



THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 40:1-11 ~ Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
2 Peter 3:8-15a ~ Mark 1: 1-8

C. Clifton Black

*Through the discipline
of intracanonical
interpretation,
the Spirit may help us
to hear and
to preach scripture
stereophonically.*



As a member of a seminary faculty, I preach less regularly than my colleague Steve Bauman and many other readers of *Circuit Rider*. When I do preach, my besetting temptation is to overwhelm unsuspecting congregations with whatever has exercised me since my last trip to the pulpit. For that reason, I find *The Revised Common Lectionary* (1992) a salutary bridle on my enthusiasms. Never more so than during the great seasons of the church year, the lectionary stands as a steadying reminder that every preacher is John the Baptist, who was not the light but came bearing testimony to the light (John 1:6-8).

Often, however, none of a Sunday's lections leaps from the page, demanding to be proclaimed. When that happens, the assigned Gospel lesson is usually my default-setting; consequently, I collude with other preachers I know in offering worshippers an unbalanced biblical diet. At other times I face an embarrassment of riches, wishing I could interpret all of that Sunday's lections while realizing that no assembly of listeners could possibly tuck away so much scripture at once without suffering indigestion or exhaustion. What is a preacher to do?

One approach that I take is what a friend calls my "posthole strategy": boring through the strata of all the lections for a given Sunday, in pursuit of common theological themes or issues that permeate the lessons. Such a maneuver isn't always feasible—especially during the season after Pentecost, for which the compilers of the lectionary have coordinated semi-continuous readings through Old Testament books and Epistles. During this Ordinary Time, lectionary connections will be purely coincidental, if they exist at all. But for the liturgical year's major feasts and fasts—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—the posthole method works tolerably well. The reason for this is the tendency of the ecumenical Consultation on Common Texts, in which The United Methodist Church participates, to follow scripture's own lead by constructing its lectionary with a high degree of intracanonical resonance.

To demonstrate how such an approach might work, let us consider the lections assigned for the Second Sunday of Advent in Year B: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8. I usually begin with the passages as demarcated in the lectionary, while reserving the right to modify their boundaries if I come to disagree exegetically with the abridgements made. Typically I turn first to the psalm, if for no reason other than to tune my ear to the key of doxology: wherever my search through scripture leads, my sermon will be in support of God's praise—the fundamental reason for worship on that and every other Sunday. This week I am not disappointed: Psalm 85 is one of Israel's magnificent laments, blessing the LORD for God's limitless favor, forgiveness, and salvation. The personification in verses 10-11 is particularly beautiful:

Faithfulness and truth meet;
justice and well-being kiss.
Truth springs up from the earth;
justice looks down from heaven
(NJPS).

Those couplets offer themselves for possible recitation in my sermon. Such quotation—with little exposition, or none at all—can create in my listeners a memory-link with the psalm, which earlier in the service they will have spoken or sung.

Whenever I spot an ellipsis in a lection, especially within a psalm, my antennae stretch northward. Often such textual cuts signal skittishness among the lectionary's compilers: scripture has made them nervous. I turn to verses 3-7 of Psalm 85: sure enough, these couplets beg God to put away anger. Whether or not

that plea returns in my sermon, I leave open the possibility of restoring these verses to their proper place, when the congregation recites the psalm. God's wrath may reappear in another of this Sunday's lections. We are, after all, in Advent: a season bristling with apocalyptic imagery and the inescapable reality of God's just judgment.

From here, I normally move to the Old Testament lesson. This Sunday, however, the Epistle reading is less familiar to me, so I turn to 2 Peter 3:8-15a. On reflection, it strikes me that 2 Peter 3 turns Psalm 85 inside-out. The Psalmist leans heavily on God's forbearance, still reminding Israel that reverent fear is due the LORD of hosts. "Peter" emphasizes the catastrophe of the Day of the Lord—the heavenly roar, cosmic conflagration, terrestrial meltdown—while assuring his anxious church that the delay of Christ's return is itself a measure of God's patient hope for humanity's repentance. Both Psalm 85:11 and 2 Peter 3:13 arrive at a comparable promise: the renewal of heaven and earth by God's righteousness. The terrors embedded in the Epistle lesson prevent us from romanticizing the psalm and locate Christian conduct—"spotless, irreproachable, and at peace"—along a horizon of no-nonsense sobriety.

*The terrors
embedded
in the Epistle
lesson prevent
us from
romanticizing
the psalm*

With relief, I turn to Isaiah 40 and its incomparable consolation of Israel in exile: "Comfort, O comfort my people." The prophet is anything but glib. The LORD's highway requires bulldozing; our life fades with the wildflower. To be gathered gently as lambs in the Shepherd's bosom is to identify ourselves with sheep: a breed not known for its intelligence. It is God alone who expiates our sin. Our confidence lies entirely in the hands of

God, "whose word shall stand forever" (v. 8). Across thousands of years—which for the Lord is but a single day (2 Pet 3:8)—that word, ever-fulfilled, rings out once more from John, the desert-rat: preaching repentance, baptizing scores in the Jordan for the forgiveness of sins, getting the Lord's way ready, heralding one who comes with holy Spirit (Mark 1:1-8). Arriving again in Advent's Judean

wilderness by way of the lectionary's map, the baptizer's own sermon resounds with a depth and clarity to which I have often been deaf.

If I have been listening for a theme that runs through all these lections, by now it has surfaced and is epitomized (I think) in Isaiah 40:8: *God's promise of salvation will stand forever.*

Have the people of God practiced iniquity? Truly God has blotted out their sins; God's help is very near the penitent (Ps 85:2, 9).

Do we live on the cusp of ferocious disaster? Reckon our Lord's patience as merciful salvation; grow in the blessing and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom be glory now and unto ages of ages (2 Pet 3:9-15a, 18).

Are we in exile, yearning for the end of our tour of duty and the chance to go home? Behold your God, who comes in might and in tenderness (Isa 40:2, 9-11).

What's the news, and is it good? Yes—the Messiah is coming, mightier than all, who will cleanse us with holy Spirit (Mark 1:1-8). Whatever our circumstances have been or will be, nothing can stop God from restoring us. That promise, steering Israel and the church throughout countless generations,

embraces us, too, and will never let go.

I have a theme; it is biblically grounded; it apparently pervades this Sunday's lections. *I do not yet have a sermon.* Nor can I, without more extensive exegesis (first) of those who will hear this word and (second) of the scripture with which I hope to marry that congregation. To answer the first question requires pastoral acumen.

Who are the people to whom I am preaching?

Where are they this Sunday?

To where, so far as the Spirit gives me the light to discern, is God calling them to move?

Since all among my listeners are not in precisely the same place, I must dig another posthole, penetrating those different levels of need and maturity through which the preached word will reach. I'll make a judgment call, based on my perception of a particular parish on this specific Sunday, which will probably direct me to one of the four lections I have studied. That lesson will give me the focus I need to translate a scriptural movement into a sermon with point and vitality.

Rarely, if ever, will I attempt to give equal time in a single sermon to four different biblical texts. Use of the lectionary has never mandated such a frantic juggling act. Neither shall I be enslaved, or shackle my parishioners, to any tool or technique; "[we] have been called to freedom" (Gal 5:13). But through the discipline of intracanonical interpretation, the Spirit may help us to hear and to preach scripture stereophonically. □

Note: For theological consideration of the approach described here, see C. Clifton Black, "Journeying through Scripture with the Lectionary's Map," *Interpretation* 56/1 [January, 2002] 59-72.)

C. Clifton Black is Otto A. Piper Professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary and an elder in The United Methodist Church. He contributed the commentary on 1, 2, & 3 John in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 8) and his commentary on Mark in the *Abingdon New Testament Commentary* is forthcoming.

