

# Ordinary Time

## Law, a Gift of Life and Light

### Preaching Resources

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**ROMAN  
LECTIONARY**  
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Deut 4:1-2, 6, 8*  
*Jas 1:17-18, 21-22, 27*  
*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-22*

**REVISED COMMON  
LECTIONARY**  
Proper 17 (22)  
*Song 2:8-13* or  
*Deut 4:1-2, 6-9*  
*Jas 1:17-27*  
*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

**ANGLICAN  
LECTIONARY**  
Proper 17  
*Deut 4:1-9*  
*Eph 6:10-20*  
*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

In an 1897 speech given in his native Boston, American jurist and later Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. stated that “the law is the witness and external deposit of our moral life. Its history is the history of the moral development of the race.”

If we agree with Holmes' assessment, then laws like the following, which continue to be “on the books” in their respective locales, may be difficult if not impossible to explain.

In Texas, it is illegal to put graffiti on someone else's cow. It is against the law in Kansas to catch fish with your bare hands. In the state of Washington, it's illegal to catch a fish by throwing a rock at it. In Berkeley, Calif., you may not legally whistle for an escaped bird before 7 a.m. In Nogales, Ariz., it is illegal to wear suspenders. In Alabama, dominoes may not be played on Sunday. Also in Alabama, it is illegal to wear a fake mustache that causes laughter in church. It is against the law to hunt whale in Oklahoma.

Not limited to the United States, strange and unusual laws can be found in other countries as well. In Athens, Greece, for example, a driver's license can be lifted by the law if the driver is deemed “poorly dressed” or “unbathed.” On the island of Jersey, it is against the law for a man to knit during fishing season. In Quebec, Canada, an old law requires that margarine be a different color from butter; this law was the result of dairy lobbyists who claimed that consumers were mistaking margarine for butter and their profits were shrinking. According to an 1845 British law, attempting to commit suicide was a capital offense, punishable by hanging. In France, it is illegal to sell an E.T. doll because it is forbidden to sell dolls that do not have human faces.

*‘The law is the  
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of our moral life.’*

Whatever these laws witness to, it does not seem to be the moral development of the human race, as Justice Holmes had suggested. For such witness, we turn today to the Deuteronomist and to Mark, each of whom offers a lesson on the true significance of law in the life of the believer. From the author of today's first reading, we are refreshed in the knowledge that the law was regarded as God's gift, mediated to the desert-trekking Israelites through Moses. As God's gift and as God's word that had the power to save (James, second reading), the law taught the Israelites how to live with one another in God's presence. Their faithful observance of the law, which was revered as the will of God for them, would lead them to life, as the authors of Deuteronomy point out here and on several other occasions in their writings. To ignore the law and its wisdom (Sirach 24) is tantamount to choosing death. As an immediate expression of Yahweh's will and a ready avenue of access to God's favor, the law illustrates God's nearness to the people, affirms Roland Faley (*Footprints on the Mountain*, Paulist Press, New York: 1994).

Several eminent Old Testament scholars have often pointed out that Israel's law did indeed bear some resemblance to other law codes that predated it, such as the Code of Hammurabi. Israel's law is unique,

however, in the sense that its observance was raised to the level of love. Rather than observe God's commands through fear of redress or simply out of a desire for order or to safeguard the people, their rights and property, Israel kept God's law, i.e., God's revealed will for them, out of the love that was born of their shared covenantal relationship. The two rhetorical questions that conclude today's first reading make it clear that the Deuteronomist recognized this difference between Israel and the nations.

In today's Gospel, the Marcan Jesus confronts certain members of the Pharisaic party and other experts in the law. By the time of Jesus and even before, the plethora of legal prescriptions that constituted the law had multiplied exponentially. With that multiplicity had come the tendency to regard the countless traditions of the elders as carrying the same weight as the Torah. Whereas these traditions legislated on issues as minute and insignificant as how much water must be used in order for a ritual washing to be acceptable, the basic Torah or decalogue focused on those laws that truly expressed and protected the relationship between God and humankind as well as the relationships among all members of the human family.

Jesus' contemporaries, so burdened with the weight of countless and confusing legal prescriptions, were also forced to resort to asking legal experts for guidance. Eventually the law deteriorated into lip service and mere external observance. This Jesus addressed clearly by urging his disciples to let their observance of the law to arise from within their hearts, minds and wills. The law involves more than conformity to standards of external behavior. The law requires interior conversion.

### DEUT 4:1-2, 6, 8

Although it has become customary to think of law as a body of regulations, the Hebrew term *torah* is derived from the verb *yarah*, which means "to throw," "to cast"

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or "to point." The noun from such a verbal gesture, explains Walter Brueggemann (*Reverberations of Faith*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 2002), comes to mean "instruction" or "guidance." Therefore, we should first understand and appreciate torah as an authoritative teaching such as that of a parent to the child (Prov 1:8; 16:20, 23). When referenced in the sphere of faith, such authoritative instruction or guidance was understood as coming from God, mediated through the efforts of priests (Jer 18:18) or, more precisely, Levites (Deut 33:10-11), as well as prophets (Isa 2:2-4, Mic 4:1-4).

The book of Deuteronomy, the name of which means "second law" (*deutero nomos*), is itself actually a recension of the Mosaic law adapted to the evolving needs and circumstances of the Israelites during the seventh century B.C.E. Although some of the laws included in Deuteronomy may indeed date from the period of Moses in the 13th century B.C.E., most of its legislation actually spans many centuries and has been drawn together here and promulgated under the auspices of Moses to give it authority.

As Dennis Bratcher ("Deuteronomy," *Harper's Bible Dictionary*,

Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco: 1985) has pointed out, one of the most important and distinguishing features of the book is its homiletical style; that is, the laws are not present in static legal format but are interspersed with exhortations and personal pleas similar to the style of a sermon. While there is an obvious focus on law, the overriding emphasis is on obedience and faith-filled observance, not merely to a code of laws in a book but obedience as the appropriate attitude of humankind in response to God's will.

As the Deuteronomic author exhorts his readers, under the authority of Moses, to hear and listen, to observe and obey so as to live in proper relation to God and the community of believers, his words reach out to challenge our own attitude and attentiveness to law. Do I truly understand the law as a revelation of God's will? Is it the light that dispels the dark and illumines my way? Is it a means of knowing the nearness of God? Or is the law a burden to bear, an unpleasant responsibility to shirk, a limitation to be avoided or ignored? After all, the manner with which I perceive and value and embrace God's law from my heart shall determine the manner and the measure with which I shall live it.

### JAS 1:17-18, 21-22, 27

Just as Moses and the author of Deuteronomy who brought Moses' authority to his words understood the law as a gift, so did the author of James regard God's word as a gift, a gift with the power to reside within and effect the salvation of the ones who welcome it, listen to it and live accordingly.

The author of James, as Pheme Perkins (*First and Second Peter, James and Jude*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995) has pointed out, was probably a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian. Like other Hellenistic Jewish authors, he understood that faith combined worship with a commitment to moral conduct. His association with James, the brother of the Lord, was probably based on the tradition (see Acts 15) that James had



sent a letter to the Syrian churches detailing the conditions for admitting Gentiles to the community.

Addressed to the “twelve tribes of the diaspora” (1:1), the letter attributed to this elusive James is a general exhortation that may have been prompted by a misunderstanding of Paul’s stand on faith and works. Although Paul did indeed advocate concrete works, such as a lived commitment to the decalogue and charity toward those in need (Rom 13:8-10), it seems that some misread certain aspects of Paul and relied on faith alone. Ever practical, the author of James calls his readers to accept God’s word, *all* of God’s word, as their guide for life. James, says Perkins (op. cit.), offers a vision of what it means to hear and act on God’s word. James represents the understanding that perfection does not derive from detailed observances of legal minutiae as regards clean and unclean. Nor does it presume that its demanding ethic should be realized only as a “last-ditch” effort to prepare for God’s imminent judgment. Rather, James describes a way of life that begins in God, who calls believers into existence and then continues to speak those words that will lead the converted to conviction as well as commitment. Act on what you hear, and welcome the word into your heart and mind and will. Then those actions that issue forth as a response to God’s word will shape a life worthy of the One who gave it.

True to the Jewish traditions in which he had been reared, the author of James calls for his contemporaries to bridle their tongues (v. 26, not included here) and care actively for widows and orphans (see Exod 22:21; Deut 10:18; 24:7-13; Ps 68:5; Isa 1:10-17; Jer 5:28; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:10; Sir 4:10). James calls for Christians to do more than simply talk about their faith, but to translate it into good deeds and a religion that expresses its vertical bond with God in horizontal sharing with needy humankind. This is pure worship, says James; this is what it means to become a living, breathing sacrifice that honors and serves God authentically.

## MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-22

Because of the excerpted nature of this pericope, it may be difficult to appreciate the fact that Jesus’ lesson on the law was actually being addressed to three different audiences: to the Pharisees and scribes (vv. 1-13), to the crowds (vv. 14-15) and to his disciples in a private instruction (vv. 17-23). Therefore, and as Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (“The Jewish Leaders in the Gospel of Mark,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, #108: 1989) has explained, those to whom Jesus spoke had three different types of relationship with him. With the Pharisees and scribes, the relationship was strained; the conversation was controversial and concerned Jesus’ authority to teach about law. With the crowd, Jesus wished to share a relationship whereby they would listen to him and learn the truth that would lead to their salvation. With his own, Jesus’ relationship would go deeper because the disciples had already committed themselves to following him. For them and for us, he extends a challenge to an interior conviction that will express itself in a fully lived faith.

With each of his audiences that day in Jerusalem, Jesus made the point that purity cannot be imposed from without or achieved by some external means. Regardless of how scrupulous one may be in cleansing hands or food or cups, kettles or jugs, holiness and purity cannot be achieved that way. Jesus, quoting the prophet Isaiah (29:13) in verse

6, called such attempts at holiness “lip service” and “empty reverence” that equate human traditions with the commandments of God.

True purity of heart and lifestyle grows rather from within, as, unfortunately, does evil. In order, therefore, for a person to be pure and holy, the heart must be filled with the word of God. That word must take root deep within, and from that inner place, if God’s word is truly heeded, it guides and inspires one’s every thought, word and deed.

Jesus came among us to be that Word, to speak and to reveal God through the word. Therefore, a relationship with Jesus is the proving ground where the word is heard and appropriated in a fully lived faith.

Bonnie Bowman Thurston (*Preaching Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2002) asks how contemporary preachers might best present this passage in churches that have long since been unconcerned with ritual purity ablutions. Perhaps, says Bowman Thurston, it may be best to focus on verses 6-13 and the matter of hypocrisy. We all need to be reminded to “walk our talk.” Additionally, verses 1-8 raise the issue of legalism. Christianity is more than the observance of legal do’s and don’ts. It is the faith freely lived by one whose heart, mind and will have become a home for the living word of God. Welcome the word, says James. Observe it and live, says the Deuteronomist. Hear me and try to understand, challenges Jesus.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

At a restaurant, a young boy was allowed to go the restroom by himself. His parents watched him head off on his own. He was growing up so fast! But when he did not return right away, the father went to see what had happened. He found his son waiting by the sinks. “What are you waiting for?” the father asked. “For some employees to come in,” the boy answered, pointing to the sign: “Employees must wash your hands.”

Today’s Gospel begins with an issue over unclean hands. The Jewish rituals of purification had gone beyond hands to include kettles, pots and even beds. Jesus uses this as a powerful teaching moment, inviting us to look more deeply at what is clean and unclean.

## Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

**KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA** [Deut] “Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees that I am teaching you to observe, that you may live ...” [Mark] “How accurately Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites ...” “... they teach as dogmas mere human precepts.” “... fornication, theft, murder, adulterous conduct, greed, maliciousness, deceit, sensuality, envy, blasphemy, arrogance ... all these evils ...”

**BACKGROUND NOTE** With this, as with many a Gospel message, the key is to be firm and clear without being heavy-handed and accusatory.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS** I was afraid he was going to get around to that.

**STARTER** [As if quoting a Gospel passage] Jesus ascended a hill outside of Bethany and began teaching the crowd, speaking thus: “There is no need to keep laws which are old-fashioned and dumb,” he told them. “Remember the Golden Rule: If you think something is right for you, then go right ahead and do it. All that matters to your heavenly Father is that you be sort of nice, at least most of the time.”

**LEADING QUESTION** \* Do we sometimes act as though Jesus really thought and taught that way?

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE** \* “... that you may live ...” God’s laws are not arbitrary, nor are they essentially an entrance exam for heaven, but are focused on human happiness here and hereafter. \* Examples of being happier as a result of observing God’s statutes. \* Religious laws that can be changed and laws that are immutable. \* Acceptance of a person does not mean acceptance of (or agreement with) his or her actions. Understanding is not condoning. \* “Primacy of conscience” is real—but assumes an open mind, honest discernment to do what is right. It is not permission for a “whatever” lifestyle.

**MEDIA LINKS** Do media portray morality honestly, realistically?

## HOMILY

Denise Simeone

### ‘Just Tell Me What To Do!’

When one of my daughters was in high school, she said she wasn’t feeling well the morning before Thanksgiving break. She wanted to go to school (it probably would be an easy, fun day), but she was worried about getting sicker while at school. I told her she had choices: She could go to school, perhaps be fine and have a good day; she could stay home, have someone collect any missed work for her; or she could go and, if she got sicker, come home. She looked at me with exasperation and said, “Why can’t you just be one of those mothers who tell me what to do!”

At times, I can understand the desire to have someone tell me what to do. There are times when I don’t know what the right thing to do is. There are many issues, concerns and questions about living in the world that are difficult to sort out and understand, let alone decide on a course of action.

In the Jewish faith, a long tradition developed that dictated what people should do and how they were to act as faithful Jews. In today’s Gospel, we hear about this “tradition of the elders.” John Pilch, in his book *The Cultural World of Jesus*, describes this as “a set of practices, defined, maintained and practiced by elites who lived in the cities. The Pharisees required that everyone observe this urban tradition. Peasants in the countryside or itinerants like Jesus and his followers would have had difficulty observing this tradition. Water was scarce and not readily available for ablutions. Fishermen routinely came into contact with dead fish, dead animals and other pollutants.”

We know Jesus’ response to the Pharisees who questioned him and accused his disciples of de-

filting the traditions. Jesus called them hypocrites for disregarding the core commandment to love in the Mosaic Law in favor of lesser, external practices. What is evil or defiles a person, Jesus said, comes not from the outside but from within a person’s heart.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses instructed the Israelites to hear and observe the laws of God. “For what nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us?”

In Chapter 12 of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus faced another test by the scribes when asked what the greatest commandment was. He recited the *Sh’ma*: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” Then he added, “The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31).

How do we live that kind of love? There are times when I just want someone to tell me what to do so I can get it right. What do I do about the hungry in the world or, for that matter, those who beg or wait in line at soup kitchens in my own city? How do I protect the gifts of creation God has entrusted to me? What can I do to foster reverence for other religious groups and practices? How do I promote understanding and tolerance?

No wonder I want someone to tell me what to do!

We practice love with hard and uncertain choices. I must weigh what Jesus said. I must ponder the opportunities before me. I must pray and reflect. I must study. And I must act.

St. James couldn’t be clearer: “Be doers of the word and not hearers only.”

# Ordinary Time

## Surrendering to God's Saving Power

### Preaching Resources

#### CELEBRATION:

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#### ROMAN LECTIONARY

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Isa 35: 4-7*

*Jas 2: 1-5*

*Mark 7: 31-37*

#### REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Proper 18 (23)

*Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23* or

*Isaiah 35:4-7a*

*James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17*

*Mark 7:24-37*

#### ANGLICAN LECTIONARY

Proper 18

*Isa 35:4-7a*

*Jas 1:17-27*

*Mark 7:31-37*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

In his bestselling account of his worldwide travels “in search of a perfect meal,” Chef Anthony Bourdain (*A Cook's Tour*, Bloomberg Publishing, London: 2001) recounts his impressions of Cambodia with a frankness that both startles and sobers us. One in eight Cambodians, as many as two million people, were murdered by the Khmer Rouge's campaign of eradication. One out of every 250 Cambodians is missing a limb, crippled by one of the thousands of landmines still lying in wait on roads, in fields and forests and irrigation ditches.

By the time the Khmer Rouge stopped marching the citizens of Phnom Penh out into the countryside to execute them, the population of that city had shrunk from 850,000 to a mind-boggling 12 people. Most of the survivors later returned to the city to find their homes looted, waterless and powerless, often occupied by equally desperate squatters.

Now, years later, armless and legless people still struggle to scratch out a meager living making souvenirs for tourists or by begging. An average wage in Cambodia is \$1 a day. Children as young as 4 wander the streets carrying their 2-year-old siblings. Eleven and 12-year-old male and female prostitutes survive the only way they know how.

Cambodia represents a microcosm of this wounded world, scourged by human sin, violence, and selfishness. Cambodia's story is unfortunately not unique; rather, it is repeated around the world in every language, in every geographic clime, in every age. Perhaps this may be the reason why so many images and visions of salvation and vindication by God are expressed in terms of healing and making whole that which has been fractured and fragmented by human sin. Even places as desperate as Cambodia, Rwanda, Sudan, Uganda, the Georgia Republic can know the salvation of God. This is our faith, the hope that we celebrate, our trust in God's power to change us and, through us, our desperate world for the better.

In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah encourages our hope in his exhortation to those who are frightened and weighed down by this world's struggles. Be strong! Fear not! he cries out. God knows! God sees! God cares! God comes to save! That salvation, as the prophet points out, shall be experienced as new sight for the blind, as hearing for the deaf, as healing for the lame and as a voice that can sing for the mute. Like his prophetic colleagues, Isaiah also had an appreciation of the ecological effects of God's salvific intervention on behalf of humankind. Indeed, the healing and wholeness experienced by the formerly ill and wounded would be echoed in the world around them. For the Israelites, that echo would mean streams in the desert and pools of oasis like refreshment in the burning sands.

The Gospels illustrate that Isaiah's vision of hope and healing for a fragile, wounded world was fulfilled in Jesus. True to his stated purpose (Luke 4: 18-21), Jesus came to realize the salvific power of God among us. In today's Gospel, a deaf-mute is set free from the isolation that had entrapped him because of his handicap. Unable to hear, unable to communicate who he was, what he desired, whom he loved and how he suffered, the man was a virtual prisoner in a cell of self;

*An average  
wage in  
Cambodia  
is \$1 a day.*

no one could reach in, nor could he reach out. But faith was growing in some of those people who lived in the district of the Ten Cities of the Decapolis. Those faithful brought the man to Jesus with the sure hope that he could make a difference. Significantly, Jesus' words to the man were "Be opened!" He did not say "Begin to hear" or "begin to speak" or even "be healed." Jesus' healing power imported the gift of freedom. A door that had been closed and tightly sealed was now flung open, and a freed man, a hearing and fluent person, stepped forth into a promising future.

Some of us may wonder why there are not similarly miraculous healings happening all around us, all throughout our world today. Perhaps the answer may lie in the fact that surrender to a power other than our own remains a challenge. Humility and self-abandon do not come easily to those who revel in the exercise of absolute personal freedom and fierce independence. Yet the power of God hinges upon such surrender. This point is well illustrated in the following, shared by Presbyterian pastor John Schmidt (included in Anthony Castle's *A Treasury of Quips, Quotes and Anecdotes for Preachers & Teachers*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, Conn.: 1998). Due to the excitement caused by several alleged miracles in a Paris cemetery in 1732, Louis XV posted a sign on the locked gate that read, "By order of the King, God is hereby forbidden to work miracles in this place." With similar arrogance, says Schmidt, the "I" on the throne of our un-surrendered hearts permits God to work no miracles in us.

### ISA 35: 4-7

"My grandfather," explained the late Jewish theologian Martin Buber (*Tales of the Hasidim*, Random House, New York: 1991), "was lame. Once, when he was asked to tell the story about his teacher, he related the tale of how the holy Baal Shem Tov would jump and dance while at prayer. As he told the story, my grandfather became so animated

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that he could not help but jump up and dance in the same way his mentor had done. From that moment, he was healed. This," insisted Buber, "is how stories ought to be told." When Isaiah shared with his contemporaries the vision that comprises today's first reading, he may have had a similar intent to bring to new life and wholeness, by the sheer power of the telling of this story, to those who were so in need of God's healing.

Along with Isaiah 28-33, Chapters 34 and 35 are more similar in style and content to Isaiah 40-55, and for this reason a consensus of scholars agrees that these texts are a later addition, loosely appended to the oracles of the eighth-century Isaiah of Jerusalem. Prompted more probably by the experience of the Babylonian conquest and subsequent deportation, these verses offer hope that God will save and heal even when that hope seems unfounded and impossible to realize. Through his reassurances, explains Carroll Stuhlmueller ("Isaiah," *The Catholic Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York: 1990), the prophet advises readers that there are times (as during the exile) when every imaginable response to God is

fraught with too much danger for us to do anything but remain silent and trustful in God's care. Into that silent trustfulness, the prophet wished to inject hope and a fearlessness born of faith. "God will come with vindication," promises Isaiah, and that deliverance will vanquish evil. In Hebrew thought, as Roland Faley (*Footprints on the Mountain*, Paulist Press, New York: 1994) has pointed out, evil was masked in many disguises: as physical illness; handicaps; scorched, barren land; sinful conduct and death itself. With the deliverance here promised — a journey homeward reminiscent of the exodus, the restoration of life and water to the desert and a healed humankind — it is clear that God is greater than evil and grace is more powerful than any affliction, be it spiritual, political or physical.

Early Christian writers were quick to understand and affirm their belief in the fact that Isaiah's promises of healing and restoration were fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus. This is particularly evident in today's Gospel, wherein the first evangelist chose to use the highly unusual word *mogilalon*, which means "with difficulty of speech" to describe the deaf-mute healed by Jesus. *Mogilalon* is precisely the same Greek word used in the Septuagint to translate the word "dumb" in Isaiah 35:6.

### JAS 2:1-5

Opinions about clothing and its significance for human beings have varied widely through the centuries. Henry Ward Beecher, for example, in *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit* (1887), is credited with declaring: "Clothes and manners do not make the man, but, when he is made, they greatly improve his appearance." A century and a half earlier, William Shakespeare included this line in "Hamlet": "The apparel oft proclaims the man." American wit and prolific author Mark Twain (1835-1910) agreed; he once quipped: "Clothes make the man; naked people have little if any influence on society." But it is the opinion of



Samuel Johnson (*Boswell's Life of Samuel Johnson*, 1763) that comes nearest to the notion James wished to correct in today's second reading. Said Johnson, "A man with a good coat upon his back meets with a better reception than he who has a bad one."

Both Johnson and James understood the human penchant for responding to others on the basis of external appearances rather than respecting the individuals for who they truly are. James understood too that such behaviors should not be found among those who had given themselves over to Jesus Christ in faith. True to form, he addressed this issue frankly and in practical terms: Do not show favoritism to the rich over the poor.

Although, as PHEME PERKINS (*First and Second Peter; James and Jude*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.:1995) has pointed out, James' example opens with the deference being paid to the rich and well clothed, the dishonor shown to the poor is the real problem facing the community. In verse 5, James reminds readers of God's predilection for the poor. This preference has effectively overturned the partiality so typical of ancient society; therefore, anyone who ignores God's choices cannot claim to believe in Jesus Christ.

When James turns the tables on his readers, says Perkins, he challenges any tendency we may have to consider ourselves to be the poor who are the heirs of God's kingdom. Though we may have experienced oppression by the wealthy, we tend to learn from our oppressors rather than from God. The all-too-common tendency for the oppressed to adopt the behaviors of those who have been the oppressors is evident in every culture. Think of each successive wave of immigrants to this country who, rather than welcome those who have followed them across the border, turned upon them instead. Even now, people in high places are plotting military strategies and designing walls intended to block the influx of the poor and effectively seal the borders of the rich. In the midst of this, James' words challenge us not

to be judges who hand down corrupt decisions, but rather to defer to the poor, to welcome them, to learn from them and thereby hope to have some share in their eternal, God-given inheritance.

## MARK 7:31-37

Though it is simply told, this short narrative makes some important statements about Jesus and prepares readers for Peter's insightful declaration that will follow in Mark 8:29. Foremost among these statements is the verdict of the crowd regarding Jesus' healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment; "He has done everything well" (v. 37). This, as WILLIAM BARCLAY ("The Gospel of Mark," *The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, U.K.: 1975) has explained, is none other than the verdict of God after having completed the work of creation (Gen 1:31). By referencing God's act of creation while telling of the good works of Jesus, the Marcan evangelist underscores Jesus' sharing God's power to recreate humankind.

A second statement about Jesus in verse 37 ("He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak") references the Isaian messianic prophecy in today's first reading, affirming Jesus as its fulfillment. In Jesus and through his healing power, the era of salvation was begun and will continue in this world through his disciples until his second coming.

While the narrative of the deaf-

mute obviously recounts a physical healing, it also contains an inherent challenge for contemporary believers. Deafness, insists Roland Faley (*Footprints on the Mountain*, Paulist Press, New York: 1994), can be more than physical; it can be a moral condition, and it is no stranger to our times. How often do we hear but not listen? The latter requires careful attentiveness; the former does not. All too often we hear God's word but do not listen to it attentively, and as a result it does not take root within us. Appropriately, the Marcan Jesus has framed his teaching with the command to hear *and* to listen (4:3-9). He teaches us, as BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON (*Preaching Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2002) has pointed out, that understanding the Word requires devoted hearing (4:23-25), and careful devoted hearing alone can result in deeper understanding. In a world filled with words that are cheapened by their vulgarity or sheer multiplicity, we might recall, says Bowman Thurston, that God has given human beings two ears but only one mouth — which suggests that we might listen twice as much as we speak. Just as we would readily use a hearing aid to enhance physical hearing, so also must we be willing to rely on God's grace as an aid to our moral and spiritual hearing. That grace is ever available to those who will daily and humbly surrender to God's saving power and appropriate the gifts of healing and hearing in faith.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

A cartoon shows two men waiting at the speech therapist's office. One of them asks the other: "I wonder whose idea it was to put an 's' in the word lisp?" If you've ever had difficulty saying "Sally sells seashells down by the seashore," then you may get a glimmer of what it is like to live with a speech impediment.

In today's Gospel, Jesus opens a man's ears and heals his speech impediment. This opening of the ears and the release of the tongue is part of the rite of every baptism. When you were baptized, the presider said the prayer of Ephphatha. He touched your ears and prayed that you would one day hear God's word. Then, touching your mouth, the presider prayed that your lips would soon proclaim God's word.

## Preaching to Youth

*Jim Auer*

### KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA

[Mark] “Some people brought him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. Jesus ... put his fingers into the man’s ears and, spitting, touched his tongue.” Loving others and serving their needs can be demanding, messy, sometimes even physically unpleasant.

**BACKGROUND NOTE** Be aware of any member of the assembly with special needs and adjust the presentation to avoid references that may be upsetting to him or her, including the material in “Starter” below.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT INITIALLY APPROACH THE READINGS** Agreement, but doubt that they themselves could actually perform “messy service” (e.g., in a nursing home).

**STARTER** An automobile accident has left you unable to walk normally or to speak clearly. You limp and your speech is garbled. How do you hope your friends will treat you?

**LEADING QUESTIONS** \* Why did Jesus get so physical in curing the deaf man with the speech impediment? Why not just say, “Be cured”? \*What reactions do you think the man had received from others due to his limitations? How was Jesus different? \*How well do we imitate Jesus in our encounters with people who are different and needy?

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE** \* The “messy service” involved in being parents (and, sometimes, older siblings); of such things is the Kingdom built. \* Serving others can be unpleasant or demanding emotionally as well as physically. \* Seeing Jesus within others: “What you do to others, you do to me” — literally true, not just “one of those inspirational things Jesus said.” \* Avoiding judging (or not accepting) people based on their appearance, abilities, challenges, personality quirks. \*

**QUOTATION** “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye” (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry).

## HOMILY

*Fr. James Smith*

# God Blesses Human Hope

In the hopelessness of foreign exile, Isaiah told his people to have hope. Does hope merely keep us from despair? Or does it really pave the way for a better future? Either way, or both ways, to be human is to be oriented toward a future as an arrow is aimed toward a target. It is human to hope. Without expectation of a better future we would be stuck in our present, permanent insufficiency.

But those we trust betray us, those we love leave us, the things we hope in disappoint us. Yet we keep on loving and hoping because we sense that there is finally Someone who is faithful, Someone who loves us anyhow, Someone who will fulfill our hopes.

We call that Someone God. And as St. Paul wrote: “In this world we live awaiting our blessed hope, the appearance of our glorious God.” All human experiences of trust, love and hope are windows onto infinite, endless trust and love and hope. Of course, we have the power to suppress these intimations of immortality, but by denying their divine origin and goal, we diminish our own humanity.

Although we hope for many things, hope is more than a wish for separate objects of desire. Hope is more like a raw, undefined, omnivorous expectation of goodness in general. Hope is the firm, fundamental conviction that good will triumph over evil, that where sin abounds, grace more abounds, that all will be well.

But if our final hope is God, and all lesser hopes do not satisfy and are finally reduced to dust, is there any reason to hope for earthly things? Of course. That is like saying that since we finally die, what is the point of living at all? The point is that human beings are creatures in process. We

are on the way to becoming more than we are now. But that does not mean that what we are now is worthless.

A seed is valuable as a seed even before it becomes a flower; a child has innate worth even before she becomes mature. So, every stage of our life, every experience of partial fulfillment has its own value besides being a part of the process of perfection. One hope fulfilled or frustrated makes the next hope possible.

Nor does the overarching hope for God invalidate our merely human hope and faith and love. Our love for a spouse does not weaken our love for God; our trust in a friend does not diminish our trust in God; our hope for health does not negate our hope for God.

But that does not mean that faith, love and hope in fellow humans is merely a stepping stone toward God. It does not mean that we use others to get to God, that we “practice” on each other to get it right with God.

No — although God is greater than everything, God does not suck human frailties into the black hole of his perfection. God graciously makes room for our human projects within providence. God courteously respects our earthly hopes, incorporates them into his own hope, even preserves them for us in heaven.

Where the adventure continues with greater intensity. We will see God face to face, but since God is a mystery, we cannot know God completely. Therefore, we will eternally learn something new about divinity. Since love is limitless, we will continually discover something new to adore in our Beloved. Since God is infinite, we will eternally expect some exciting new revelation of reality.

# Ordinary Time

## Suffering, the Locale and Language of God

### Preaching Resources

**CELEBRATION:**  
A Comprehensive  
Worship Resource  
[www.celebrationpubs.org](http://www.celebrationpubs.org)

**ROMAN  
LECTIONARY**  
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
*Isa 50:5-9*  
*Jas 2:14-18*  
*Mark 8:27-35*

**REVISED COMMON  
LECTIONARY**  
Proper 19 (24)  
*Prov 1:20-33* or  
*Isa 50:4-9a*  
*Jas 3:1-12*  
*Mark 8:27-38*

**ANGLICAN  
LECTIONARY**  
Proper 19  
*Isaiah 50:4-9*  
*Jas 2:1-5, 8-10, 14-18*  
*Mark 8:27-38* or  
*Mark 9:14-29*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

**T**he 1975 movie “The Hiding Place” poignantly portrays the story of Corrie Ten Boom. Born in the Netherlands in 1892, Corrie and her sister Betsie, her mother and her father, who was a watchmaker, enjoyed a comfortable life in Harlaam until the rise of the Third Reich in 1933. As members of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Ten Booms were relatively safe from Hitler’s forces, yet they risked their safety to join the Dutch underground. In that capacity, they opened their home to shelter countless Jews and worked diligently at helping others to hide out in the Dutch countryside.

Betrayed by a quisling in February 1944, Corrie, her father and sister were sent to the camps, first in Holland and then to Ravensbrück in Germany. Within 10 days, her father died and Corrie and Betsie found themselves, along with 10,000 other women, in horrible conditions.

One scene in the film is set in the women’s barracks, where in the midst of the beds some of the prisoners, cold, hungry and lice-ridden, have gathered to pray with Betsie. One of the other women calls out derisively from her bunk: “If your God is such a good God, why does he allow this kind of suffering?” As she speaks, she tears off the rags that bind her hands, displaying her broken, mangled fingers. “I am the first violinist of the symphony orchestra! Did your God will this?”

*‘All this God  
did for love.’*

For a long moment, no one speaks. Then Corrie replies, “We can’t answer that question. All we know is that our God came to this earth and became one of us; he suffered with us, was crucified and died. All this God did for love.”

By December of 1944, Betsie, too, succumbed to the suffering thrust upon her at Ravensbrück, but not before telling Corrie, “We must tell them what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” Amid that unjust and inexplicable pit of suffering, the Ten Boom family had learned that even such a travesty as the suffering of an innocent can have meaning and purpose if, within that suffering, God is acknowledged and experienced as near, as loving, and as a caring yokemate in the struggle. This is the mystery we remember and celebrate today — that the means God chose to overcome the evil and sin that plague this world is through the service that is suffering. This truth is affirmed in today’s Gospel as the Marcan Jesus responds to Peter’s objection that suffering and rejection is not the best way for Jesus to establish God’s kingdom. Only later, and after much struggle, would Peter and company and all of Jesus’ other disciples through the ages learn not to judge by human standards but by God’s.

Those standards are clearly in evidence in today’s first reading, which describes the character of the Deutero-Isaian Servant. The Servant surrenders to God’s mission with all of its consequences because the Servant is also fully confident that when God commissions for service, God also strengthens and sustains. Despite the struggle and the inevitable sufferings that always seem to be inherent in the divine plan of redemption, the Servant is unflinching and undeterred.

Because suffering is the means God chooses to effect the divine pur-

pose, then suffering also becomes the place where God can be encountered. Corrie and Betsie Ten Boom knew this when they experienced the seemingly bottomless pit that is suffering and realized that it was precisely in that place that they and all who suffer can find God.

Some have compared this discovery of God in the midst of suffering to learning a new language. Obviously, there are many benefits in learning another language. One of the most important of these is the increased ability to understand and be understood. If people know only one language, they may be inclined to assume that everything they say is understood. However, if a person is challenged to translate into another language, their effort opens a door, allowing communication with many new people. If the believer learns to speak and understand the language of suffering, a door of ministry and service is thereby opened to a world of people who are hurting.

Jesus learned the language of suffering; Jesus accepted the means by which God chose to save sinners. In his learning and in his acceptance of God's ways and will, Jesus has become the place where God can be encountered. Shall we also become places where others can find God?

### ISA 50:5-9

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But, do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us. Remember the fruits we have borne, thanks to this suffering — our comradeship, our loyalty, humility, courage, generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown out of all this. And when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness." This prayer, scribbled on a piece of scrap paper, was found on the body of a dead child at Ravensbrück concentration camp. Could it have been the prayer of Betsie Ten Boom? Perhaps. Could it not also have been a prayer of the Servant depicted by the prophet we call Deutero-Isaiah? Certainly. Although the

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## Ordinary Time

24th Sunday

*Suffering, the Locale  
and Language of God*



Servant is quite frank here in telling of the struggles inherent in doing God's will, there is no undertone of anger or resentment. Such feelings, if they arose in the Servant's heart at all, have yielded to the conviction that the Servant belongs to God, and in that capacity shall not be abandoned. Rather, the God who has offered daily instruction to the Servant (v. 5) is also the Servant's help (vv. 7, 9) and the upholder of the Servant's rights (v. 8).

Third among the four songs interspersed in the Isaian Book of Comfort (ch. 40-55), this song indicates that the Servant has already begun his mission and has begun to suffer accordingly, a suffering that will eventually lead to his innocent death for the sake of his sinful contemporaries (Isa 52:13-53:12). But who was this servant? In the sixth century B.C.E. when these songs first appeared, the role of the Servant may have been assumed by the collective tribes of Israel suffering in exile. Some scholars suggest that the description more properly applies to one of the prophets, such as Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel, whose ministries invariably left them vulnerable. Others suggest that it is the *anawim* or

faithful remnant of poor ones who are being characterized here as those who suffer for the sake of the larger community.

Centuries after these songs were composed, they came to life in the person and through the saving suffering ministry of Jesus. In the synoptic Gospels in particular, the faith of Christians in the servanthood of Jesus is quite evident. Careful readers of the synoptic narratives of Jesus' passion will realize that these accounts affirm Jesus' role as one unexpected by human beings but also as one that had been foreordained by God. Just as these songs put us in touch with the redemptive power of Jesus' suffering, they also contain an inherent challenge for his disciples.

### JAS 2:14-18

Throughout this month, each of the second readings has offered insights into James' understanding of Christianity made real and practical through a fully lived faith. This week, James' point is exceedingly clear. Professed faith must be practiced. Mere words are not enough; good words must be translated into good works.

Following the style of the Greek diatribe, James argues with an unnamed adversary in order to clarify and affirm his ideas about the relationship that should exist among Christians. Each must care for the other, and that care must go further than a happy greeting or an expressed wish for luck and well being. James uses the vivid example of the poor person, unclothed and unfed. Of what use is sympathy without an attempt to turn that sympathy into food and shelter against the elements?

This, insists William Barclay ("The Letter of James and Peter," *The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, U.K.: 1976), is a passage that would have special appeal for a Jew to whom almsgiving was of paramount importance. Indeed, almsgiving was regarded as righteousness and as a sure defense against the judgment of God.



Recall the wisdom of Jesus ben Sira, who advised: “Water will quench a flaming fire and alms can make atonement for sin” (Sirach 3:29). In the book of Tobit, a similar thought is expressed: “Give alms from your possessions. Do not turn your face away from the poor and God’s face will not be turned away from you ... give alms in proportion to what you own. If you have great wealth, give alms out of your abundance; if you have but little, distribute even some of that ... you will be storing up a goodly treasure against the day of adversity. Almsgiving frees one from death ... alms are a worthy offering in God’s sight” (4:7-11).

Such incentives notwithstanding, James also advocates care for the poor as an outward expression of an authentic interior faith. In this, says Barclay (*op. cit.*), James is “profoundly right. There is nothing more futile than the repeated experience of a noble intention without making any attempt to put it into action.” Barclay believes that a person has no right to entertain sympathy for another less fortunate unless that person is willing to turn sympathy into service. Emotions are not ends in themselves or moments in which to dawdle and luxuriate; on the contrary, feelings of sympathy and emotion at the plight of another must, through deliberate effort and toil, discipline and sacrifice, be turned into the stuff of life.

Over and against the imaginary opponent who seems to suggest that some people have faith while others have works, as though these were two alternative expressions of Christianity (v. 18), James argues that it is not a case of “either/or” but of “both/and.” In this way, faith is real, and God, in God’s predilection for the poor, is truly worshipped in thought, word and deed.

### MARK 8:27-35

“Finding new life through suffering and death: that is the core of the good news,” insisted Henri Nouwen (*Jesus, A Gospel*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 2001). “Jesus has lived out that liberating way before

us and has made it the great sign.” Jesus points to that sign three times throughout the Marcan Gospel; today’s Gospel selection represents his first indication that he understood his role as God’s Servant and humankind’s savior as one that would necessarily bring suffering into his life. To look suffering and death straight in the face and with “one’s face set like flint” (first reading, Isaiah) — that, said Nouwen (*Letters to Marc About Jesus*, Harper & Row, San Francisco: 1988), is the true sign of Jesus. It is the sign of the cross, the sign of suffering and death, but also of hope and total renewal.

When Jesus offered this sign to his disciples, they were without understanding, as is evidenced in Peter’s reaction. Understanding and acceptance would come only later and only with the grace of resurrection faith that enabled them to see and to believe fully. Although Peter’s negative reaction to Jesus came directly on the heels of his remarkable confession of Jesus as Messiah, it is also clear that Peter’s messianic expectations had not yet coalesced with God’s saving plan as realized in Jesus. Again, full understanding and acceptance would only come later.

Later also would come an appreciation of the site of Peter’s confession of faith: Caesarea Philippi. That city, which was part of the tetrarchy of Philip, was the farthest Jesus had traveled from Jerusalem. For Mark, explains Bonnie Bowman Thurston

(*Preaching Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2002), Caesarea Philippi represented opposition to Jesus and his message. Caesarea Philippi was also the site of the ancient city of Paneas, where Pan was worshiped and where a temple to the emperor Augustus was erected. Thus, in Caesarea Philippi, where both the forces of nature (Pan) and of political power (Augustus) were centered, Peter’s declaration (though uttered with only partial insight) affirmed that Jesus’ messiahship would take precedence over both. Moreover, the locus of Peter’s declaration was a racially mixed area. To confess Jesus there was to confess him as the messiah not only for the Jews, but for all peoples (see 7:24-30).

To confess Jesus with the lips was also to confess Jesus with one’s life, lived out as Jesus lived, through the dual signs of service and suffering. This truth is borne out in Jesus’ challenge that those who would be his must take up their cross and follow him (v. 34). Bowman Thurston (*op. cit.*) warns believers against adopting a merely stoic “grin and bear it” attitude toward the difficulties that come unbidden in our lives ... as in, “My mother-in-law is my cross to bear!” To take up the cross is a voluntary choice, not a burden. This choice involves resolve, desire and active acceptance, not a merely passive resignation. Motivation for such a free and proactive choice is found in verse 35; Jesus bids his own embrace the cross “for my sake and the sake of the Gospel.”

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

Poker has become a spectator sport, and with the explosion of TV channels there’s almost always a game on the screen.

“Texas Hold-em” is the most popular poker game among card enthusiasts. In Texas Hold-em, a player has the option of “going all in.” That’s the moment when they bet everything they have. It’s the player’s final chance. If they win, they win everything. If they lose, it’s all over.

In today’s Gospel, when Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it,” he invites us to “go all in” and bet everything we have. If we hold back we will lose, but if we let go, we will win. It’s a high-stakes “game.” All eternity is riding on our willingness to bet our whole life on Jesus.

## Preaching to Youth

*Jim Auer*

**KEYVERSE(S)/ MAIN IDEA** [Mark] “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man had to suffer much, be rejected ... be put to death, and rise three days later.” “Peter then ... began to remonstrate with him. [Jesus] reprimanded Peter in turn: ‘You are not judging by God’s standards but by man’s!’” Attitudes toward the inevitability of suffering.

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE READINGS** Theoretical agreement.

**STARTER** Use questions below. Or cite an anecdote about a “bad break” in your life and how you dealt with it, or an anecdote from the life of someone you know.

**LEADING QUESTIONS** \* When you get a “bad break — a broken arm, a broken relationship, an opportunity denied, a personal rejection, a deliberate injury — what is your usual response? At first, probably anger, but what is your more thought-out, sustained response? \* Resentment? Self-pity? Grudging resignation? Determination to survive? Acceptance? \* How about ... offering?

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE** \* The power of freely offered, redemptive suffering in union with Christ. \* Varieties of suffering: physical, emotional (e.g., broken relationships) and spiritual (e.g., seeming inability to conquer sinful habits); all of these can be legitimately offered. \* Assigning specific intentions (e.g., people we want to help) to personalize the value of suffering — the traditional “offer it up for ...” \* The “now but not (fully) yet” nature of the Paschal Mystery. \* Our paradoxical call to work to eliminate suffering while accepting it as an instrument of perfection.

**MEDIA LINK** Upon realizing he has been given Godlike powers, Jim Carrey in “Bruce Almighty” shouts, “I’ve got the power!” We do too when we, like Jesus who was God, accept and offer our inevitable suffering.

**QUOTATION** \* “The Crown is not promised without the Cross” (C. S. Lewis).

## HOMILY

*Fr. James Smith*

# Who Do You Say I Am?

Who do people say Jesus is? I think that most people unconsciously understand the life and times of Jesus in a mythical manner. They imagine Jesus thinking to himself something like this:

“I will have myself born of poor but honest parents so people cannot say I was born to success. I will live a quiet, hidden life as a youth so there will be no premature notoriety to distract the public.

“I have a message that has been honed by focus groups all through the history of Israel: the Kingdom of God. Nobody really knows what it means — it is a flexible image that I can shape to fit different people.

“I will have to do some amazing actions to match my ordinary words. I will cure 10 lepers, make three blind men see, six deaf people hear and 10 lame people walk. To get them ready for my own resurrection, I will bring one child and one adult back to life.

“Because these are illiterate peasants, shepherds, fishermen and housewives, I must temper my talk to fit their simple minds. I’ll have to tell simple fables and parables to both intrigue and educate them.”

If this doesn’t seem likely, let’s try it from another angle. Jesus was born poor because 99 percent of his people were poor. He lived a quiet life because Nazareth was on the edge of the earth, and he had to have time to grow in wisdom and grace. Besides, he did not yet know what he wanted to do with his life

He became restless with this anonymous life, sensing that there must be something more. He left home and wandered around until he heard some crazy preacher railing on about the Kingdom. Jesus immediately recognized his calling and his destiny: to spread that Kingdom.

But he came to his work gradually, with no preconceived agenda or program. He initially attracted very few followers, and he concluded that the kingdom must be like a small mustard seed. So he made up a story to console his little band. At a synagogue, he heard a man thank God for growing his crop while he slept, and Jesus thought that was a good way to explain how the Kingdom grows, by itself. Farmers were always digging up buried coins as they plowed, so Jesus knew that was a good image to show that the Kingdom was both surprising and free.

In one village, a man grumbled that his father treated his worthless brother better than his own hard-working self. That became the most popular story of God’s ridiculous forgiveness. And when the story went around about that poor traveler mugged on the road, Jesus made that into an unforgettable, undeniable demand to love everyone.

The Kingdom project had ups and downs, and Jesus finally realized that he had to take the show on the road to Jerusalem. And that is where the country boy learned how life works in the big leagues. The earthly king threw him in prison, the religious powers descended on him en masse, his fickle friends quickly found better prospects, he was abandoned naked and derelict on a splintery pole.

On the verge of despair asking, “Why has God forsaken me!?” Jesus heard the Spirit sigh: “Hey Jesus, remember when you chose God’s will over success? Your work was not about you — it was about the Kingdom. Your life is not about you — it’s about God.”

And Jesus smiled and said: “Right. Into your hands I give my life.”

# Ordinary Time

## Cherishing the Good; Welcoming the Holy

### Preaching Resources

**CELEBRATION:**  
A Comprehensive  
Worship Resource  
[www.celebrationpubs.org](http://www.celebrationpubs.org)

**ROMAN  
LECTIONARY**  
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
*Wis 2:12, 17-20*  
*Jas 3:16-4:3*  
*Mark 9:30-37*

**REVISED COMMON  
LECTIONARY**  
Proper 20 (25)  
*Prov 31:10-31* or  
*Wis 1:16-2:1, 12-22*  
*Jas 3:13-4:3, 7-8a*  
*Mark 9:30-37*

**ANGLICAN  
LECTIONARY**  
Proper 20  
*Wis 1:16-2:1(6-11), 12-22*  
*James 3:16 – 4:6*  
*Mark 9:30-37*

This scriptural commentary was prepared exclusively for the *Celebration* members by **Patricia Datchuck Sánchez**, who earned a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible in a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Sometimes when we encounter a genuinely good and authentically holy person, our hackles are raised against them. What is it about them that irks us? Rather than rejoicing in that person's goodness and holiness, it is as though we consider their very existence a personal affront. When we could be cultivating respect and honor for that person, why is it that we harbor anger and resentment and even allow the desire for revenge to foment in our hearts? Is it because that person's innate goodness and holiness function like something of an "external conscience"? Is it because their very existence seems to point out what I am not? Perhaps it is because the level of discomfort I experience in their presence goads me to such a degree that I yield to my lesser self rather than to the One in whose image I am made and according to which I am to live.

In today's first reading, the author of Wisdom indicates an understanding of the all-too-prevalent human penchant for reviling the good and the just. The author's words touch a nerve in the hearts of those among us who allow ourselves to entertain such notions. Yet what prompts these ideas? What provokes such thoughts? Why do we consider the just "obnoxious"? Why, for example, would Mohandas Gandhi, whose life was given over to an intense struggle for peace and human rights and who tenaciously resisted prejudice and violence — why would such a good and holy man provoke unspeakable wrath, brutality and murderous vengeance from the British occupying forces in his native India? Gandhi was also persecuted for his efforts against racial prejudice and violence in South Africa. Of him, his political adversary, General Jan Smuts, once said, "It was my fate to be the antagonist of a man for whom, even then, I had the highest respect. He never lost his temper or succumbed to hate and preserved his gentle humor even in the most trying situations. His manner and spirit, even then as well as later, contrasted markedly with the ruthless and brutal forcefulness which is the vogue in our day" (Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Harper & Row, New York: 1950).

Why also would a peaceable woman such as Dorothy Day, who raised her voice in print (*The Catholic Worker*) to speak out against war and violence in all its forms and who gave herself completely to the service of God's least ones — why would such a woman be beaten, jailed and persecuted for her beliefs? Day herself suggested an answer to these questions, quoting philosopher Simone Weil in her *Selected Writings* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1994): "The idea of the despised and humiliated hero which was so common among the Greeks and is the actual theme of the Gospels is almost outside our Western tradition which has remained on the Roman road of militarism, centralization, bureaucracy and totalitarianism."

Because they would not travel such a road, there have been countless despised and humiliated heroes of the ilk of Day and Gandhi. Each has suffered for their goodness; some have even given their lives: Daniel Berrigan, Cesar Chavez, Oscar Romero, Edith Stein, Martin Luther

*Why have those  
who should have  
been revered been  
so despised?*

King Jr. and wife Coretta Scott King, Menachem Begin, Anwar Sadat and Jimmy Carter, Sojourner Truth, Joan Chittister, etc. etc. Why have so many of those who should be revered as heroes and role models been so despised by so many?

For an answer, we turn to the ever-practical author of James, who, in today's second reading, attributes the tendency to despise authentic goodness to jealousy, strife, an inconstant spirit, inner cravings and envy. Similarly, in today's Gospel, the Marcan Jesus will assign such attitudes and behaviors to unbridled ambition as well as a distorted sense of one's own importance. As a remedy to and a safeguard against such aberrations of the true Christian spirit, Jesus challenges his disciples to make their own the attitude of a servant. Willing to serve the needs of others and place others ahead of themselves, the disciple of Jesus will thus learn to look at life and others from a new perspective. From that perspective, the disciple will no longer ask, "What can you do for me?" but "What can I do for you? What can I be for your benefit?" In the same way, Jesus challenges his own to welcome others and to value the goodness and holiness of others as we would welcome and value a child.

In Jesus' day, children had no legal rights and were regarded as the property of their father, who had unquestioned authority over them. Therefore, to welcome a child and to serve a child would be to expect nothing in return, save the blessing of having helped one of God's least ones. Just as Jesus identified with the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the poor and the otherwise marginalized members of society, so Jesus identified with the helpless child.

### WIS 2:12, 17-20

In his most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, Athenian philosopher Plato (428-348 B.C.E.) raised the question, "What is justice?" By way of an answer, Plato detailed the plight of his mentor, Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.).

September 24, 2006

## Ordinary Time

25th Sunday

*Cherishing the Good;  
Welcoming the Holy*



Arrested for supposedly corrupting the youth of Athens and for refusing to worship the gods of the state, Socrates was portrayed, nevertheless, by Plato as a true patriot, a just man who respected the law. When he was found guilty by what Plato regarded as an unjust authority, Socrates was said to have gone to his death "in innocence, a sufferer and not a doer of evil, a victim, not of the laws, but of men."

A similarly just and innocent figure is featured in this text from Israel's sapiential literature. His description, explains Roland Faley (*Footprints on the Mountain*, Paulist Press, New York: 1994), is actually a collage of freely adapted texts from the Greek version (LXX) of the Hebrew scriptures, particularly from Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Psalter. Like the rejected and condemned just one in Psalm 22, this figure in Wisdom has claimed that God will come to the rescue (v. 19; see Ps 22:23ff) and that, in the end, God will save the person from death (v. 20; see Ps 22:9).

Angered by these claims, the wicked persecute the just one and plot the just one's downfall. Their views, insists Faley (*op. cit.*), are completely self-centered and reflect

a clear moral void. Unlike the just one who is actually called God's *pais* (son or servant) in verse 13, which is omitted from this pericope, the wicked are lawless and ungodly. But the just one, whose heart and mind and lifestyle are inspired by a relationship to God, is morally upright, authentically true and genuinely holy. That person is the example set before readers today, to edify and encourage each of us to a similar way of living and, if necessary, dying.

Because of the parallels between this portrait of God's just one and the sufferings of Jesus Christ, some scholars regard this Wisdom text as a prediction of the passion. As such, it forms a complement to today's Marcan Gospel with its second announcement of the manner in which Jesus will suffer and die. That complementarity would be more perfect if the Wisdom text continued to include verse 22, wherein the ancient writer announces the just one's vindication: "And they knew not the hidden counsels of God; neither did they count on a recompense of holiness nor discern the innocent soul's reward."

### JAS 3:16-4:3

At their 1971 synod, the bishops of the Catholic church released this statement on the meaning of justice in world society: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" ("Justice in the World," United States Catholic Conference, Washington: 1972). To aid the faithful in the practical realization of this statement, John R. Donahue ("Biblical Perspectives on Justice," in *The Faith That Does Justice*, John C. Haughey, ed., Paulist Press, New York: 1977) shaped a working definition of justice as "fidelity to the demands of a relationship." Rather than live solely as individuals, believers are called to be united



to others in a social context, either by bonds of family or by covenant relationships. This web of relationships — leaders with those who are led; judges with complainants; family with kinfolk; community with the immigrants and aliens among them and with the suffering in their midst, and *all* with God — these constitute the world in which life is lived. That the author of James agreed with this statement and promoted its realization among his readers is clearly evident in this text.

Calling for a harvest of justice that is sown in peace, the ancient writer listed those behaviors that result when justice is breached alongside those behaviors that arise among those who embrace justice fully. Rather than simply appeal to patience or to tolerance, both of which insinuate a “grin and bear it” attitude or a mere putting up with the idiosyncrasies of the other, James called for justice. Indeed, the relationship shared by those whose faith has brought them together in Christ demands more than tolerance; justice calls for love and a bearing with the other for the sake of the other, for the sake of Christ.

Those who willingly accept the call to lead just lives and to deal with others with genuine justice are called “wise” by James (v. 17), wise with the wisdom that comes not from human philosophical systems but from above, from God. This wisdom issues forth in a catalogue of virtues that James may have borrowed from Israel’s sapiential literature (Wis 7:21-28), wherein true and godly wisdom is contrasted with human folly.

While wisdom from above is innocent, folly stirs passions and cravings that lead to evildoing and can even stand in the way of authentic praying. James’ insistence on this (vv. 2-3), explains William Barclay (“The Letters of James and Peter,” *The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, U.K.: 1976), reminds believers that the true end of all prayer is to say to God, “Your will be done.” The prayer of the passion-driven person is “My desires be satisfied.” James would keep us

mindful that prayer becomes true when the believer removes self from the center of one’s life and welcomes God to dwell within, thereby making God’s will my will.

### MARK 9:30-37

Like Socrates, whose life and death were referenced in the commentary of the Wisdom text, Jesus was a peripatetic teacher whose disciples followed his lead not only in a geographic sense but also in a spiritual and ethical manner. Like Socrates, Jesus was a just man who was condemned for his teachings. But unlike Socrates, who took his own life by drinking hemlock, Jesus allowed himself to be delivered into the hands of those who would put him to death, and after three days, he was found to be risen from death unto life everlasting. Today’s Gospel pericope represents the Marcan Jesus’ second prediction of this central tenet of our Christian faith. Like the first prediction (Gospel for September 17), it includes a geographical reference (vv. 30-33), the prediction itself (v. 31), the disciples’ misunderstanding (vv. 32, 34), and further instruction on the challenges of discipleship (vv. 36-37).

Notice that the instruction of the disciples is being conducted in private; at this point in the Marcan Gospel, Jesus is featured as avoiding public appearances where his “brand” of messiahship is generally misunderstood. While many among

his contemporaries would have wanted to make him a king, Jesus avoids this possibility by focusing his time and attention on instructing his own as to what kind of leader he shall be — that is, one who exerts his authority as service.

As his followers, Jesus’ disciples are invited to a similar way of life. Once they were inside the home at Capernaum, Jesus took the initiative. He “sat down and called the Twelve to him” and began to teach them. This verse, insists Bonnie Bowman Thurston (*Preaching Mark*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 2002) should not be passed over quickly; in it Mark portrays Jesus in the authoritative position of a teacher about to impart a singularly important lesson. Jesus “sat down” there in the home at Capernaum just as he “sat down” to impart the Great Sermon (Matt 5:1-2). Those present are the inner circle, those key figures in what became the Christian community were to take with them the knowledge that their role as leaders would best be exercised in the service of all. Moreover, and as Jesus’ instruction continues, those servant-leaders were to realize that rather than hobnob with the rich, famous and powerful, they were to find their pleasure and their purpose in the company of the poor and the powerless — typified in the child whom Jesus stood in their midst. The helpless child would also be the person in whom they would meet and welcome Jesus himself.

## Sermon Starters

*Dick Folger*

Remember “The Honeymooners”? Jackie Gleason played a New York bus driver named Ralph and Audrey Meadows played his beleaguered wife Alice. During their quarrels, Ralph would often threaten: “To the moon, Alice!” But at the conclusion of many of the episodes, after Alice had rescued him from various predicaments, he would affectionately declare: “Alice, you’re the greatest!”

In today’s Gospel, the disciples are arguing among themselves about which of them was the greatest. Like Ralph in the TV sitcom, their vision is short-sighted and they fail to see the one who truly is the greatest. Jesus patiently calls them to him for a new explanation of the reality right there in their midst.



## Preaching to Youth

Jim Auer

**KEY VERSE(S) / MAIN IDEA** [Wis] “Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us.” [James] “What you desire, you do not obtain, and so you resort to murder. You envy and you cannot acquire, so you quarrel and fight.” [Mark] “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men who will put him to death.”

**HOW YOUTH MIGHT APPROACH THE READINGS** A mixture of agreement and, if an idea hits home at personal behavior, resistance.

**STARTER** Several years ago, a teenage girl left a dance in a church hall to escape the incessant taunts of the “cool people.” “Good girls” were obnoxious in their eyes. Outside, in the dark, she was abducted, forced into a van, and gangraped. Recovery took years. Did the taunters envision and intend this specific result? No. Nevertheless, it was precipitated by their desire for power and status at the expense of another. Evil often has a “domino effect.”

**LEADING QUESTIONS** \* Why are good people so often victims of both official and unofficial crimes? \* What would you propose as the single best cure for the “jealousy and strife” and “conflicts and disputes” that the letter of James talks about?

**DIRECTIONS TO EXPLORE** \* “Murdering” someone’s self-esteem or reputation also violates “Thou shalt not kill.” \* If we use the rationalization “Nobody’s getting hurt,” we need to broaden our vision. Can we really be so sure? \* Courage to come to the defense of someone who is being harassed or victimized. \* Consumerism gone rampant and unbridled depletion of earth’s resources as a type of “murder,” especially of exploited Third World workers. \*

**MEDIA LINK** In the (far better than average) “teen” film “Crazy/Beautiful,” Carlos and Nicole have little in common except the opportunity to despise and/or exploit each other. Instead, they find mutual respect and love. Carlos: “You’re crazy ...” Nicole: “... and you’re beautiful.”

## HOMILY

Fr. James Smith

# The Courage to Pray

St. James thinks that Christians don’t pray correctly. Here’s what one conservative expert on prayer thinks about us: “The most basic crisis facing the church today is that we have not learned to contemplate.” But he is not alone in his assessment. The editor of a liberal Catholic publication wrote: “Not one layperson in 100,000 has a really deep grasp of what contemplation and prayer are all about.”

We’re going to change that percentage right now. Prayer is not something you do once in a while, like going to a movie. Or even something you do regularly, like bathing. Prayer is a special way of looking at the world, a different view of reality, a certain way of living. Prayer is a three-dimensional vision that sees through everyday appearances to get to their inner meaning. Prayer is a way of living that includes the imponderable mysteries of life, thereby giving ordinary things extraordinary significance.

All of us probably want to pray and maybe think we could. If only we didn’t feel like foreigners visiting a strange country without knowing the language. So, the first requirement is to convince ourselves that it is worth the effort to learn the language. Because prayer, like language, is real only when it becomes a part of us.

Prayer is a very personal communication with God. God speaks first; we learn to listen day by day. You must be attentive: ready to hear; to follow. Personal prayer is very demanding: undivided attention, active faith, wholehearted consent. God does not love gently; God does not hide the truth.

And that’s a problem. When we seriously pray, we have to look at ourselves—and we feel God’s gaze

condemn the large or small evil in us. A popular book is titled: *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* The answer is inside: “Because you may not like who I am.” That’s why we are afraid to let anyone look too deeply inside us, even God. Along with Augustine, we pray: “Make me pure — or holy or honest or anything — but not right now.”

We lack the courage to face the searing contact of prayer. We sense that in prayer it is necessary to hand ourselves over, naked and unprotected. So we decide there is no hurry; better wait; death will be soon enough. But for the courageous people who try to pray, the tension between God and us lessens. As we begin to realize who we are (not much), God reveals who he is (pretty much). And when we see that open, defenseless God, we in turn become open. Just as we do all kind of crazy things with kids because we know they can’t hurt us, so we can get carefree with God, knowing that we are safe no matter how dangerous the conversation may get.

It takes a while for us to really trust that God won’t hurt us. It is only when we are completely honest and open with God that we can live what we believe. Because the Christian life is open-ended. There is no program, just infinite possibilities for good along the way. Along with infinite opportunities to deceive ourselves at any time.

So it is necessary to have gazed long and lovingly on God in order to have our wavering way sustained in critical times. We have to be convinced that our happiness lies in being closely connected with God, from whom all good things come. Prayer is the guarantee.