

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of June 9, 2024

Collect for Proper 5

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.** BCP 229

1 Samuel 8:4–11 (12–15) 16–20 (11:14–15) NRSVue, 2021

In our Hebrew Bible lesson the elders of Israel insist that the aging prophet Samuel anoint for them a king such as governed the surrounding nations. The biblical account refers to the military threat of the Philistines as the primary motivation for this request, but other pressures were likely at work as the tribal structure of Israelite society underwent change. God tells Samuel to consent to the request of the elders, but to make clear the cost involved in submission to the arbitrary power of a human monarch. Yet the people persist in their request and Samuel anoints Saul as king over them.

- 4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah
5 and said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”
6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD,
7 and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.
8 Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.
9 Now then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”
10 So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king.
11 He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots,
[12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.
13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.
14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.
15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.]

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- 16 He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work.
- 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.
- 18 And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you on that day.”
- 19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! We are determined to have a king over us,
- 20 so that we also may be like other nations and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”
- [14 Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.”
- 15 So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.]

Exploring 1 Samuel 8:4–11 (12–15) 16–20 (11:14–15)

1 Samuel. At one time, the first and second books of Samuel formed a single book. They were separated in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint (about 250 BC). 1 Samuel begins with the story of Samuel: hence the name. 1 Samuel is the first of four books which tell the story of Israel's monarchy. Samuel anointed the first king. We then read about King Saul, and later about David's rise to prominence.

Pastoral Perspective

By Marianne Blickenstaff

Since the time when Israel first became a nation, Israel had been a theocracy, a community guided and protected by [YHWH](#). They were set apart, distinctive from other nations, and they had no king as other nations did. Israel was led by various judges whom God raised up in times of need. These leaders included, among others, Moses, Miriam, Aaron, Deborah, Samson, Gideon, and Samuel, who served not as kings or queens but as mouthpieces for God as they arbitrated disputes, saw that justice was done, or led the people to victory over a threatening enemy.

As the narrative in today's lection opens, Samuel had given many years of service as a prophet and judge, and he was growing old. But like Eli's sons before him, his sons were not fit to be judges, because “they took bribes and perverted justice” ([8:3](#)). The elders of Israel feared that there was no one to replace Samuel, so they asked Samuel to give them a king.

No doubt the debate over the relative merits of theocratic and monarchic rule had been going on for some time among the Israelites, and the narrative of 1 Samuel 8 seems to have been written from the perspective of someone who saw the monarchy as inevitable but unnecessary. In the story leading up to the demand for a king, the narrator tells us that the Israelites rededicated themselves to God, and God intervened to spare them ([7:5–14](#)). The storyteller seems to be framing an unspoken question: “God's rule is more than sufficient, so why would Israel need a human king?”

Israel's desire to be like other nations is a clue to the rationale behind the request. Israel was constantly under threat of attack from other nations and had seen the advantages of having a centralized government to coordinate defense efforts and a permanent leader around whom they could rally ([8:20](#)).

Trusting God is difficult and, we must admit, impractical. Though we profess to be God-fearing people, only the most idealistic among us think it would be a good idea for our nation to lay down arms and trust that God will protect us. A pastor might want to explore these questions with the congregation: What does it mean to trust God? Is human government necessary? How do we balance divine providence and self-sufficiency? In a nation that separates church and state, what accountability do our leaders have to God, and what accountability do Christians have to secular society and government?

H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* explores the relationship between church and society, the peculiar conundrum that the church is called to be in but not of the world. To what degree should Christians settle in and conform to society, and to what extent should we stand apart and critique it? How do we balance these conflicting roles?

Being in an “already—not yet” situation is not easy. We are much more comfortable with absolutes. We want to be either here or there, not straddling the gulf. This must be the way the Israelites felt when they demanded a king to lead them. They were weary of their precarious position. They found it difficult to trust that God always would raise up a judge to lead them in their times of great need, especially since such protection depended on the people's faithfulness to the covenant, a very dubious guarantee. They thought it would be more practical to rely on the security of a king and a standing army ready to defend them. Who among us can blame them?

This certainly was not the first time Israel had questioned God, and it would not be the last. God tells Samuel to grant the people what they ask, but first to warn them: be careful what you wish for. Samuel describes how a human king will draft their sons and conscript their daughters for service in the palace. He will tax the people in the form of produce and livestock and give the best to his own courtiers and officers. Samuel warns, “You will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves” (8:11–18). This scenario may sound familiar in our own day and age in criticisms of our leaders' alleged excesses, privileges, and abuses of power.

Though the Bible recounts how Israel flourished under the reign of David, Samuel's warnings were proven correct, especially during the reign of Solomon, with his hundreds of wives and concubines, luxury imports, and building projects. The goods this kingly lifestyle required must have been a huge burden on the people.

In the end, the monarchy failed to bring long-lasting stability to the nation. After the glory days of David and Solomon, the monarchy began to disintegrate until the nation was split in two parts. Both Israel and Judah eventually would fall to foreign powers. The Israelites were scattered all over the world, and for centuries after, with brief respites, Israel was ruled by foreign kings. Even so, many of the exiled people still pinned their hopes on a king, someone in the line of David who would unite the people, overthrow foreign rulers, restore the land, and reestablish justice and righteousness. In the first century, many Jews believed they had found this messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus' followers still today profess his kingship. But Jesus did not bring an end to worldly injustice; Jesus' kingdom is not of this world.

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We are called to minister to the world and yet, at the same time, to be removed from the world. The pastor's role is to help God's people negotiate that liminal place of "already but not yet," somewhere between the secular and sacred, and to do so faithfully and with integrity.

"Pastoral Perspective (1 Samuel 8:4–11 (12–15), 16–20 (11:14–15))," in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays, vol. 28, Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1–5.

Psalm 138 NRSVue, 2021

A hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord on high who has saved God's servant and cares for the lowly.

- 1 I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;
- 2 I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name
for your steadfast love and your faithfulness,
for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.
- 3 On the day I called, you answered me; you increased my strength of soul.
- 4 All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD,
for they have heard the words of your mouth.
- 5 They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.
- 6 For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,
but the haughty he perceives from far away.
- 7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;
you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.
- 8 The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Exploring Psalm 138

Psalms is a collection of collections. The psalms were written over many centuries, stretching from the days of Solomon's temple (about 950 BC) to after the Exile (about 350 BC.) Psalms are of five types: hymns of praise, laments, thanksgiving psalms, royal psalms, and wisdom psalms. Within the book, there are five "books"; there is a doxology ("Blessed be ... Amen and Amen") at the end of each book.

Theological Perspective

By Rebecca Blair Young

One of the limitations of the English language is the slipperiness in the meaning of the word "pride." The positive form of pride finds expression in the synonyms dignity, self-worth, and self-esteem. However, there is also the pride of arrogance, egotism, and vanity. Psalm 138 speaks to both forms of pride. It has a clear message to practitioners of the latter form, and the message is not reassuring. Those who find their worth in God, however, have a right to pride by association. The psalm also differentiates between God's form of self-pride and that of human beings.

The psalmist begins the hymn with an expression of thanksgiving to God that infuses the emotions as well as the entirety of one's intellect and will. In other words, the act of thanksgiving itself is a form of submission to God. To reinforce this understanding of

thanksgiving as subjugation to God, the psalmist states that all the other lesser gods will be witness to the psalmist's act of praise. In the second verse, the submission of the heart and mind leads to an act of submission of the body, as the psalmist prostrates the body in homage to God. It is a physical as well as spiritual and intellectual yielding to YHWH.

Then the next verse speaks to the way in which God exalts Godself above all else. Being all-powerful, God has the right to pride in Godself as no one else does. Indeed, royalty throughout the world will recognize the greatness of the glory of YHWH. Not only will they praise God, but they will also sing about God's wonderful ways. Singing is a form of personal submission to God. Spoken words of praise can be repeated by rote without much feeling. Singing, however, requires an outpouring of one's breath, one's spirit, and one's wind (*ruach*) in a deeply felt form of adoration. Although one is hard-pressed to envision members of the House of Windsor bursting into spontaneous praise hymns, the image of contemporary monarchs revealing feelings of awe toward their Creator through music is a powerful one.

The psalmist praises God's great kindness and faithfulness, and declares that God is greater than all other gods and deserves the full adoration of the greatest peoples of the earth. Such praise is common from an appreciative underling toward an authority figure. The distinction comes when the psalmist turns to God's attitude toward that underling, and herein lies the heart of the psalm and its most intriguing message. This God is like no other in regard to the company God keeps.

The psalmist is clearly an ordinary person rather than royalty. The psalmist faces many troubles and has enemies with harmful intentions. In spite of this seemingly hopeless situation, the psalmist also knows that God is on the side of the common person. This fact is what makes God the greatest of all. Human leaders do not consort with *hoi polloi*, but God does. Most gods prefer to mingle with other gods, but YHWH reaches out to the poor and lowly. "Sublime as he is, Yahweh looks on the humble" (v. 6 NJB). Even more telling, God distances Godself from the proud and the haughty. God wants nothing to do with people who exalt themselves for their own sake.

With God on the side of ordinary people, they have justification to be prideful. God's act of hearkening to the psalmist's cry emboldened the psalmist to act "stormily, boisterously, arrogantly"[1] (*rahab*). This is a good kind of arrogance, because it is an arrogance that stems from having God paying heed and responding to the call of someone who is considered insignificant in worldly affairs. The God who is the subject of the songs of world leaders nonetheless makes time for the forgotten of this earth. Because of God's faithfulness, those forgotten folk can think highly of themselves. Not only can they think positively about themselves, but they can even act boldly and insolently, with flamboyance and fierceness.

[...]

Christians are proud in the knowledge of being exalted through the resurrection of the savior, Jesus Christ, who showed the ultimate sign of humility in Godself by becoming human. Fellowship with Christ in the Holy Spirit gives one the courage to boast, as Paul so eagerly declares. We remember, however, that the concept of God as one who stoops to the

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level of the poor of this earth is not exclusive to the New Testament, but has deep and solid roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, as is reflected in this rousing hymn of praise to YHWH. Knowing this consistent attribute of the Creator toward common folk grants one ample excuse for pride.

[1] Francis Brown, ed., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 923.

“Theological Perspective on Psalm 138,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 320–324.

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1 NRSVue, 2021

In this passage Paul speaks of the eternal and glorious hope that belongs to Jesus' disciples even in the midst of trouble and mortality. The apostle has just told of the difficulties that beset his ministry. These, however, have not prevented his preaching of the gospel. Now he quotes scripture to express his conviction that the belief of Christians can and must be proclaimed in all circumstances. Although our physical being is gradually decaying, we are inwardly being renewed in accordance with what is unseen and eternal.

- 13 But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I spoke”—we also believe, and therefore we also speak,
- 14 because we know that the one who raised Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us with you in his presence.
- 15 Indeed, everything is for your sake, so that grace, when it has extended to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.
- 16 So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.
- 17 For our slight, momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,
- 18 because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.
- 5:1 For we know that, if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Exploring 2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

2 Corinthians. This is a letter, written in the style common in the first century AD. From the text, we know that Paul wrote it in Macedonia after leaving Ephesus, probably in the autumn of 57 AD. It gives us a picture of Paul the person: an affectionate man, hurt to the quick by misunderstandings and evil-doing of his beloved fellow Christians, yet happy when he can praise them. The letter's prime intent is to combat evils which have arisen in the Christian communities in the Achaian peninsula of Greece.

Homiletical Perspective

By Mark Barger Elliott

In 1934 two heavyweights took a few intentional swings at each other—think of perhaps Muhammad Ali vs. George Foreman. The opponents were not professional boxers with gloves sparring in a ring but two testy European theologians, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, who traded jabs of the pen. At stake was determining once and for all the *Anknüpfungspunkt* (namely the “point of contact”) between God and human beings.

Emil Brunner believed the point of contact was located inside of us, while Karl Barth saw the point of contact as truly beyond us. To generalize many pages of argument, Brunner

believed there were echoes of Eden still inside our heart, soul, and mind, while Barth staunchly argued God was nothing like us, but instead distant and ultimately “other.”

In the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul suggests, amidst the travails of life and ministry, we can take comfort that a resurrected Christ lives inside of us. Like Brunner, Paul locates the *Anknüpfungspunkt* at first as inside rather than outside of us. He writes, “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

Bede Griffiths is a Benedictine monk who in his travels around the world asked various people of faith, “Where is God?” Hindus and Buddhists in the East, he discovered, would typically point to their heart while Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the West would point outside of themselves to the heavens.[1] A sermon on this passage might begin by asking a congregation to imagine where they believe the intersection occurs between God and their own life. Inside or outside? Up or down? A sermon could continue by delving deeper into the passage and reflecting on Paul’s claim that our inner nature is being renewed. This renewal will also eventually draw to a close when “the earthly tent we live in is destroyed” (5:1). Paul’s point is that at some point we will all die—that in time everything human will crumble and perish, whether it is a city, a home, or even our own life. In the face of our death, and the struggles of life and ministry, Paul then steers his readers to the hope found in “eternal” things. What does he mean? Like an inner nature grounded in a resurrected Christ, there also exists, says Paul, divinity “outside of us,” another reality to restore us, but one not easily seen. So we might say that if Bede Griffiths happened to meet Paul and asked his question, “Where is God,” Paul might have pointed at first to his heart, and then with his other hand to the world and the stars above.

When I ask people in a Sunday school class to describe their experience of God, they often begin by referencing moments they cannot fully explain but that somehow hint at a spiritual dimension in this world. Celtic Christianity describes such moments as “thin places.” I have found church members often describe them as coincidences or déjà vu.

In his book *The Sense of Being Stared At*, Rupert Sheldrake observes how some animals have a sixth sense. Sharks and birds, for example, have a magnetic sense to enable them to respond to the earth’s magnetic field. Sheldrake goes on to suggest human beings may not have this sixth sense, but have what he calls a seventh sense—a spiritual awareness that connects us to each other, to the world, and to the realm of the spirit. For example, he observes how a majority of us believe we have sensed people staring at us even though our backs were turned at the time. Sixty percent of us claim to have experienced telepathy. Sheldrake guides his readers to the skaters Jayne Torvill and Chris Dean, who dazzled us during the Olympics, and how, according to Dean, the reason they could skate together so fluidly and beautifully was telepathy. “There’s simply no other way to explain it,” says Dean. [2]

A sermon might ask: “Have you ever thought of someone right before the phone rang, and then heard that person’s voice? Have you ever woken up before the alarm rang? Or before your baby started to cry?” In our passage Paul seems to indicate that just as Elijah

heard a still, small voice, and Moses climbed a mountain to see God’s glory, we can discover God’s presence all around us—inside and out—if we have the eyes of the heart to see.

There is an old story about a disciple and his teacher, a story Paul might have liked. “Where shall I find God?” a disciple once asked. “Here,” the teacher said. “Then why can’t I see God?” “Because you do not look.” “But what should I look for?” the disciple continued. “Nothing. Just look,” the teacher said. “But at what?” “At anything your eyes alight upon,” the teacher said. “But must I look in a special kind of way?” “No, the ordinary way will do.” “But don’t I always look the ordinary way?” “No, you don’t,” the teacher said. “But why ever not?” the disciple pressed. “Because to look, you must be here. You’re mostly somewhere else,” the teacher said.

The Pauline theologian J. Christiaan Beker once summed up the canon of Paul’s thought as underscoring “the triumph of God.” Beker believed the triumph of God is discovered when we come to understand, “the Christian already lives in the dawning of God’s coming reign ... [and] since the coming of Christ and his victorious resurrection, suffering becomes all the more tolerable.”^[3] Perhaps Paul would have said both Brunner and Beker were right, that God’s presence and triumph is both internal and external—as the resurrected Christ renews us from the inside out, but also as God continues to birth in our midst, and before our very eyes, a new heaven and earth.

[1] Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart* (New York: New World Library, 2001), 79.

[2] Rupert Sheldrake, *The Sense of Being Stared At* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2003), 24.

[3] J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 366–67.

Mark 3:20-35 NRSVue, 2021

In our gospel lesson Jesus is accused of being possessed by the prince of demons. He responds by describing his battle against Satan and indicating that true relationship with him is based in the doing of God’s will. The passage suggests a certain separation between Jesus and his own relatives due to the intensity of his ministry. To those who charge him with doing good by the power of evil, Jesus answers with figures of speech—one implies that Jesus himself is the man who must first bind Satan before destroying his power. A warning is given not to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit—by which perhaps is meant calling good evil.

- 20 Then he went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.
- 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”
- 22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”
- 23 And he called them to him and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan?
- 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.
- 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.
- 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.

- 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.
- 28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter,
- 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin"—
- 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."
- 31 Then his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him.
- 32 A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you."
- 33 And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?"
- 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!
- 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Exploring Mark 3:20-35

Mark. As witnesses to the events of Jesus' life and death became old and died, the need arose for a written synopsis. Tradition has it that Mark, while in Rome, wrote down what Peter remembered. This book stresses the crucifixion and resurrection as keys to understanding who Jesus was. When other synoptic gospels were written, i.e. Matthew and Luke, they used the Gospel according to Mark as a source. Mark is most probably the John Mark mentioned in Acts 12:12: his mother's house was a meeting place for believers.

Theological Perspective

by Wendy Farley

One way to read this passage is as a drama portraying the difficulty of the discernment between good and evil. What the passage seems to say is that this discernment is not easy and that we often are siding with Satan when we think we are being faithful to God.

The setting is a house in which Jesus is attempting to eat dinner after a long day. The lectionary reading begins mid-sentence, recalling the huge, frenzied crowd of Jews and Gentiles desperate to get close to the man reported to possess power over sickness and demons. Jesus' family is on the way to the house in order to bring him home because they are afraid he is mad. The scribes from Jerusalem are also after him, believing him to be in league with Satan. Jesus responds to this accusation with a series of short images. The first set shows that something divided against itself cannot stand: a kingdom, a house, Satan himself. A second image, perhaps more opaque than the first, is about tying up a strong man in order to plunder his house. Jesus condemns his detractors in very strong terms. At this point, a message is conveyed that Jesus' mother and brothers are outside. Jesus responds with a chilling rejection: they are not my family. Looking around him at the crowd of misfits, crazies, and his relentlessly undiscerning disciples he says, "This is my family." (In Mark's Gospel, the disciples almost always get it wrong, up to the last sentence when the women, who alone have seemed to understand Jesus, run away in terror.)

It is easy to identify with the family and with the scribes. The "family values" agenda defends strong, traditional families and attributes their defense to a biblical perspective. It

is also natural to identify with church authorities. If we are preaching in a church or sitting on committees, choosing hymns, organizing Sunday school and potlucks we are part of the church authority. Christianity usually puts Christ at the base of these structures and uses his authority to bolster theirs. But this story demands a different perspective, because it is these very people that are condemned for failing to recognize who Jesus is.

It is disturbing to consider that these authorities are not evil. They are committed to maintaining domestic and religious life in the midst of troubled times. And yet from Jesus' perspective these familiar and essentially benign institutions are beyond the pale of his ministry. It is an odd feature of Jesus' ministry that he is open to everybody: Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the demented, the sick, working class, women, tax collectors, sexual outcasts. The only people who provoke Jesus' intolerance are his family and the normal, law-abiding scribes. The ones closest to him, his family and those who are—like him!—dedicated to a life of piety, are those that are also farthest from him. They are least able to make the leap from dedication to religion to openhearted love of God's beloved, disfigured humanity. For these people, Jesus' disordered love of humanity feels like falling off a cliff into chaos best symbolized by the demonic or insanity. The passage displays the difficulties of telling madness and evil from the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit and implies that it is especially difficult for domestic and ecclesial authorities. Though the text does not give many clues about what precisely the good news is, it is embedded in a series of stories about healing, the hostility that this healing generates, and Jesus' anger and frustration over this hostility.

If we transpose this theological vision into our own time, instead of lepers and demoniacs crowding around Jesus, we might see the strange bodies of the disabled. We might see soldiers with three-fourths of their bodies burned from a fire in Iraq or other soldiers in prison reflecting on the horrors they witnessed and committed. We might see legless Afghan or Palestinian children. We might see a group of men reeking of cigarettes and coffee at an AA meeting. We might see a lesbian mother with a baby on her hip and gay men holding hands or holding their adopted child. We might see scruffy members of a mining community singing old-time hymns. When we think about who is near Jesus, it is not the morally perfect. It is just the diverse mess of humanity, with all of its moral, physical, spiritual beauty and imperfection. The only ones not in the picture, the ones not pressing in at the doors and windows, desperate and aching to be near Jesus, are the ones who think they know what religion and family life is supposed to look like. Jesus, infinitely patient with the crowd, blasts away at these people. Everyone will be forgiven, except people who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. The inability to tell the difference between the power of the Holy Spirit and the demonic is an unforgivable sin.

For most of us, this is pretty bad news. Like the Jews of the first century, we live in troubled times and try our best to figure out how to be faithful. The Holy Spirit is wild and disturbing and comes to us in unfamiliar forms. Is same-sex love a breeze from the Holy Spirit or a sign of a disintegrating society? Are feminine images of the divine crazy, demonic, or healing? What if we make the wrong discernment? Perhaps if we pay attention to the theme of healing that runs through these stories, we might find a way to

orient ourselves. It was the desire for healing that drew people to Jesus. Perhaps if we had compassion for our own wounds and the wounds of others, we might find ourselves in the crowd devoted to Jesus, instead of in the “legitimate” family that Jesus rejects.

Bibliographical and Contributor Information

Unless otherwise noted, the Introductions to the readings come from *Introducing the Lessons of the Church Year, Third Edition* by Frederick Borsch, and George Woodward. (New York; Harrisburg, PA; Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

Bible verses are from: *New Revised Standard Version: Updated Edition*. Friendship Press, 2021, unless otherwise noted.

[Book Outlines](#) are from [Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary](#) website maintained by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal.

Unless otherwise noted, the commentaries are from: David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B. Vol. 3*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

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Odds & Ends

Track 1 and Track 2 Readings

From Sunday, June 2, 2024 through Sunday, November 24, 2024 we will use the **Track 2 readings**.

During the long green season after Pentecost, there are two tracks (or strands) each week for Old Testament readings. Within each track, there is a Psalm chosen to accompany the particular lesson. The Revised Common Lectionary allows us to make use of either of these tracks, but once a track has been selected, it should be followed through to the end of the Pentecost season, rather than jumping back and forth between the two strands.

The first track of Old Testament readings (“Track 1”) follows major stories and themes, read mostly continuously from week to week. In Year A we begin with Genesis, **in Year B we hear some of the great monarchy narratives**, and in Year C we read from the later prophets. (*We are in Year B this year*).

A second track of readings (“Track 2”) follows the Roman Catholic tradition of thematically pairing the Old Testament reading with the Gospel reading, often typologically—a sort of foretelling of Jesus Christ’s life and ministry, if you will. This second track is almost identical to our previous Book of Common Prayer lectionary.

Within each track there may be additional readings, complementary to the standard reading; these may be used with the standard reading, or in place of it.

Credit to The Rev Dr. J. Barrington Bates and quoted from [The Lectionary Page](#).

Blaspheming the Holy Spirit*by Diane Roth**It's the "unforgivable" part that gets me. How can there be an unforgivable sin?*

Jesus continued, "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin" Mark 3:28-29

It's the unforgivable sin, according to the gospel reading from Mark....

I remember reading the gospel at the early service that day, out on the lawn, and when I got to this part, I saw one man near the front row raise his eyebrows. I'm not sure if he raised his eyebrows at the part about "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" or about "the unforgivable sin," or if it was a combination of the two. But my immediate thought was, "I should have preached about this. People are going to wonder about it."

Preachers, does this ever happen to you? You think you have listened to the Holy Spirit during the week, and as you are reading the gospel, or one of the readings, or as you begin your sermon, you look out at a particular face, and sometimes you even know a story about what that person is struggling with, and you think, I should have preached on this.

I remember thinking about it when I was preparing the week before. There was plenty to wrestle with in the story, plenty to think about, from "family values" to "a house divided," and of course, "blaspheming the Holy Spirit." Back during my dalliance with the Pentecostals, this was one of the verses they liked to talk about, since it highlighted the importance of the Holy Spirit. You can even say bad things about Jesus, and he'll forgive you -- but don't say anything bad about the Holy Spirit! That's what my Pentecostal friends said. So there was a lot of speculation about what "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" would actually look like.

Actually, though, as a Lutheran, it's the "unforgivable" part that gets me. How can there be an unforgivable sin? Confession and absolution is a non-negotiable part of the liturgy for me. And you notice that we always say, "In the name of Jesus, I forgive you some of your sins"? Oh, you notice that we don't say that? We say ALL of your sins. Because we believe that words have power, and that the Word has power, and that when I say "your sins are forgiven," Jesus has bound the strong man and thrown him out.

You know what I think the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is?

It is to believe that there is any sin that God can't forgive.

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