are called to ponder the connection between our bodies and the presence of the Spirit.

Where is the Spirit in our bodies? Where is the body in the Spirit? We often do not know where the Spirit of God is in us. If we remind ourselves that our life was breathed into us by God, we understand that the Spirit of God is in our breathing. Breathing is a connection between mind and body. There is no distinction between body and Spirit, since we are always breathing. Our breathing has to do with the breath of God given to us when we were "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). When our bodies are celebrated as the house of the Spirit of God, we gain a connectedness that we might call a life of the Spirit, in our bodies. God's Breath/Spirit indwells our bodies. The life

of the Spirit is in our bodies, and there is no life of the body outside of our Spirit.

Unless we hold on to this relation as one, forms of disassociations will make us live in disconnected realities, and we will hold on to dualisms that make us suffer, dualisms that often involve hierarchies—for example, when we think that nature is of less value than human beings. We disassociate nature and culture and think they are opposite, when they are in fact part of each other, of the same and yet different life. Moreover, this disassociation makes us think that we do not have limits and that the earth is out there to be taken, used, and exploited. If we can sustain a spirituality that holds together human beings and nature, as we consider the life of the Spirit in us, we would consider animals as having rights, ecosystems as habitats full of living creatures to be protected. In the same way, we would not use pesticides in our crops that endanger bees and our environment.

As the text says, "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:16–17). The Spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit creates the conditions for us all to become heirs of God and Christ. Thus, in the body and flesh, we must hold nature together with us as we also must hold each other's suffering.

This collective movement of belonging and mutuality is the living of God's glory enfleshed in our community. In this way, the Spirit of God in our flesh will mean honoring the earth, caring for all sentient beings, mountains, waters, and minerals. The Spirit of God in our flesh will also mean freedom to love one another, to the point of living in a community that does not cling to the spirit of the world, but holds on to the Spirit of God, who shows Godself in and through our actions and our loving of one another.

When we are connected in body and flesh, the Spirit will lead us. While some people are intolerant of others' mistakes, saying, "If they messed up, they must deal with the consequences," we

will say, “We are each other’s keepers,” which is somewhat the same as what Paul is saying here: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (v. 14). Being the children of God by virtue of our baptism makes us responsible for each other’s lives, no matter how badly some might go astray. In the same way, when we see the bees dying, we will promptly fight for their lives and well-being.

When we are free from disassociated ways of thinking and living of our society, we can think and act differently, discerning the ways in which everything and everyone belong together, and as a result we can live a fuller and more joyful life.

We learn with each other to be responsible for ourselves and for everyone. Then we can all feel free in the Spirit and not cling to the isolated ways of the flesh of the world. We are freed from cultural systems that say: “You are on your own.” Instead, we say together: “Abba! Father!” which meant, in that time, fidelity to the God of love, in contrast to calling Caesar “father” and giving fidelity above all to Caesar.

The first Christians were engaging in civil disobedience, dismissing the “father” of that time and calling upon the presence of the living God as their Father, the one who would sustain them. Surely, in our time, we have learned to call God “Mother” and other names. When flesh and Spirit are brought together, God is understood

expansively beyond the patriarchal limits of the masculine. In fact, we undo the masculine as a form of dominance. When the Spirit lives fully in our bodies we are free to call God Mother, Lover, Friend, Rock, and so much more. For the presence of life in fullness carries the many names of God.

If we have the Spirit of God bearing witness in our spirit, in our bodies, our lives can be fully renewed and constantly restored. Carrying the very breath of God in us, our spirituality finds its fullness in all bodies: the earth and sentient beings. Fully connected with God, the earth, birds, fishes, meadows, our neighbors and ourselves, we all become children of God, beloved by God, Abba. Entangled in this vast notion of grace, we find the breath of God in our communities by the way of seeing the Trinity as an ever-encompassing event of connections, connectivity, mutualities, and entanglements.

We can now engage differences and complexities because we are one and many with God and with one another. In other words, we can say that the whole is our being together in God. Now, we are better prepared to pay attention to our differences and be aware of what breaks us apart, and what divides us from the whole. Then we might understand what it means to be “glorified in God.”

CLÁUDIO CARVALHAES

Trinity Sunday

John 3:1–17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” ³Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” ⁴Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” ⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture

Today’s reading from the Gospel of John interrupts the lectionary focus on Mark, shifting our attention to the mystery of the Trinity and the transformative depths of the teachings of Jesus. The cryptic dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus stacks up polarities between heaven and earth, perishing and eternal life, condemnation and salvation, flesh and spirit. This symbolic language is rich in images and provokes us to plumb the depths of its meanings. Precisely because of its profundity, however, such discourse does not deliver ready-made clarity. Given the depth of Jesus’ teaching, it is not surprising that a major theme in John is the misunderstanding of Jesus’ signs and teaching.

This encounter with Nicodemus highlights confusion over Jesus’ teaching. Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus is a teacher (rabbi) who comes from God (John 3:2). Nicodemus himself is “a teacher of Israel,” but he cannot fathom Jesus’ words. He interprets being “born from above” into new life literally (v. 4), and so he does not understand how the status “child of God” is given to humanity. Moreover, Nicodemus has been trained to think earthly society reflects the structure and mores of heavenly society. Jesus’ references to being born of Spirit, in contrast, clearly delegitimize tying the status “child of God” to such worldly distinctions. Nicodemus is conflicted, for while he accepts that the signs

Jesus performs establish that he is a teacher who has come from God, he does not understand the meaning and implications of Jesus' teaching.

Who is a child of God? The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus revolves around this question. In the society of Jesus' and Nicodemus's day, birth cemented a person's place in society. In the society of first-century Palestine, unlike present-day North American society, achievement, work, education, or movement from one place to another rarely changed the status established at birth. Of course, even today, birth status can deliver a host of advantages or subject one to a lifetime of discrimination. We face the same challenges, if to different degrees. In Jesus' day, social status depended almost entirely on the status of the kinship group into which a person was born. Jesus of Nazareth, coming from a group with roots in Galilee, was near the bottom of the social hierarchy. A stunning reversal, obvious to John's first readers, is played out in this conversation. Nicodemus, a ruler (*archōn*) in Jerusalem, by far outranks Jesus, a peasant from Galilee. Yet Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus comes from the "presence of God," and he accepts Jesus as *his* teacher.

This dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus performs and displays a disruptive gospel truth. For whatever else it may mean when Jesus describes a child of God as someone who is "born from above," it means this person is born into a new family, a new kinship system, a *koinōnia* that rejects earthly hierarchies.

Paradoxically, access to this new status and quality of life comes to believers through what is considered to be *dishonorable* in Nicodemus's society: humiliation and death on a cross. Crucifixion was both a physical and a social death. As a social death, it stripped the person of social standing, making them vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse. Furthermore, hanging from the cross outside the city gates was a not-so-subtle reminder of social rejection. The paradox lies in the fact that Jesus, who "comes from the presence of God," is humiliated through death on the cross. Perhaps this status is also conferred on those who believe in him?

Nicodemus appears again later in John's Gospel in two scenes that bracket Jesus' presence on the

cross. In both scenes, birth status plays an important role. It appears that Nicodemus accepted Jesus' teaching about being born again as children of God. In the first scene (7:45–52), Nicodemus appears to defend Jesus' right to a hearing, but he is put down by his fellow Pharisees, who appeal to Jesus' social origin and status in Galilee. To be born and bred in Galilee, a place considered by Judeans as "unclean," is to be part of the periphery. Jesus does not deserve a hearing because "no prophet is to arise from Galilee" (7:52).

Nicodemus appears again as a witness to the entombment of Jesus' body (19:38–42). From the worldly perspective of those who have not been born again, the process of crucifixion has progressively shamed, humiliated, and dishonored Jesus. Nicodemus, however, no longer sees through the ideological lenses of this world, for after the crucifixion Nicodemus appears with Joseph of Arimathea, treating the body of Jesus with costly spices and placing him in a rich man's tomb—all of which contradicts what the world sees as Jesus' shamed social status. Seeing with new eyes, Nicodemus honors Jesus as someone who "comes from above." These actions suggest Nicodemus was open to being taught by Jesus, for his are the actions of a person seeing with the eyes of one born again.

Although the other readings for this day were conceived and crafted in very different circumstances, they echo and enrich the images of God found in the Gospel text. In Isaiah's call narrative, God commissions him to be a bridge between heaven and earth, an essential aspect of prophetic service: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'" (Isa. 6:8). The psalm emphasizes transcendence. God is enthroned not only in the temple, as in Isaiah, but over creation, over even the chaos of the flood. Romans, too, links the powerful, transcending rule of God to the daily life of human beings. In this text, the Spirit of God is the messenger, transforming believers into children of God. God's intimate, loving care for humanity and the physical cosmos is clearly emphasized in these texts, in sharp contrast to an idea of a detached, hubristic deity—the sort that mirrors so many earthly rulers.

Images related to the Trinity also fill today's other lections: God the Mother/Father enthroned in Isaiah's vision; the wind representing the Spirit in John's Gospel; the Son talking about himself with Nicodemus. Two verses in the Gospel reading powerfully portray the *relational* character of the Trinity in *action*: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16) and "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (v. 17). In the Gospel of John, "world" refers to three entities: the physical world, Israel as God's chosen [ideal] humanity, and Judeans as enemies of John's community.¹ God eternally relates lovingly to the world in all three of these senses in a positive, life-giving way that includes even enemies.

Many in our pews have a deeply held image of God that does not correspond to the idea that God loves the world and is self-giving. This is especially true, for example, of people who are part of a Christian community yet do not feel personally connected. It is also true of those who need to strive for recognition, instead of accepting that they are God's children. God is distant in such scenarios, and it is very easy to live out of a deistic frame of mind. This Sunday is an opportunity to heal and transform these distant images of the Trinity, to proclaim a gracious God who knows and loves us intimately, and to help us all glory in our status as members of one family, children of God.

RENATA FURST

Commentary 2: Connecting the Reading with the World

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "Nicodemus at Night" might be a good starting point for looking at the complex character of Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a learned man, yet he is unable to understand the truth given plainly to him by Jesus. There is a sense in which he knows this, which is why he comes to Jesus under cover of night, when "The dark houses seem / Like sepulchres, in which the sleepers lie / Wrapped in their shrouds, and for the moment dead."² The preacher might examine what we, like Nicodemus, do to hide our lack of knowledge. Teachers may say there is no such thing as a stupid question, but many of us are not willing to test that premise! Nicodemus, with his reputation for knowledge, is eager to learn and does not hesitate to pose his question.

The preacher might consider conversations that take place at night: campfire stories, slumber-party secrets, late-night confessions or declarations of love to a sweetheart or friend. There is something intimate and freeing about late-night conversations, where faces are half lit and background clutter fades away. Why might Nicodemus have stepped out in the dark to meet

Jesus? It might have been out of embarrassment or concern about negative consequences if he were seen consulting this radical teacher, who had just disrupted the operations of the Jerusalem temple (John 2:14–21). It might also have been motivated by a desire for a private conversation, for words half whispered, true, and life changing.

Whatever Nicodemus's reasons, we can ponder what we might learn from this approach. To what sorts of unexpected approaches might we want to be open? Which methods of evangelism make sense for particular people and particular congregations in your care?

We see Nicodemus twice more in this Gospel. In John 7, Nicodemus admonishes others to listen to Jesus before judging him. In the end, in John 19, Nicodemus provides myrrh and aloes to embalm Jesus. What began under the cover of night has become an honor that stood the test of daylight and public acknowledgment. Though Jesus called Nicodemus out for his apparent lack of understanding, Jesus did not reject him—and Nicodemus did not reject Jesus.

1. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 246.

2. "Nicodemus at Night," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (Windham, NH: Windham Press, 2013), 379.

We never find out whether Nicodemus accepted the “born again”/“born from above” proposition. We are not told whether he considered himself a follower of Jesus. We know only that he is there at the end. Perhaps Nicodemus’s persistent presence is proof that those among us who have questions and doubts, who speak of our spiritual questions in the dark of night but not in front of peers, may have a place in the kingdom as well.

This lection is assigned for Trinity Sunday; here Jesus discusses all three members of the Trinity with relational language that connects them. The preacher might use this text as a springboard to theological reflection on the Trinity. Indigo Girls band member Emily Saliers (a preacher’s daughter) sings, “Try making one and one and one make one, twist the shapes until everything comes undone” in her song “You and Me of the 10,000 Wars.”³ Many congregants will relate to her language. The Trinity can be hard to understand. The preacher might take this opportunity to note that perfect understanding is not prerequisite to receiving the love of the triune God to which the rest of our pericope bears witness.

John 3:16 is one of the best-known verses in the Bible. Many parishioners will be able to recite it by heart, even if they were not raised in the church. The very familiarity of the verse may limit appreciation of its radical promise. The preacher might work to make manifest to parishioners the stunning intensity of God’s love for us as articulated in this verse and prominent throughout the Bible. One way of describing this love might be found in the enchanting Sam McBratney children’s book *Guess How Much I Love You*.⁴ Caregivers in the congregation may recognize its famous line, “I love you right up to the moon and back.” Some older parents may remember the game where kids and elders would playfully and joyfully seek to best one another: “Well, I love you to the stars and back,” “I love you to infinity and back,” “I love you to infinity times infinity!”

The lection ends this pericope at verse 17, but after the born-again language and the beloved

John 3:16, verse 17 might not get its full due. This one line—“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”—might be used to reread the preceding passage to teach us the reason for God’s sending of the Son. Jesus is sent not to condemn Nicodemus, who does not quite get it, nor to condemn the ordinary believer, whose lack of understanding or action worries them. The Son has been sent to save.

To illustrate this, the preacher can draw on stories unique to the congregation’s region. National stories could include, for example, the West Nickel Mines School shooting in an Amish school, where the community, despite enduring horrific violence and the deaths of five children, did not condemn the shooter or his family, saying that was not what Jesus had been brought into this world to do. This highlights the radically gracious character of the love of God revealed in the life, works, and teachings of Jesus.

What could add to the extent of “love you to infinity times infinity”? Love that is utter and absolute apart from anything earned or deserved; love that flows despite my flaws, failures, and shortcomings; love that embraces me despite my moments of neglect, wrongdoing, ambition, and spite; love even for those so lost that they lash out in violence; love even for enemies. This is the love of Jesus, the love of God, a gracious love for one and all, a freely given love stronger than any self-condemnation, a love stronger than the hatred or bitterness that so justly flows from the injustice and abuse we have suffered from others.

As we survey daily news about our world, we realize, as did first-century Jews and Christians struggling under the oppressions of empire, that the world deserves condemnation. We realize, however, even as we identify and strive to aid those hurt by the world’s injustices, that God sent the Son not to condemn the world but to save it, not to bring condemnation but to reveal gracious love. The preacher may want to clarify that this does not mean we forget the prophets

3. “You and Me of the 10,000 Wars,” composed by Emily Saliers, appeared on the 1990 Indigo Girls album *Nomads, Indians, Saints* and was produced in a remastered format in 2000.

4. Sam McBratney, *Guess How Much I Love You*, 25th anniversary ed. (Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2019).

and the prophetic aspects of Jesus' ministry, and it does not mean that we fail to name and condemn oppression and exploitation, but it does mean the prime and ultimate source of our passion is the gracious love of God, a love embracing each of us, a love for all—oppressed

and oppressor, abused and exploited and those who exploit—a love through which all are born again, thanks to the work of the Son, so that we might be born again, born through the Spirit, children of God's love.

SUSAN K. OLSON