

Easter Vigil

Genesis 1:1-2, 4a; Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26; Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13; Psalm 46; Genesis 22:1-18; Psalm 16; Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21; Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18; Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12:2-6; Prov. 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6; Psalm 19; Ezek. 36:24-28; Psalms 42-43; Ezek. 37:1-14; Psalm 143; Zeph. 3:14-20; Psalm 98; Romans 6:3-11; Psalm 114; Mark 16:1-8.

The Easter Vigil is to Easter what the Christmas Eve service is to Christmas. It is that worship which is on the cusp of that most important of holy days to the church that anticipates the very coming of that day. But, although it is not observed by most Protestant churches, the Easter Vigil is far more important a liturgical day than is Christmas Eve.

The worship of the Church, of course, centers around Easter. Each liturgical year, the church has gone through a long period of preparation for its Easter celebration, starting with Lent, moving toward Passion Sunday and Palm Sunday, and then by the movement through the entirety of Holy Week, finally culminating in the Easter Vigil as the church approaches the sunrise that marks the beginning of the celebration of Easter. Likewise, the church participates in activity following its celebration of Easter as it moves through the seven Sundays of Eastertide (including Easter day) and on to the celebration of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit and finally into Trinity Sunday. Thus, in the liturgical calendar, nearly half the year is occupied with the centrality of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the stranglehold of death. And the Easter Vigil is the final preparation for the coming of Easter day itself!

The Easter Vigil is one of the oldest of Christian celebrations, and has taken a number of forms over the millennia. In the ancient church, the catechumens (those desiring to confess faith in Christ and to join the church) had gone through months of preparation for the ritual of baptism and reception into the church which would happen at the Easter Vigil; they would thus receive their first communion at the Mass (or Eucharist) that would occur on that Saturday night-early Sunday morning. Consequently, the service would be held late at night, so that both their actual baptism and then the subsequent Eucharist would be celebrated after midnight (when, theoretically, the next day began) or as close to the break of day as possible, so that the sky began lightening to dawn at the completion of the Eucharist. The Easter Vigil would also serve as a celebration of the whole of the gospel, so that salvation history would be shared from the scripture from the creation story in Genesis to the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel accounts. This meant that the Easter Vigil was a worship of three or more hours as the biblical stories were read, hymns sung and prayers said, the catechumens would declare their faith and each be individually baptized, and then the entire congregation would conclude this worship with the Eucharist in which these newest members of the church would participate for the first time.

Because of the length of the service and because of the lateness of the hour, it was inevitable that the Easter Vigil would be moved earlier and earlier into Saturday. Thus, in the Western Church, it was moved to late Saturday afternoon in the 10th century (so that the Eucharist was taken at sunset), then to the morning of Holy Saturday by the 14th century. The Eastern Church, on the other hand, remained steadfast to the Saturday night/Sunday earliest morning worship. Since 1950, the celebration of the Easter Vigil has gradually been restored to its late Saturday night/early Sunday morning time.

The celebration of the Easter Vigil is quite varied today. Some churches of the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions continue to hold a full Easter Vigil service, including the baptism of catechumens, the celebration of the Mass, the presentation of a sermon or homily and an extensive telling of salvation history through a service of lessons and carols/prayers; these services last three or more hours. The scriptures on which we have written expositions for the Easter Vigil consists of the 21 lessons that would be used in this three-hour service. In any Easter Vigil that uses some combination of the lectionary scriptures that are traditionally used within it, a minimum of three Old Testament lessons should be used (not counting the Psalms), one of which should be the Exodus 14 passage.

If Protestant churches celebrate the Easter Vigil at all, most would do so by a significantly-shortened service of lessons and prayers or by the substitution of an Easter Sunrise Service (see the scriptures below or on Easter Day for appropriate scripture for an Easter Sunrise Service). But there has been a slowly-growing movement within Protestant Christianity to reclaim the Easter Vigil.

Genesis 1:1-4a begins salvation history. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the water. Then God said, “Let there be light”, and there was light. And God saw that the light was good”.

In the first creation story (Genesis 1), God creates the world in six days and rests on the seventh, thereby establishing a day of Sabbath rest and the entire concept of the sabbatical after having brought order out of chaos. The first four verses of Genesis 1 recite for us God’s work on the first of those six days of creation.

When scripture deals with the creative work of God, it stresses that God created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) (cf. John 1:3; Heb. 11:3; II Peter 3:5). But in the first verses of Genesis 1, the emphasis falls on God’s progressive ordering of the world, not out of nothing, but out of formlessness, chaos and emptiness.

The first verse of the Bible can be translated “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (KJV, RSV). But it can also be translated with equal legitimacy, “In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth” (NRSV, NJPS). Whatever way the translator wishes to translate this verse, it is describing creation as a “soup” of chaos and darkness, with no form, purpose or order to it. The six-day work of creation undertaken by God described in Genesis 1, then, is that of God bringing order and restraint out of chaos (Psalm 104:5-9). Creation is thus understood as ordering, as imposing a design on formlessness and chaos.

This scripture then goes on to describe God as hovering or brooding over this chaos, like an immense eagle covering the chaos with its outstretched wings and, step-by-step, making this chaos into a habitation for human beings. That work of creation occurs in six steps, each step following exactly the same pattern, as follows:

? Creation occurs through the word; “God said”

? A command is used from God:	“Let there be . . .”
? What was commanded happens:	“And it was so”.
? An evaluation occurs:	“It was good.”
? A chronology is stated:	“The first day”.

This scripture lessons records only the creation that occurs on the first day. The primordial “soup” of chaos is lightless and landless. It is unordered and unfilled. God thus speaks to it, “Let there be light”, light is created and that light separates itself from the brooding darkness. “And God saw that the light was good”. “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day!”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” St. John declares (John 1:1). The Word was God. It is the word of God that speaks the universe, the earth, and all its creatures into being. What is presented in the First Creation Story is a recital of the process of creation that bears amazing correlation with the discoveries of science of the order by which the universe, the earth and all that lives upon it were formed.¹ That becomes truly amazing when one realizes that this creation story was written more than 3,000 years ago.

But what is unique about the Creation Story is that it concentrates not upon the process but the Actor. God spoke the creative instruction (“Let there be light”). And *then* it happened! The text doesn’t tell us how it happened. It simply states that it happened. The point is that the author of the First Creation Story tells us that God spoke the word – God ordered the creation – and it was so! And because it was so, it was deemed “good”! Creation didn’t occur by happenstance, but by the acted-out Word of God. The universe, the solar system, the earth, all life upon the earth is all God-breathed. “The spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (1:2). “And God saw that it was good!”

Essentially, what the first chapter of Genesis presents to the reader is the reality that the work of God is the work of creating order out of chaos, habitation out of formlessness. God is at work ordering a new world so that all creation will praise Him and will share in the world God created as God intended it to be – humanity living in relationship with God and each other, acting justly in public life and perceiving all wealth as a gift continuously being given by the creative God to guarantee that there are no poor. Thus, from its very origins, the biblical message is one of God always at work creating the world and shaping humanity into his image. That is the “theophany” or “manifestation” that God would bring upon this world that he chose, with his word, to create.

Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26 is obviously meant to be recited out loud as a litany of thanksgiving. The refrain in it, “for his steadfast love endures forever”, follows every statement of God’s action, so that each statement and refrain becomes a small confession of faith – all of the confessions then welling up into a single hymn of praise to God. The statements that make up this lesson deal with creation and God’s mercy to us.

¹ E.g., <http://cset10.physUtk.edu/astr162/lect/cosmology/hotbb.htm>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiw/BigBang>; Lee Smolin, *the Life of the Cosmos* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997); Freeman J. Dyson, *A Many Colored Glass* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007); particularly the research done on the evolution of the universe from radiation to matter.

Before looking at these confessions of faith, however, we need to take a moment to dwell on the refrain. A significant Hebrew word is used each time in this refrain, the word *chesedh* (pronounced with a throat-clearing “ghead-said”) which is translated into the English “steadfast love”. What is it about God’s person or character that “endures forever”?

There is no single English word that is the equivalent of the Hebrew word, *chesedh*. Therefore, it can only be translated by using several English words in tandem that are closest to the Hebrew. Consequently, the English words most often used to approximate *chesedh* are “loving kindness” or (as in this Psalm), “steadfast love”. *Chesedh* is primarily used in Scripture to refer to God’s love for us. It is God’s redeeming love, unconditional love, totally embracing love that is directed toward us in spite of how we respond, and is against all logic and even against all dignity. It is very comparable (but not identical to) the New Testament understanding of “grace”. Thus, in Psalm 136, the Psalmist is describing God’s action toward us and the creation itself as an unconditional and grace-filled act of love that requires no response from us in order for it to occur. This is simply “God-in-action”, whether the object of his action is the creation itself or us as God’s people.

The first part of the scripture lesson deals with God’s work in creation. “O give thanks to the Lord; for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever:

who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever; who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever; who spread out the earth on the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever; who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever; the sun to rule the day, for his steadfast love endures forever; the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever” (vss. 1-9).

The psalmist both thanks and praises God. The two words are similar but not identical. To give thanks is to express gratitude for some gift, act or consideration given to the thankful one (e.g., “the sun to rule the day”). To praise is simply to celebrate or to glorify one simply for who he is, not for what he can do for us (e.g., “O give praise to the God of gods”). The first thanks and praise are given for God’s work of creation in bringing order out of chaos, the earth, waters, sun, moon and stars out of the undifferentiated “soup” of the initial creation. All of this act of creation – even if there had been no human to ever see it – was a manifestation of the unconditional, spontaneous love of God.

The second part of this psalm (vss. 10-22) is not included in this lesson. But it is equally strategic. The psalmist gives thanks to God, not only for his creative “chesedh”, but because of his liberating (and therefore, redemptive, “chesedh”). God rescued Israel from Egyptian slavery, brought them into the wilderness where he fashioned them into a people, and then brought them into the Promised Land. And this God did, not because Israel deserved such treatment, “for you were the most insignificant of all peoples; but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:7b-

8). Thus, God's "chesedh" is not only God's act of creation, but God's act of liberation and redemption. And why does God so act toward you undeserving people? Simply because God loves you. And why does he love you? Because he loves you!

Now the Psalmist moves to the third section of the psalm. "It is God who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever; and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever; who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever" (136:23-26). God's "chesedh" is at work, not only through the creation of the world or the redemption of God's people. God's "chesedh" is at work each day, as God stands against injustice in our society, works to minister to us "in our low estate" and to motivate us to deal with our own situation. For God is the God who cares, who has compassion for us and who is delighted when we respond in love to Him!

Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18; 8:6-18; 9:8-13 really is three passages that are profoundly linked to each other. Let's look at them separately and together.

Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18 is the well-known story of Noah and his escape from the flood that covered the earth and wiped out all life. It begins, "Then the Lord said to Noah, 'Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground'" (vss. 1, 4). Thus it was that Noah brought into the ark with him not only his extended family but pairs of animals – both domestic and wild, clean and unclean, "and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind" (vs. 14b). And "the flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark and it rose high above the earth. And the ark floated on the face of the waters" (vss. 17-18).

There is no story in the Bible that captures the imagination and interest (and perhaps the dread of chaos) as does the story of Noah and the Flood. It not only captivated the Jews for 3,000 years and us, today (witness the number of stories on the History and National Geographic channels on the flood), but it captivated much of the ancient world, as well.

The flood story of the Hebrews shared a flood tradition among most ancient Near East societies, as well as other cultures around the world; thus, we read flood stories very similar to the Noah story in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, the *Tablets of Sumar* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. But the flood story of the Bible is profoundly different than the other Near East story in one respect. All the others are essentially adventure stories, telling of the fortune or misfortune of its hero. The biblical account, on the other hand, is a morality play! It deals with God's intervention in a world that has departed thoroughly from God's intention realized by God's act of creation. Humanity is destroyed because of their refusal to act justly, to love each other tenderly, and to walk humbly with their God. Further, this story tells of the salvation of one family from the waters of punishment in order to beget a new race of humanity. It is a story of God's call to and selection of one man and his family, and of that man's obedient response to that call. Therefore, the biblical story is a morality tale rather than an adventure story!

The story begins by introducing the protagonist. “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God” (6:9). Only two others in the book of Genesis are called “righteous” – Enoch who was so in relationship with God that he did not die but was translated into heaven (5:24) and Abram/Abraham (17:1), the progenitor of Israel. The Hebrew word translated “righteous” (*tsedeq*) can equally be translated “just”, because the word has about it not the sense of moral fastidiousness but rather of acting justly, equitably and compassionately toward humanity and of being in a covenantal relationship with God. The implication of the word is that one is living in obedience to God’s call and thus is following God’s moral standards in one’s commitment to humanity.

The “antagonist” – humanity – is also introduced as “corrupt” and “lawless”, continually breaking covenant with God, acting unjustly and greedily toward humanity, and corrupting the earth itself (6:11-12). Now, God must act to bring judgment upon that humanity, and yet to seek its redemption through Noah. How will God do it?

“And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence (*hamas* or “lawlessness”) because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark” (6:13-14a)! And the saga begins!

God’s instructions to Noah are threefold. First, he is to build the ark to the specifications God gives to him (6:14-16). Second, he is to gather “your sons, your wife, your son’s wives and two of every kind of living thing into the ark” (6:19-21), awaiting “a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life” (6:17).

Third, in this act, Noah, his family and the innocent beasts of the earth will ride out the flood, and will become the progenitors of a new world. Their survival will be the indication that “I will establish my covenant with you” (6:18a), “that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (9:11, 13).

The text then tells us, “Noah did this: he did all that God commanded him”. And “the flood of waters came upon the earth” (6:22; 7:6).

Genesis 8:6-18. “All the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. And the waters swelled (or “poured forth”) on the earth” (7:11, 24).

What is described here is not simply an enormous storm or even the breaking of a breach with accumulated waters flooding the flood zone. What is described here is all hell breaking loose! It is the disintegration of the world. The description of the flood (e.g., “fountains of the great deep” and “windows of the heavens”) is a direct reference to Genesis 1:6-9. On that second day of creation, God commanded, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters” so that “dry land appear” (1:6, 9). Out of the chaos of interstellar space described in Genesis 1:1-8, the chaotic “soup” of creation had to be in some way “tamed” by God’s word if a planet were to emerge. Therefore, the Hebrews believed that god created a dome which spread over the world. Much as does a soup bowl, when being washed upside down

in a larger bowl, create an air pocket that separates the waters” above that soup bowl from the waters “under” that bowl, so the Hebrews envisioned the primeval “dry land” emerging. It is that perspective to which the writer of Genesis 1 is referring as he presents the rationale for the creation of dry land out of the “soup” of universal watery chaos.

Now, in the flood description, the author envisions that dome disintegrating so that the chaotic waters held at bay above that dome over the earth, and the waters below the earth also held at bay by the earth suddenly break through. Thus, the waters that formerly were above the dome and the waters formerly below the earth meet in a great avalanche of water that obliterates all life (save Noah, his family and animals safe in the ark) from the earth. Thus, humanity’s lust for power, wealth, and domination of the earth and even of God comes to an end with God’s action that reverses God’s great work of creation and destroys all that God had previously made.

“At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent out the raven and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth” (8:6-7). The rains stop. The flood ceases. And after 150 days after the flood stopped, Noah peaks out the trap door of the ark and decides to send forth a raven, which only returns. A dove likewise returns. But then, one day, the dove returns with an olive leaf; the flood was draining from the earth!

“And Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying. In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, ‘Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons’ wives with you. Bring out with you every living being that is with you of all flesh – birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth – so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth’. So Noah went out with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. And every animal, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out of the ark by families” (8:14-19). Thus, Noah and his family leave the ark, as do all the creatures. But what will God now do to restore his world – and humanity with it?

Genesis 9:8-13 is the story of the covenant that was made between God and Noah after the flood that had destroyed the remainder of humanity. This, one of the earliest covenants in the Bible, was God’s promise to Noah that he would never again destroy the world through a flood.

Covenants were the essential vehicle used throughout the scripture by which God came into agreement with God’s people. A covenant was a solemn promise made by one or both members of the agreement that bound that person to that agreement. It was the formal act, usually with some symbolic action, that obligated each to the other – and sometimes had dire consequences resulting from the breaking of that covenant. God covenanted often with Israel and the Church. This covenant between God and Noah was one of the earliest covenants found in the Bible.

The terms of this covenant as stated in Genesis 9:8-17 is (1) it is initiated, drawn up and ensured by God; (2) it is an eternal covenant, never to be dissolved; (3) God made this covenant with the entire human race and every form of animal life; (4) its aim is to protect all life from destruction. It is therefore an ecological covenant, proclaiming that it will not be God who brings destruction again to the earth. Rather, if the world is ever destroyed, it will be by the irresponsible hands of humans, acting out of greed, a lust for power and the perception of humans as being supreme and

not God. The rainbow was given as the symbolic action that it would not be God who would destroy this planet.

The Easter Vigil is the traditional time for the baptizing of catechumens on their confession of faith in Christ, and their reception into the life of the church. The covenant with Noah has a great deal to do with baptism. Every covenant that God made with God's people had a symbolic action or a sign that was used to remind both God and the people of both the making of that covenant and the obligation inherited by embracing that covenant. As the symbol of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow, so the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision (Gen. 17:11), of the Mosaic covenant was the Sabbath (Exod. 31:13, 17), of the Davidic covenant was David's offspring (II Sam. 7:11-16) and of the New Covenant made through Jesus were the sacraments of the Eucharist (Lk. 22:20) and Baptism (I Pet. 3:18-22). Thus, the first and the last covenants are inextricably linked by water. As it was a flood that took away life in Noah's flood, so it will be a flood (baptism) that announces life. The waters announce birth into the covenant community and acceptance of God's grace upon the one baptized. As baptism symbolizes the initiation of the catechumens into the community of faith, so the receding waters of the flood symbolized new life to Noah and a new beginning for the human family. All are linked together through the waters of baptism!

Psalm 46 deals with God's defense of Jerusalem (and therefore, by implication, any city) and its people. The psalm's opening lines describe God's commitment to the city and its inhabitants.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult" (46:1-2).

The Psalmist declares that God will be "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble", even in the midst of the most violent of earthquakes or even of a tsunami caused by that earthquake. God is with us, protecting us and providing refuge to us, no matter how cataclysmic nature or human disaster might be.

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge" (vss. 4-7).

The mood of the Psalm suddenly shifts. Whereas verses 1-3 were describing chaos and mass destruction, the image of verses 4-7 is tranquil and subdued. "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of god." Here, the city or "the holy habitation" of God is described as at peace, fecund from the river, an oasis of tranquility and rest. And the reason why is clear to the Psalmist. "God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns" (46:5). The very presence of God in the midst of the city causes it to be tranquil and at peace.

Suddenly, the mood shifts for the third time, as if an orchestra is playing a great work which alternates between storm and peace. “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts” (vs. 6). Even when the city is in turmoil and struggle, either from natural catastrophe or human war, “the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vs. 7).

Now, into the third stanza, the conflict continues:

“Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vss. 8-11)

God brings desolation and destruction. But God also brings peace, security and tranquility. “He makes wars cease; he breaks the bow; he burns the shields.”

Then the Psalm enters into its final moment of meditation and peace with what are some of the most profound and most quoted words from the psalms, second only to the 23rd Psalm.

“Be still and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth” (vs. 10).

These are not the words of the Psalmist in this text. These are the words spoken by God! And they are God’s only lines in this psalm. This is God’s instruction to us: “Don’t fret. Don’t become anxious. Do not fear. Simply be silent and let your heart and your emotions be still. Allow yourself to be at peace before God”.

And why? Because, in the final analysis, God is in charge – in charge of the earth, of your city, of all the nations of the world. You can leave the world in God’s hands; you don’t have to manage anything. And you need be responsible only for that to which God has called you to be about in your ministry.

Therefore, the Psalmist concludes, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (vs. 11)!

Genesis 22:1-18 is one of the most shocking, troubling and yet admired stories in the Bible – Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Isaac had inherited the place of the eldest son – the one through whom God “would make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted” (Gen. 13:16), the one through whom “all the nations of the earth would be blessed” (12:2-3).

But now comes this most improbable story. The way for Isaac to be *the* progenitor of Israel had now been established. The future of the covenant made between God and Abraham had been served by the birth of Isaac. But now God is acting in what seems to be the most illogical way – a way that jeopardizes everything! God commanded, “Take your son, your only son Isaac,

whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (22:2). And with that command, God’s divine effort to redeem humanity is put in peril!

God is the God of the unexpected! We, as human beings, want to always operate out of the perspective, “Come weal or come woe, our status is quo”! We don’t like unexpected change. We don’t like to be threatened with the unknown. Abraham and Sarah had it all figured out – that Isaac would succeed his father as patriarch of the clan, that God’s covenant with Abraham for the land, the nation and the people would pass through Isaac as son. And then God threatens all of that neat world with the horrifying words, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering!”

Put to the test, what will Abraham do? What Abraham does – and what Isaac as his faithful son does – is expressed in the most intriguing terms of openness and vulnerability. “God said to him, ‘Abraham’! And he said, ‘Here I am’” (vs. 1). The words, “Here I am” are used three times in this story, knitting this story together into one coherent whole. When faced with God’s initial challenge, Abraham’s attitude is an open-handed “Here I am”. When Isaac – unaware that he was to be the sacrifice – asked his father where the sacrificial animal was, Abraham replied, “Here I am” (vs. 7). When, finally, God intervenes to keep Abraham from killing his son, Abraham replies to God’s call to him, “Here I am” (vs. 11). This is the response of Abraham that typifies his whole character – being totally transparent before God and open to God’s leading. “Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no guile” (John 1:47)!

The command is to offer Isaac “as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (22:2). This is the only instance in scripture in which God demands human sacrifice. In Judges 11, the only other biblical record of human sacrifice to Yahweh, God did not demand it. So why does God demand it here?

It is clear from the very way this story is told that God has no intention of allowing Isaac to be killed. In this story, God is not in the least way interested in human sacrifice. The purpose of the demand is to see how deeply Abraham’s trust in God truly lies. It is a test as powerful and as eternally significant as is the test of Job (Job 1-3). Would Abraham accept the command to sacrifice his son, and act upon it? Would he proceed over several days journey to Moriah and there begin the preparations for the sacrifice? And would he do so while still holding steadfastly to the promise “through Isaac that your offspring shall be named for you” (21:12)? What was the extent of Abraham’s faith? To what degree did “Abraham believe God and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6)?

We do not know what was going on in Abraham’s mind (although likely confusion was a strong part of it). But he did know what God had promised, and Abraham was committed to taking God at God’s word. How God would resolve the dilemma, Abraham did not know (the New Testament writer of Hebrews suggests that Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead: Hebrews 11:19). But God would act, because God had promised. And God would be faithful to that promise!

The curious player in this entire scenario was Isaac. He, of course, simply thought that his father and he were traveling to a holy mountain to sacrifice to God. It had never dawned on him that he would be the sacrifice! He even asks in all innocence, “Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And he seems to accept in blind faith his father’s response, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (vss. 7-8). But what did he think when Abraham “bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (vss. 9-10)? By this time, it should have dawned on Isaac that he was the sacrifice, and he must have lain here in horror (in fact, one can only wonder at the trauma this incident must have had upon Isaac). But there is no indication from the scripture about Isaac’s reaction to this whole incident.

God stays the execution! God provided a ram for sacrifice, Isaac was released and restored to his father. And because of Abraham’s obedience and faith, God once again confirmed the covenant made between God and Abraham with the words, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (vss. 16-18).

The covenant between Abraham and God is best understood as a reflection of the Israelites’ understanding of the importance of their agreement with God made 800 years later at Mt. Sinai. That Sinai Covenant held the nation of Israel together and gave it its reason for existence. The Israelites could take assurance that the covenant made between Moses and God was no light matter, for God had bound himself as irrevocably to Israel as he had to Abraham. The Israelites were guaranteed the land of Canaan, and they were set apart to become a great blessing to all the peoples of the world. This was the unbelievable covenant made between Israel and God that was foreshadowed in Abraham’s willingness to take God at God’s word, and obey him.

By telling the story of the sacrifice of Isaac thousands of years after that incident, the Israelites reminded themselves of the response which God would expect, not only from Abraham but from God’s people down through the millennia. As God demanded unswerving obedience from Abraham – no matter how impossible the demand might seem – so God would demand of Israel commitment to the covenant made at Sinai. Obedience to God’s call was the inevitable outcome to the covenant made between God and God’s people. And that was not only true of Abraham and Isaac. Nor was it only true of the children of Isaac who 800 years later stood with Moses at Mount Sinai. That obedience to God’s call is equally expected of God’s people who name the name of God’s son four thousand years later as it was for Abraham walking with his son to the land of Moriah to “offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains” (Gen. 22:2).

Psalm 16 is a hymn of delight, confidence and joy of the worshipper of God that is the result of remaining in God’s presence. It is contrasted with those who yield to the worship of Ba’al who become absorbed into the religious systems of pagan nations that seek to control and dominate the people. “Those who choose another god (and thus, the political domination, economic greed and religious control of those nations) multiply their sorrows” (vs. 4). Rather, the Psalmist

declares, “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot” (vs. 5). The result of committing one’s self to Yahweh and a relational faith that is lived out in justice and in sharing, is that “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage” (vs. 6). One enters upon “the path of life” and “fullness of joy” by thus entering into God’s presence (vs. 11), for life in relationship with God and with God’s people living in a shalom community together will endure.

There is one portion of this psalm that is particularly referenced by New Testament preachers. “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption” (vs. 10). Sheol, to the ancient Hebrew mind, was a shadowed, dark place where the dead continue to exist in the underworld, a place where all relationship and interaction with Yahweh was at an end. To the Israelites who both wrote this psalm and who used it in their worship or devotion, these words provided promise that those touched by and embracing Yahweh’s “steadfast love” would be delivered from such a Godless eternity. But both Sts. Peter and Paul refer to this text, seeing it as a prophetic statement about the Son of David, Jesus.

Exodus 14:10-31 and 15:20-21 is the story of Yahweh’s miraculous deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. As such, the Red Sea experience is to the Jewish faith what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to the Christian faith. If Passover is their “Good Friday” where the Israelites are delivered in the midst of death, the crossing of the Red Sea is their “Easter Sunday”! For it is the day when God demonstrates God’s self as Israel’s deliverer from the very jaws of death, and Israel is saved from certain annihilation. As such, it is Israel’s central salvation story.

The conflict at the Red Sea is not so much the final conflict between Moses and Pharaoh (in fact, they never even meet at the sea) as it is the final conflict between Yahweh and Amon-Re, the chief god of the Egyptian pantheon. Amon-Re is a nature deity, the giver of life and death to all. Yahweh is a deity of history, the one who causes history to be what Yahweh causes it to be. But here, even more profoundly than in the plagues and in the passing over of the angel of death, Yahweh demonstrates that he is the lord of nature of and of nature’s god, Amon-Re. This is what makes of this struggle the central story of salvation in the book of Exodus.

Faced with Israel’s almost certain annihilation as they are trapped on the shores of the Red Sea, God miraculously delivers the Israelites by parting the Red Sea. Thus Yahweh has the power to part the sea. And Yahweh has the power to reverse the process in order to destroy the Egyptian army. And all Amon-Re can do is to helplessly stand aside in the person of the Pharaoh – and watch in horror!

Now to the story itself.

With Pharaoh’s release of the Israelites from their bondage, the Hebrews were now free of their Egyptian task-masters. They virtually danced out onto the desert, skipping along in excitement at the freedom that had come to them and the wealth showered upon them by an Egyptian people happy to see them go! So they marched into the desert east of Egypt, heading toward the Red Sea that acted as a natural barrier between Africa and Asia, Egypt and the Sinai desert. They were on their way to meet with Yahweh, their God, at Mount Sinai.

But suddenly, those at the back of the Israelite procession became alarmed. They could see clouds of dust rising far behind them. A few went back to scout out what was happening. They returned with dreadful news. The greatest army in the world – the Egyptian army was on the march, pursuing the former slaves. Had Pharaoh reneged on his command that the Israelites were to be set free? Was his army pursuing them in order to slaughter all of them in the desert? Was the Pharaoh taking revenge upon them?

The news of the sighting quickly went up the Hebrew procession until it reached Moses. Upon receiving the news, Moses turned and saw the clouds arising ever closer to their rear. The Egyptian horses and chariots were indeed racing toward them. Now the Red Sea standing before them was no longer an invitation to leisurely cross in order to reach Mount Sinai. Now the Red Sea stood as a massive barrier against which the Israelites would huddle, waiting for the rushing Egyptian army to catch them and to slaughter them in the desert. What would Moses do? What could Yahweh do?

God was the first to act. Suddenly between the fleeing Hebrews and the advancing army, a pillar of cloud came from the heavens, with fierce winds blocking the Egyptians access to the Israelites. At night, that pillar glowed like fire, threatening to sear the Egyptian soldiers to death. The army was now held at bay. But the army simply gathered behind the wall of cloud, wind and fire, waiting for it to disperse.

It now became Moses' turn to act. The people complained loudly to Moses that he had led them into a trap and that God didn't care for their plight at all. But God told Moses what to do. And although what Yahweh told Moses to do sounded nothing short of suicidal, Moses did as he was told.

Moses stepped to the edge of the Red Sea and lifted his staff over the sea. Suddenly, a violent wind came up the Red Sea and – miracle of miracles – the water parted before the Israelite people. The water banked on one side and on the other side of the sea, so that dry land appeared – dry land that stretched across the sea to the desert on the other side. Then Moses commanded the people to walk across the sea bed to the other side. And though scared half to death, the people did as they were told. They, their children, their elderly, their animals and carts scurried across that sea bed. Last of all, they were followed by Moses, still holding up his staff above his head, heading to the safety of the opposite shore.

As Moses neared the opposite bank, the pillar of cloud suddenly lifted, and the Egyptian army poured into the breach, their horses and chariots racing across the sea bed toward the retreating Moses and the people already safely gathered on the opposite side. Soon, most of the chariots of the Egyptian army were in the sea bed, racing in pursuit to the opposite bank. Moses clambered up the bank to safety, turned around to face the rushing army – and lowered his staff! The wind immediately stopped. The waters banked on either side of the sea came crashing in. And the Egyptian army was drowned!

The people of Israel celebrated that night. They danced and feasted and sang, for their captors were now conquered and all threat of retaliation was gone. “Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's

sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them, ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’” (15:20-21).

This experience was the capstone of the far-reaching events which had set Israel free. God’s meeting with Moses at the burning bush, his confrontation of Pharaoh, the plagues, the Passover experience, and now rescue at the Red Sea had demonstrated, beyond all doubt, that Yahweh was the Israelite God, that he had power over all of nature and history, and could control both at will. The deliverance at the Red Sea was the final proof that Yahweh loved the Hebrews and had chosen them to be his people. From this time forward, the Exodus stories would remind the people of God’s saving acts which had freed them from slavery, conquered the forces of nature and welded them into a nation.

Exodus 15:1b-13, 17-18 is meant, in the lectionary, to be used as an alternative reading to Exodus 14:10-31; in its Easter Vigil, the church uses one or the other because they both tell the same story. Traditionally, every Easter Vigil uses either the Exodus 14 or the Exodus 15 passage, because both deal with Israel’s “Easter” experience – the event in which God delivered Israel from the jaws of death and saved them to become his people.

Exodus 14 is prose – the telling of a most compelling story. Exodus 15, on the other hand, is poetry, telling the same story in poetic mode. The Exodus 15 passage goes further than Exodus 14, in that it not only tells the story of Israel’s rescue at the Red Sea (vss. 1-6), but also continues to tell of God’s cosmic conquering of Amon-Re, the chief Egyptian deity incarnated in Pharaoh (vss. 7-11), and then concludes with telling of God’s blessing of Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land (vss. 12-17), the eventual taking of Jerusalem as the nation’s capital city and the establishment of the Temple. Thus, Exodus 15 brings the mighty works of God to their appropriate conclusion (i.e., God rescued Israel at the Red Sea, not to see them later perish in the wilderness but to both regain the land of their ancestors, create a capital city, and finally enshrine Yahweh in God’s throne room – the Temple). Appropriately, therefore, the poem ends with the words of both worship and of political intentions, “The Lord will reign forever and ever”!

The poem is profound, not only in its story telling (which is important, in and of itself), but in both its political interpretation of God’s action, and its perception of the cosmic dimensions of that action. First, the poem is grounded in God’s political intentions. God is seen as the mightiest of warriors, the undefeatable general of his people. The poem declares, “The Lord has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea (vs. 1a); the Lord is a warrior (vs. 3); your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy” (vs. 6; also see vss. 7-10). It is intriguing that the defeat of Egypt was not the doing of the liberated slaves; they were running for their lives! The defeat of Egypt was entirely God’s action; he is the warrior *par excellence* who single-handedly destroys Egypt’s military prowess.

But God, as political leader, is more than consummate warrior. He is also a compassionate monarch who works for the political justice, compensation of the weak, equitable distribution of wealth and the good of the entire nation. Thus, the poem declares, “in your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed (vs. 13), “you brought them in and planted them on the

mountains of your possession, the place, O Lord, you made your abode” (vs. 17). The other nations look in jealousy upon God’s particular protection and care for Israel (vss. 14-16). In fact, the author of this poem uses the richest possible language to talk of God’s commitment to and treatment of the Israelites; he uses the word “*chesedh*” (“steadfast love”) to indicate God’s singular commitment to Israel (see the commentary on “*chesedh*” in Psalm 136 of the Easter Vigil).

What is being described in Exodus 15 is the acting out of God’s intentions for society – the creation of a relational culture of justice, equity, stewardship of its resources and being at-one with each other and with God. God’s intentions for the world was symbolized in a Garden of Eden, was acted out in God’s covenants with Noah and with Abraham, and is now being realized in God’s saving acts of the Israelites that lead up to Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments. It is, therefore, a profoundly political poem – if politics is understood as the means by which we order our life together.

But this poem is also cosmic in nature. It is not only that God conquers Pharaoh, but also conquers the Sea (“Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone” [vss. 4-5]; “At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea” [vs. 8]; “You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters” [10].) This preoccupation with God’s manipulation of the Sea is particularly significant for all people of the two millennia before Christ. To them, waters symbolized chaos, and the apparently bottomless and dangerous ocean was the epitome of Chaos. It is significant that the author describes the body of water in which Egypt was defeated as the greatest of oceans. That is done in order to insist upon the cosmic power of Yahweh, for God is proclaimed as superior not only to the Pharaoh and his army, not only to the Egyptian god Amon-Re, but is superior to all the gods for Yahweh alone can manipulate and use the waters of eternal Chaos for his own purposes! This, clearly, is the only god in whom to place your trust!

This, then, is this majestic poem – a poem that goes far beyond the story of the parting of the Red Sea told in Exodus 14. For this poem argues that the action of Israel’s rescue at the Red Sea was not simply the rescue of one people from another nation’s murderous intent, but was a parable, a symbol of the action of the God whom Israel worships – a God who can transform political realities in order to create peoples who can live in relationship with Him and with each other in the ways that God intends them to live, a God who can tame even the Chaos and can order it into the kind of world that God would create and maintain for us all.

Isaiah 55:1-11 is a celebration of the covenant that exists between Yahweh and Israel. It is likened to an abundant and magnificent banquet hosted by God and given to Israel as God’s gift to them and in which they can fully partake.

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me,

and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David” (55:1-3).

This is a statement of full, unadulterated grace. The banquet of the covenant is a free gift from God to Israel. It requires no money to purchase its food and drink. It demands no labor or action from the Israelites. It is God’s free gift to Israel. They are simply to receive it and delight in God’s abundant giving to them. All that Israel needs to do is to respond to God’s covenantal love for them. They are to embrace it, to accept that they are already accepted, to believe that they are already loved by God – loved enough for him to make “an everlasting covenant” with them!

The text continues. “See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you” (55:4-5).

God had made an “everlasting covenant” with David that continues down the centuries with Israel. This emphasis on the Davidic covenant is found throughout the warp-and-woof of Hebrew scripture. What makes this statement unusual, however, is that the author extends that covenant to the world – a theme throughout Second Isaiah but found rarely elsewhere in the Old Testament (42:6; 45:5-7, 22-23; 49:6; 56:3-8). “See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you”. That is, God’s people will reach out to and impact the entire world – both the peoples of the world and the nations (that is, the corporate entities of the peoples) of the world. God’s grace, originally reserved for Israel, will become God’s grace to all the world. God’s people are found far beyond Israel itself, for God is at work to transform all humanity and the societies created by humanity everywhere throughout the world.

This Old Testament lesson then continues with well-known words. “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:6-9).

God’s grace, once offered exclusively to Israel, is now offered to the peoples and institutions of the whole world. These people and political, economic and religious systems – whoever they are and wherever they may be – can become the world as God intended it to be, the community of shalom. All the peoples and systems of the world can live out of a framework of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, the elimination of poverty and personal and corporate relationship with God and each other. God’s grace is for all.

All it requires to access that grace on the part of people and of the institutions of society is for those people and systems to “seek the Lord”, to “call upon God”, to “forsake their (former) ways

and thoughts”, to “return to the Lord”. If they so choose to act, then Yahweh will “have mercy on them” and will “abundantly pardon” them.

Why is God a god of grace, acting with such compassion to all the world? “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (vss. 8-9). God’s whole embrace of grace as the underlying premise of God’s very being in relationship to humanity exceeds and even defies all human imagination (cf. 64:4; Rom. 11:33; I Cor. 2:9; Eph. 3:20). Grace permeates the very being of God. We cannot conceive of any human being or any entity so grace-centered and grace-dominated. But this is who Yahweh is. And this is what our God yearns for each human and all human society to discover and embrace for themselves.

And how do we know that this promise of God is true? “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty” (vss. 10-11).

Isaiah 12:2-6 is an alternative scripture to Isaiah 55:1-11. Both are not meant to be used in the same Easter Vigil. So the one planning this worship experience is meant to choose between the one or the other.

Isaiah 12:2-6 is a Psalm that does not appear in the Psalter. It is a hymn of praise written by the prophet Isaiah.

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.’ Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (12:2-6).

To understand this psalm, one must pay particular attention to one phrase and two words. The phrase is “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”. The two words are “salvation” and “Yahweh” (in the NRSV, translated as “the Lord”).

The phrase, “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” is particularly intriguing because this immediately reminded the Israelite listener to this hymn of young women gathered around a well, scooping up in its bucket the waters of life (or “salvation”) and chatting and visiting around that well as they worked. This statement has many echoes with other such images in the Old Testament (Num. 21:17-18; Psalms 66:2; 67:2; 105:1; 148:13; Isa. 65:8; Jer. 25:30; 65:8; Zech. 2:10) and has a clear example of this hymn’s theme in Judges 5:11, where the author writes, “Hark to the women drawing water (at the wells)! It is the victories of Yahweh they commemorate there” (New English Bible). The sense of Isaiah 12:2-6 is of women gathering around the well, attending to the common tasks of daily life but using those tasks as the occasion for celebrating Israel’s deliverance by God (e.g., Exodus 2:15-22).

What is it that these women are celebrating about God? That brings us to the two words used most often in this psalm – the words “salvation” and “Yahweh” (each used three times). Isaiah wrote (and, perhaps, the women sang as they worked), “He is the God of my salvation. I have trust now and no fear, for Yahweh is my strength, my song, he is my salvation. And you will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation” (vss. 2-3, Jerusalem Bible).

The Hebrew words “salvation” (*yeshua*) and “to save” (*yasha*) means “to have victory in battle” or “to develop without hindrance”. If we are to understand a passage like Isaiah 12, it is important to separate the Hebrew word translated “salvation” from the Christian understanding of “salvation”. When we hear this word, it has purely spiritual associations for us, having to do with the release of our immortal soul from sin and into eternal life. But this was not the meaning of the word in Old Testament Israel, nor exclusively within the New Testament, as well.

In the Old Testament, one who was needing liberation from oppression, deliverance from danger and tyranny, or even rescue from imminent peril was in need of “salvation” (e.g., I Sam. 4:3; 7:8; 9:16). For someone to “save” another not only meant that troubled one’s rescue but also meant the transfer to him by the “savior” of some of his prevailing strength (cf. Job 26:2) so that the “saved” one becomes more self-reliant. Of course, the only one in Israel powerful enough to bring victory, security or freedom to another – even the king – was Yahweh (Ps. 98:1; Job 40:14; Ps. 20:5-9). That recognition was the reason why in Isaiah’s psalm for today, the words “salvation” and “Yahweh” are in such close juxtaposition, for salvation for the nation, the village or the people will not happen apart from God!

This more ancient usage of the word is still reflected in the New Testament in such emphases as salvation meaning deliverance from specific ills, captivity, disease, demon possession or even physical death (Matt. 9:21; Luke 8:36; Matt. 8:28; Acts 27:20; Heb. 2:15). Therefore, it is only in later usage of both Old and New Testaments that salvation became increasingly understood in terms of spiritual deliverance, whereas it was originally seen as physical, political, social and economic rescue (as clearly demonstrated in Exod. 2:15-22 and in the “psalm” of Isaiah 12).

Therefore, what Isaiah is declaring in this “psalm” is that Yahweh is Israel’s ultimate “savior” who will deliver them from physical, political, social, economic and spiritual troubles – whether those troubles are caused by Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders, by kings and generals and armies of other nations or even by the way Israelites treat each other. And the young women, gathering around the wells and collecting the water for their households that day, sing of such deliverance and of the continuing protection and sustenance of Yahweh for them and for their families, tribes and communities!

Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6 is a part of the “wisdom” literature of the Bible. This passage, in itself, states the “mission” of “wisdom”. There are two Hebrew words often translated as “wisdom”, *chokmah* and *binah*. The Greek word for “wisdom” used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament is the well-known *sophia*. The word *binah* has the sense of “understanding” or “consideration” to it. *Chokmah*, and its adjective *chakam*, on the other hand, has the sense of sagacity, discernment or even technical proficiency that results in

action. Thus, “wisdom”, to the Hebrew, was not so much an accumulation of knowledge as it was the skill in making thought issue in action. The Greeks had the same understanding of wisdom; this was seen in the regulation in republic Athens that no one under the age of 50 could participate in public decision-making within Athens’ political arena because they lacked *sophia*; they lacked political judgment.

In Proverbs 8, “Wisdom” is a woman who is seated at the gates of the city, at its crossroads and at its “high place” or center of decision-making. The choice of places where “Wisdom” has taken up residence is significant: the gates of the city was where the judiciary and the legislative body of a city sat to make judgment; it was the political center of the city. The crossroads was the city’s market square where items were bought and sold and the city’s commerce occurred; it was the economic center of any Hebrew city. The “high place” or “the heights” was the physically highest point of the city and was where the Temple or religious edifice of either Yahweh or Ba’al would be built; it was the religious center of the city. Therefore, the author of this Proverb is telling the reader that “Wisdom” – contemplative and thoughtful decision making ending in just action for the common good – must occur at the center of Israel’s political, economic and religious life. And that wisdom that is most godly for any city is best understood as the contemplative, reflective action of a woman!

The woman, Wisdom, is standing at the center of that Hebrew city’s political, economic and/or religious system. And she cries to it, to those who shape and manage it and to all who participate in it, “To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; for my mouth will utter truths; wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them”.

As the Greeks demanded *sophia* of anyone who would participate in politics, so the Israelite woman, Wisdom required the same of anyone who would participate in the city’s political, judicial, economic, educational or spiritual life. She calls to all who would set themselves to mold the social ethics, public morality or political or economic decisions of her city to do so with a sober regard for the seriousness of the task which they are undertaking.

Wisdom continues her declaration to the “movers and shakers” of her city or nation. “My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, endowing with wealth those who love me, and filling their treasuries” (vss. 19-21). Do you want your city to be wealthy and profitable? Then, don’t make as your aim the making of profit. Instead, make as your aim justice for all your citizens, equity in your treatment of them, stewardship of your city’s common wealth and an equitable sharing of that wealth so that there are no poor among you (Deut. 15:4). Do that – and you will prosper! By acting for the public good rather than for your private benefit, your city will be enriched and all will equally benefit. This is what Wisdom (rather than cunning or self-service) tells you.

Wisdom continues with her message to both the “powers that be” and the ordinary citizens of her city. “to those without sense I say, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live and walk in the way of insight” (9:4b-6). God knows how to

build the truly good and fulfilling society, and it is that society that Wisdom is proclaiming to you. So, exercise your wisdom, and the practical results of your exercise of justice, equity, stewardship and genuine caring for each other – either as the powerful or as an ordinary person – and you will discover the kind of world in which God wants you to live!

Psalm 19 deals with two ways that God communicates and interacts with us. The first is through creation. The second is through his Word (the Law). First, God reveals himself through creation.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (19:1-4).

It is as if the creation has a voice that speaks to us, the Psalmist writes. The created order is so vast and so overwhelming, its very existence speaks to us of a Creator who is powerful enough to create such beauty and ordered enough to create such order (incidentally, astronomers today report that the cosmos is not silent simply because of its vast space; instead, stars produce an immense amount of noise, as each solar flare and explosion erupts with ear-shattering noise).

But God also speaks to us through his written Word – to the Jews, it is the Law through which God speaks. To the Christians, it is the scripture themselves.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of the Lord are clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (19:7-9).

God’s word revives our spirit, God’s teachings make us wise, God’s truths teach us rightly and cause us to rejoice, God’s expectations enlighten and order our lives. Standing in awe before God makes us centered in him and pure. Thus, relationship with God makes us “true and righteous altogether”.

It is out of the keen awareness of the power, majesty and love of God revealed to us both by creation and the Law that we inevitably have two responses.

First is the awareness of our sin. An awareness of God’s power and love makes us immediately aware of how far short of his glory we fall. The response of Isaiah the prophet to the vision of Yahweh that he had in the Temple was his confession, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). Thus, this psalmist reacts in the very same way.

“But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression” (vss. 12-13).

The Psalmist is made aware of his own sinfulness and his own limitations. Therefore, he confesses his sin – and particularly “hidden faults”, sins of omission as well as commission. But he is also aware of how easily he is tempted to follow others who do not stand in awe before God – the “insolent”. So he further prays that God will protect him from his own tendency to not stand strongly for what he believes.

But the Psalmist’s second response is one of praise. He centers his soul upon the centering of his entire life in God. And he does so in one of the most beautiful benedictions that appears in scripture.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (vs. 14)

Ezekiel 36:24-28 begins a segment of the book of Ezekiel which runs through chapter 39 and presents one notable statement of hope in what is otherwise a highly critical book regarding Judah’s political, economic and religious systems. Ezekiel’s primary emphasis throughout his book is that Israel’s kings, court, business leaders and priests have conspired together over hundreds of years to build their mutual power and wealth by dominating, exploiting and seducing the people. In doing so, Ezekiel stressed that Judah’s systems are no longer being faithful to the Deuteronomic standards for a nation that is to be the shalom community, acting justly, sharing wealth equitably, eliminating poverty and building a people deeply in relation with God and each other. Consequently, Ezekiel repeatedly predicted that destruction was going to come upon Judah both in the form of conquest from without (e.g., 21:1-32) and by decay from within (e.g., 22:23-31).

Such a prophecy presents a bleak and even hopeless vision to both the people and the powers of Judah. Consequently, in chapters 36 through 39, Ezekiel presents a ray of hope for the restoration of the nation. In chapter 36, Ezekiel tells about God’s blessings upon a sobered Israel, restored to the land of Palestine after exile in Babylon. Ezekiel’s promise is that Israel will once again become a prosperous and large people. They are restored, however, not because they are good, not because they are repentant, not even because of their obedience, but because of the grace of God.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations in which you came. I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes” (36:22-23).

The transforming and salvific work God will do within and to the Israelites is beautifully presented by Ezekiel:

“I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your

uncleanness, and from all idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (vss. 24-28).

It is intriguing to note what God will do and in what order. God will (1) gather Israel from the nations; (2) wash them of their uncleanness; (3) remove from them their heart of sin; (4) place a godly heart within them; (5) put a godly spirit within them.

By so doing, God will transform Israel so that they will thus be empowered to live in a godly manner before Yahweh and in a just and equitable manner before each other and the world.

God gathers, God cleanses, God removes the attraction of injustice, domination, greed and the use of unilateral power (i.e., sin), God places a new heart and will within them (i.e., the desire to act justly, equitably and lovingly in their political, economic, social and religious life as a nation), and God fills with God’s Spirit (in order to enable them to continue to live justly). This is a beautiful statement of God’s work in social reform. And therefore, it is a beautiful statement of God’s work of redemption. God is not expecting Israel to live a godly life for which they have shown themselves incapable. Rather, God will work in them to remove their lust for power, greed and domination and to transform them into right acting. And only when that miracle has taken place within them are they capable of following God’s law.

Who says the Old Testament isn’t built upon grace?

Psalms 42 and 43 deal with the grief and pain felt by Israel in their captivity. The two psalms (which are one psalm in the Catholic Bible) were written during the Babylonian Exile, and present a poignant story indeed.

“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”” (42:1-3).

The imagery is particularly vivid – of a timid and vulnerable deer desperately seeking for water. Thus, our souls are likened to that deer, desperately seeking God.

The key to this passage, however, is found in the question the psalmist asks in 42:2b: “**When** shall I come and behold the face of God?” The issue is not **where** the writer will find God, or **whether** he will. The issue is **when** he will meet God. The assumption is that the psalmist knows quite well where God is – God is in the Temple in Jerusalem, and only in the Temple in Jerusalem (42:4). But the author is in exile in Babylon 1,000 miles from Jerusalem. Therefore, since he is in Babylon and since God is only found in the Temple in Jerusalem, for him to be in political exile among his Babylonian captors is for him to be as much in exile from God as from his countrymen. So the only issue to him is when he will be liberated from Babylonian capture to return to Jerusalem where he can once again meet God and worship him in the Temple. That

God could go with the psalmist into exile was beyond the capacity of the psalmist to even begin to imagine! *That* is why he is longing for and thirsting for God – even “as a deer longs for flowing streams”.

“These things I remember, as I pour out my soul; how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” (vss. 4-5).

Here is the passage that confirms the interpretation appearing above. The author here remembers the processions he led into the Temple (was this psalmist the high priest or a prince of Israel?). For him, such processions had not simply been ritual and liturgy. These were times of authentic celebration and even jubilation. “With glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving”, he had participated joyfully and enthusiastically in these celebrations.

But now, his soul is “cast down” and “disquieted within (him),” for not only is he deprived of the joy of participation in such gala Temple worship; he is bereft of God Himself!

“I say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?” As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”” (42:9-10)?

Here is the saddest note of all. This psalmist feels forgotten by God, abandoned by God at the Psalmist’s time of greatest vulnerability when he is being taunted by his oppressors in Babylon with the cry, “Where is your God?”

What most strikes one in this passage is the inability of this psalmist and his contemporaries in Babylonian exile to think “outside the box”, to envision God in any other way than their orthodoxy allows. To them, Yahweh is a territorial God, supreme in Israel but absent elsewhere. Yet the Israelites’ entire religious origins in their liberation as a nation from Egyptian slavery tells them otherwise. It is as if that story of liberation has lost all capacity to influence their thinking, for if they had honestly looked at that story, they would have seen that Yahweh had defeated Amon-Re on the latter god’s own turf – Egypt! That would have demonstrated to this psalmist that Yahweh was a universal and not a territorial God, and that he was supreme over all gods. This Psalmist cannot envision God as anything other than a territorial deity, and therefore could never perceive that God had gone with him and the other Israelites into Babylonian captivity and was consequently with them there in that terrible situation. The psalmist and his contemporaries never needed to long for God’s presence among them “as a deer longs for flowing streams” – for God was right there, in the midst of their suffering! And they could not see that truth!

Psalm 43 is a continuation of Psalm 42. Verses 1 and 2 simply reiterate the insights of Psalm 42, and then create a transition to verses 3 and 4. These verses present new material.

“O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God”.

The Psalmist asks for God to send out rays of his “light and truth” from Jerusalem, so that it may cross over the miles to Babylon and capture and bring back to the Temple mount the exiled Jews. If God does that, then, the Psalmist suggests, the returned exile will be grateful to God and will praise him for their rescue.

Again, the Psalmist cannot conceive of God accompanying the Jewish exiles to Babylon and there making his home among them. The most God can do is “send out (his) light and truth” – a temporary invasion of Babylonian space in order to bring the Israelites back home to Himself.

After making this assertion, the Psalmist closes with the chorus in 43:5, which was also repeated in 42:5 and 42:11:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

Ezekiel 37:1-14 is the famed Prophecy of the Dry Bones. In this prophecy, Ezekiel comes upon a former battlefield littered with the dry bones of the combatants. God commands him to call the bones together. He does, and the bones join together and form dead human beings. God then commands Ezekiel to call the winds to come from the four corners of the world and enter into the army. He does, and they come alive – “they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude”!

The lesson of this prophecy is quite clear, and is the best of news for Israel. “Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act”, says the Lord” (37:12b-14).

The lesson of the dry bones is that, because of God’s love, God will restore the exiled, defeated Israel and will return them to their land as a free people. There, they will embrace the covenant with God, so that they will seek the shalom of their nation by “doing justice, loving each other tenderly and walking humbly with their God” (Micah 6:8). Thus, this entire section, from the 36th through the 39th chapters of Ezekiel, give the Israelites living in Babylonian exile hope – for God will restore Israel to their land, defend them from all external threats, will pour God’s grace upon them and will thus enable them to become the nation as God intended them to be – a nation of justice, equity and in relationship with God.

Psalms 143 is a psalm of supplication, with the psalmist obviously feeling rejected and side-lined. It begins with a well-known prayer:

“Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness. Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you” (143:1-2).

The psalmist is well aware of his sinfulness, particularly as he stands before God. His only hope is not in his own goodness, but in God’s mercy.

“Save me, O Lord, from my enemies; I have fled to you for refuge. Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path. For your name’s sake, O Lord, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble” (vss. 9-11).

Zephaniah 3:14-20. Zephaniah is essentially a gloomy prophecy built around the concept of “The Day of the Lord” but seeing that anticipated day in dark terms. “That day”, the prophet writes, “will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities, and against the lofty battlements” (1:15-16). Both Judah (ch. 1; 3:1-5) and all the nations (ch. 2; 3:6-8) of the world will know the judgment of God against them. And why? Because “the officials within the city are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning. Its prophets are reckless, faithless persons, its priests have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law” (3:3-4). Both Israel and the nations will be judged by God and severely punished because they have been unjust toward the poor and have not sought to empower the powerless.

But Zephaniah doesn’t leave his prophecy on a dark note. He promises, “Wait for me, says the Lord, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms. At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord” (3:8a, 9). And why will God redeem and liberate the nations? Because he will have so worked in the hearts of God’s people that they will witness of God’s love to the world through their actions. “I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek such refuge in the name of the Lord – the remnant of Israel. They shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down and no one shall make them afraid” (3:12-13).

It is in the light of Zephaniah’s proclamation that God will act to save the nations through God’s people that one then reads this Old Testament lesson for the Easter Vigil. That lesson is a song of joy sung by all of God’s people from all over the world.

“Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more” (3:14-15). God is in the midst of the city of Jerusalem (cf. 3:5). But he is also in the midst of his people wherever they may be gathered. He is among them as monarch, protector, the one who deeply cares for each of them and all of them, and thus cares for the world. He has become their God and they God’s people!

But Zephaniah continues. “I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord” (3:18-20).

What Zephaniah describes is God’s salvation of Israel and of God’s people scattered around the world. But it is notable how this prophet defines salvation. Salvation is to “remove disaster from you”, “deal with your oppressors”, “save the lame”, “gather the outcast”, “change shame into praise and renown”, “bring you home”, “restore your fortunes”. Salvation is not presented as being solely spiritual liberation from evil or interior (spiritual) transformation. Salvation is concrete, practical and having to do with the everyday issues of injustice, oppression and marginalization. Consequently, salvation is seen as social as well as spiritual, corporate as well as individual, having to do with justice as well as with righteousness.

There is, however, in this hymn of joy one statement that seems to get at the very heart of Zephaniah’s proclamation of salvation for the remnant of Israel and of God’s people spread throughout the nations of the world. That passage reads, “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival” (3:17)

The phrase that is translated “he will renew you in his love” in the NRSV is likely more accurately translated “he will quiet you by his love” or “quiets you” or “rests you”. The image is one of a baby, freshly fed and now lying peacefully and sated, feeling perfectly safe, loved and at home on his mother’s breast (cf. Psalm 131). That, Zephaniah is saying, is what God will do for us who remain centered in Her and working for Her justice! In the larger context of this prophecy, God is most often envisioned as a Warrior “mighty to save” (1:14). Now, in this passage, Zephaniah is bringing out the feminine, warm, nurturing and caring side of God who cradles those who have formerly been either the rejected of the world or their oppressors. But now God has worked redemptively in oppressor and oppressed alike, has brought them to God’s self, and has thus brought about both within and among them the transformation of the world into the world as God intends it to be. This is the great hope and expectation of Zephaniah.

Psalm 98 describes a messenger running from the field of battle with the good news that God, that nation’s authentic king, has conquered the enemy. His message is followed by the blast of the trumpet, and the king himself approaches the city in triumphal procession. The city’s people, of course, go wild with joy, as they praise both their victory as a nation and their God!

Actually, there are three dimensions of praise presented in Psalm 98. There is, first of all, the praise that human beings, both as individuals and as a people give to God (vv. 1-3). God’s deliverance is perceived by the people as being a “new thing” deserving of a “new song”. And that “new thing” that God has done is comprehensive in scope. God has acted to bring about a spiritual transformation through his mighty act (“he has remembered his steadfast love and

faithfulness”), but that transformation is also political (“he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations”) and military in nature (“his right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory”). Thus, the great work that God has done in liberating his people has not solely been individualistic (although it has included this dimension), but is corporate and social as well, transforming the nation’s political and military agenda as well as its spirituality.

Second, Psalm 98 presents God’s work of human transformation not only as being praised by the people and nation (vss. 1-3). It is also praised by all the peoples of the earth. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth: break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord” (vss. 4-6).

By stating that the “joyful noise” that is to be made to the Lord is to be undertaken by “all the earth”, the psalmist is indicating that this transformation that God is doing is not for Israel alone, but is intended for the whole world. This is clearly stated in verse 3, “all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God”. Thus, what the Psalmist is presenting here is that God’s salvific work is neither exclusively spiritual nor is it exclusively intended for Israel. Rather, it is “good news of great joy for all the people” bringing shalom “among those whom God favors”.

The third level of praise moves beyond individuals, the people, Israel or even all the nations of the earth. The praise of God for God’s transformative work is also to be taken up by nature itself! “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (vss. 7-9).

Ancient Israelite thinking, like that of the nations around them, envisioned the world set upon chaos (“the roaring of the sea”) that seeks to deny or overthrow God’s dominance. But even chaos itself recognizes the great victory that has been won by God, so that just as humans have been redeemed and civilizations transformed politically, economically and socially by God’s saving work, so even nature is made new again as it becomes the world of shalom that God intended it to be.

Thus, the Psalm ends “God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity”. The world itself – both the natural world and the human-built world – will be governed with *tsedeq* (here translated “righteousness”), the Psalmist tells us. And the people will be governed with *mescharim* (translated “equity” or “uprightness”). The nations (and even nature) will be governed by the conquering monarch-God in the new world God is creating, and they will be governed with compassionate and just treatment toward the poor (the meaning of the word *tsedeq*).² And the people will be governed by God with *mescharim* or with economic equity, so that everyone shares wealth and “there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). This is the kind of kingdom God is creating as he conquers the forces of chaos and evil, and this is the kind of world in which he invites those who are called by him to live.

² The Hebrew word *tsedeq* didn’t mean what the English word “righteousness” now means. “Righteousness” has a sense of acting in a morally right way. On the other hand, *tsedeq* is always used of nations and people in acting ethically and compassionately toward the poor.

Romans 6:3-11 begins with a very strange question. “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound” (6:1b)? What is Paul talking about?

Paul is returning to his statement in Romans 5:20b: “But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”. Apparently, there were those both inside and outside Christianity that were radically misinterpreting Paul’s argument, and because that misinterpretation was so attractive, believers were embracing it.

What Paul was doing in the previous chapter of Romans was arguing for the power of grace as acted out in Jesus Christ. Paul never underestimated sin and both its insidious penetration throughout each human and all society and its immense power to corrupt. His doctrine of sin that later came to be known as “Total Depravity” was not that each human has no good in him but that every human act and intention is permeated with the temptation to do evil. No motive is pure; no action is free of self-interest. Sin permeates the entirety of the human race and any society that humans build (Rom. 3:9-12; 5:12; 8:7-8; 11:35-36; I Cor. 2:13; 4:7; II Cor. 3:5; Eph. 2:1-3; 4:17-19).

“But when sin abounds, grace does much more abound”! No matter how deep, how penetrating, how comprehensive or wide sin might be, God’s grace enacted through Jesus Christ is greater still! Paul is arguing in Romans 5 that there is no sin beyond the power of grace to overcome it, no permeation of sin throughout human society that cannot be eliminated through the power of God’s grace. He is arguing both for the extent and the power of God’s amazing grace!

But others took Paul’s argument in an entirely different direction, thereby seeking to reduce that argument to absurdity. They took his statement, “But when sin increased, grace did much more abound” and argued that it was every Christian’s obligation to sin as much as possible! Why? Because the more you would sin, the more opportunity you gave God to activate God’s grace so that such sin might be eliminated. That is, by boldly and intentionally sinning, each Christian was contributing to the activating of God’s grace upon humanity. They were truly reinterpreting that old gospel hymn to sing, “I was sinking deep in sin – Wheeeee!”

But Paul’s reaction is no “Wheee!” His reaction is utter recoil. “Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound? By no means” (vss. 1b-2a)! The Greek that is translated “by no means” is as emphatic and as shocked as that language can make it! It could equally be translated, “God forbid” or “no way”! It is the strongest-possible statement of shocked recoil! Paul is utterly scandalized that anyone could interpret his teaching this way!

Paul then moves to his main argument, seeking to prove how utterly preposterous such an interpretation could be of a statement that was trying to declare the utter depth of both our capacity to sin and of God’s capacity to forgive. “How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (6:2b-4).

Paul builds his argument against this misinterpretation of his teaching around the sacrament of baptism (this reference, incidentally, gives an indication of how important the sacraments were to the earliest church). Thinking in terms of baptism by immersion, Paul describes a new believer as being totally submerged in the waters of baptism, and then lifted up out of that water as it cascades off her. The act of totally submerging the believer in the baptismal waters is symbolic of that person dying to his or her old way of life; it can be likened to Jesus' death on our behalf. The act of lifting the person back out of the baptismal waters is symbolic of that person's resurrection into new life, and can be likened to Jesus' resurrection. This is the metaphor that Paul uses to make his case.

Baptism is to Paul an outward sign of an inward condition. That is, the new believer is submerged in the waters, symbolizing his death to the way of life that formerly dominated him. As a person formerly of this world (whether a Gentile pagan or a Jew, all of us lived lives both under domination and dominating others. We were possessed by greed (even if that economically hurt our neighbor), the lust for power (even if that oppressed or took advantage of those around us), and seeking to control everything in our environment (rather than being in caring relationships with one another). Consequently, we were not people of "shalom", of "God's kingdom" but rather of the kingdom of Satan, and consequently the kingdom of Rome or official Jewry.

But Jesus changed all that! And Jesus changed all that for each of us! His word became gospel to us, he revealed to us a new way of life ("the kingdom of God") where we could actively live for justice, equity and oneness with God and each other. And he offered us that new way of life through his own death at the hands of the systems. Thus, as Jesus died for us, so, by receiving God's immeasurable grace, we both "take on" Christ and "die" to this former pagan way of life. And our baptism symbolized all that, because in it, "we have been buried (submerged) with Christ by baptism into death" (6:4).

But baptism doesn't end with submersion into the death of water. Baptism ends with being lifted out of those waters of death! Baptism ends with our resurrection. As Jesus rose again from the dead, thereby revealing to all his victory over the Powers that be and the values of those Powers as we have embraced them, so we are lifted out of the waters of baptism into the embrace of new life in Christ! Thus, "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (vs. 4b).

Paul now moves from symbol to statement, in order to make his argument. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, so we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:5-11).

What Paul is presenting here is what Christian theologians would later call the doctrine of “sanctification”. The word “sanctification” (from the Greek *hagiasmos*, or “holiness”) is the belief that embracing Christ as our own is not simply an act that we do that is complete, in and of itself. Rather, it is the first step of a journey, the beginning of our growth or maturation in faith that continues our whole life long. The term, “spiritual formation” is another term for “sanctification”, suggesting that Christ is increasingly being formed in us as we grow into an ever-deeper embrace of a commitment to justice, a willingness to use our money for the sake of the gospel and a desire for ever more loving relationship with God, our brothers and sisters in Christ and of all humanity – believers and unbelievers alike! It is what Paul referred to, when he wrote to the Christians in Galatia his wish for Christ to be “formed in you” (Gal. 4:19).

Building on his earlier metaphor of baptism, Paul adds now another magnificent metaphor to express his belief in the necessity of sanctification. He writes, “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like this” (vs. 5). The Greek word translated “united” is *symphytos* (from which we get the words “symphony” and “sympathetic”). The word literally means “being planted with”. What Paul is suggesting here is that whereas *justification* is the act of initially responding to Christ’s embrace of us, *sanctification* is the process by which we become more “Christ-like”! We are “planted” in Christ, and thus “grow up” into Christ, becoming more “united” (or “sympathetic” or “attuned”) to Christ and Christ’s priorities of justice, economic sharing, commitments to the elimination of poverty, and the deepest of loving and trusting relationships with God and each other. And when we become more “Christ-like” through such “growing up” into Christ, we increasingly become part of Christ’s “symphony” of that community of believers all seeking to live their lives “in concert” with one another, giving ourselves to the causes of justice and equity in the world, and being at one with God-in-Christ!

The result of being “planted” and “growing up in Christ” in both our public action as well as our personal spiritual formation is that, like Christ, we are now “dead” to any kind of life that enjoys sinning. “The death Christ died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also much consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (vss. 10-11). “Growing up” into Christ in the ways described by Paul here (so that such spiritual formation includes both public action and private devotion) means that, in due time, we become repelled by sin! Those so growing into Christ will no longer seek to sin in order for grace to abound. In fact, the very idea will disgust them! Rather, all that such Christians will desire is to be “alive to God in Christ Jesus” and consequently to rejoice in the reality in and through their lives that “grace does much more abound”!

Psalm 114 deals with a celebration of the Exodus. It begins, “When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion” (114:1-2). Israel departed from Egypt in order to become in their person, as a nation, the sanctuary or dwelling-place of God. But the author doesn’t continue to develop the point that Israel is the abode of God. Rather, he continues to focus on how God delivered Israel.

The remainder of Psalm 114 describes the overwhelming ways God acted to protect Israel in the wilderness and to bring them to the Promised Land. “The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned

back. The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back? O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rocks into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water” (vss. 3-8).

God delivered Israel at the Red Sea (vss. 3,5) by parting the waters. He brought a great earthquake upon them at the time of the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (vss. 4, 6-7). God gave them water from a rock to sustain them in their wilderness wanderings (vs. 8). And, finally, he parted the waters of the Jordan River to bring them into their promised land (vs. 5b). And all this, God did in order to sustain Israel in their pilgrimage and to bring them to his best intentions for them.

And what about us? Has not God worked equally miraculously in our lives and in our corporate history to bring us to God’s place for us?

Mark 16:1-8 is perhaps the most confusing account of the resurrection of Jesus that appears in the four gospels. In fact, it is no resurrection story at all, but rather an empty tomb story. It is quite similar to the stories that appear in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John – except that no resurrected Christ appears to the people at the tomb. Instead, Mark simply ends his story quite abruptly with the women who found the empty tomb, afraid to share what they have seen with anyone else. Why that is so, we will explore later in this exposition.

The close of the fifteenth chapter of Mark tells us that Jesus was buried in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. The tomb was described as a hole or cave within a rock wall, and it was sealed with a giant stone that was rolled in front of the doorway to the tomb and sealed shut. Mark’s story then continues.

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:1-8).

That’s it! That’s the way the Gospel of Mark ends! It simply stops with the women running away from the tomb, frightened to say anything about what they had seen.

But what had they seen? They had not found the corpse of Jesus that they had expected to find (and to prepare for proper burial). But neither had they seen a resurrected Jesus. All they saw was an empty tomb and a man telling them that Jesus had “been raised” and was consequently

“not here”. He intimated that Jesus was alive again because he said that he was “going ahead of (the disciples and Peter) to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he promised you”. But there was no actual Jesus. In the other gospels, Jesus met with the disciples, broke bread and ate fish with them, talked with them and taught them. But in Mark – there is no Jesus at all, only the rumor of a risen Jesus! What a strange way to end a Gospel!

Many have sought to make correction of such an abrupt ending. Although the most ancient manuscripts simply end at verse 8, other endings begin to make their appearance in the 2nd and 3rd Christian centuries; one has found its way into the KJV, RSV and NRSV as verses 9-20, but it is always bracketed to indicate that it is likely not an authentic ending of Mark. It is clearly built upon an integration of the other three gospel accounts. So it must be considered as spurious. Therefore, we are still left with a very abrupt ending to this Gospel.

There are two plausible explanations for the sudden ending of the Gospel of Mark. The first is that there was originally a much longer ending, similar to those written by Matthew, Luke and John – but that somehow it has gotten lost. Of course, that is pure conjecture. So, although one could consider the possibility, you can’t build biblical study upon a supposed document you can’t study.

The other explanation is that Mark meant to end his book as rapidly as he did, indeed, end it – that it ended precisely the way Mark intended to end it! But why would he do that? Why would he end his book with no ending at all?

Well, consider the theme of the Gospel of Mark. The genius of the book by Mark is its analysis and its acting out of power. The root of Israel’s problem, Mark teaches, is its understanding of power (Mark 10:32-42). Both conservative and revolutionary, both Roman governor and Zealot, both Jewish priest and Pharisee understood power as domination, as control, as enforcement. But what if Godly power is something entirely different? What if true power is relational?

This is what Jesus is proposing in his radical statement to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

The image of a servant captures the essence of authentic power, Jesus teaches. The image of the one “who gives his life as a ransom for many” captures the power of Jesus’ third way. Such a person who exercises servant power is “the man or woman for others.” This is Jesus’ “third way” – the radical solution that would keep the Jewish and Roman worlds from destroying each other.

But was Jesus right? Or was he a victim of his own delusion? The “realists” of Israel, whether of the Jewish or Roman persuasion, would say he was a dreamer, naïve, one who threw himself against the unyielding phalanx of Roman swords, high priests’ law codes, and a procurator’s cross.

So was the third way no way? Did the exercise of relational power reveal itself to be as useless as revolutionary power? For all his good intentions, had the radical rabbi lost? The most important portion of the eight final verses that conclude the Gospel of Mark are these words:

“As the women entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:5-7).

“He is going ahead of you to Galilee.” It is here that the Gospel of Mark comes to its abrupt end. But its end is, intentionally, no end at all! Jesus is going before them – before the women to whom he appears as the only ones who stood faithfully beside him through his crucifixion, before the disciples who have fled in terror, before Peter who had denied him. He is going before all of them, back into Galilee, back to where the story first began, back to where it is always beginning afresh, back to where God’s people always keep engaging Jesus. We keep experiencing the *relational power of Jesus* – a power that could not be killed by even the greatest powers of Rome or Jewish high priests. As each person meets the resurrected Jesus and comes into relationship with him, he is radicalized as Jesus was radicalized, he accepts the call to the third way of Jesus to change the world, its power structures and its abuse of power by practicing the power of the love that can confront and can call to a different political, economic and spiritual reality. As each person meets the resurrected Jesus and decides whether to accept Jesus’ call to a radicalized faith and to act upon that faith, the new covenant community keeps on being recreated, and we follow Jesus into our “Galilees” as we each answer his ongoing call to discipleship. And as we follow him, then – and only then – is the Gospel of Mark completed as it is being lived out in our world!

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