

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; others may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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1 Samuel 3:1-10,(11-20)

NRSV

Hannah, Samuel's mother, barren for many years, has given her son to the service of the Lord in thanksgiving for his gift of a child. He serves Eli in the temple at Shiloh. (Jerusalem is not yet an Israelite city.)

For many years (during the period of the *judges*), revelations from God ("word", "visions", v. 1) were rare. The "lamp of God" (v. 3) burned throughout the night (per Exodus 27:21), near the Ark, so it was not yet morning. Perhaps Samuel lay near the lamp to tend it.

God calls Samuel, as he had Moses, Gideon and Samson. Samuel thinks it is Eli who is calling him (vv. 5, 6); he does not recognize God's voice because he had not come into direct contact with him (v. 7a); it is Eli who realizes that God is calling the boy (v. 8c). Samuel then acknowledges God's call.

Vv. 11-14 and 2:27-36 probably explain why the priests in later times were descended from Zadok and not from Eli: his sons were *a bad lot*: see 2:12-26. Samuel was later recognized as a prophet, and God continued to appear to him at Shiloh.

Psalm 139:1-5,12-17

NRSV

The part of this psalm used today is a hymn praising God for his knowledge of all (vv. 1-5) and of the psalmist (vv. 13-17). God has "searched" (v. 1) the psalmist and known him. (Knowing his *sitting down* and *rising up* is a Semitism for knowing him completely.) God knows everything he thinks and his "ways" (v. 3). God finds him wherever he goes, for God is everywhere; the psalmist couldn't escape from God even if he tried (vv. 7-12). God knows him because he created him (v. 13).

In v. 14, he praises God for the wonders of his works, particularly for the mystery of the creation of humankind. The "depths of the earth" (v. 15) is a figure for the womb, perhaps reflecting the second creation story (Genesis 2:7).

Then v. 16: either God knew the length of the psalmist's life before he was born, or he knew his character from the moment of conception. That God keeps a record of humankind is found in several psalms, and elsewhere. V. 17 is an exclamation of wonder. To count all God's thoughts, the psalmist would need to live for ever (v. 18).

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

NRSV

It seems that there were people at Corinth who saw the reverses Paul suffered as evidence that he was not an authentic apostle, a true spokesman for Christ. Sure-

ly, they claimed, an apostle who displayed such weakness could not be a prime agent in spreading the good news.

But Paul ("we") proclaims Christ rather than himself. He is their *slave*, one totally committed to God. God is the one who gives "light" (v. 6), understanding. (The quotation is from Genesis 1:3). The "light" shone in Paul's life in his conversion experience. But while we have access to this understanding, we are fragile and weak like "clay pots" (v. 7) – so this amazing power must be from God.

But Paul still keeps going, despite setbacks (vv. 8-9). He realizes in his weakness ("carrying ...", v. 10) that he needs the salvation made available through Jesus' death, so that he may be alive in Christ, but he is always prone to failure. God intends that Paul suffer duress ("death", v. 12), so that the good news may be known.

Mark 2:23-3:6

NRSV

2:1-3:6 present stories about the growth of opposition to Jesus. When Jesus has dined with people whose trades made them ritually unclean, scribes have questioned why he associates with such outcasts. He has told them that he comes to those in need of purification and not to those who think themselves godly. When others have questioned why his disciples do not fast, he has told them that while he is on earth is a time for joy and not for mourning.

Now he challenges the law stipulating what may be done on the sabbath. Pharisees attack Jesus through his disciples for both exceeding the distance a Jew might walk on the sabbath, and for doing work on this day. Per Exodus 34:21, harvesting was not permitted on the sabbath; they construe "plucking heads of grain" as work prohibited on that day.

In v. 25, Jesus answers a question with a question: surely you recall that David broke the Law by eating bread from the altar, and by permitting his "companions: to do likewise? (v. 25-26). Then v. 27: human needs are more important than observing the sabbath, so "the Son of Man" (v. 28, in Mark: Jesus) has sovereign power ("lord") even over the sabbath law, a basic Jewish principle.

3:1-6 show that Jesus is powerful in deed and word. The man's illness is not life-threatening, so healing him on the sabbath would contravene Jewish practice. Jesus' question (v. 4) is about a universal principle. "They" (v. 2) would agree that on this day an action in accord with the Law is good, but for them, this is not the question. To Jesus, healing is saving lives, part of God's intervention in the world; to miss an opportunity to restore health is akin to killing. So "they" are faced with a dilemma: "they were silent" (v. 4).

Jesus is angry (the only time in the gospels) because they, seeking to *get him*, are fixed in their thinking. In v. 6, the Pharisees conspire with the "Herodians", a secular group, to "destroy him": a strange partnership with only one aim in common.

