Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 28, Year A
First Reading

Judges 4:1–7 (track one)

And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand'?" (ESV)

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 (track two, omitted verses in italics)

Be silent before the Lord GOD!
    For the day of the LORD is near;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice
    and consecrated his guests.

And on the day of the LORD's sacrifice—
"I will punish the officials and the king's sons
    and all who array themselves in foreign attire.
On that day I will punish
    everyone who leaps over the threshold,
and those who fill their master's house
    with violence and fraud.

"On that day," declares the LORD,
    "a cry will be heard from the Fish Gate,
a wail from the Second Quarter,
    a loud crash from the hills.
Wail, O inhabitants of the Mortar!

For all the traders are no more;
all who weigh out silver are cut off.

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the men
who are complacent,
those who say in their hearts,
'The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do ill.'

Their goods shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them."

The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter;
the mighty man cries aloud there.
A day of wrath is that day,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring distress on mankind,
so that they shall walk like the blind,
because they have sinned against the LORD;
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.
Neither their silver nor their gold
shall be able to deliver them
on the day of the wrath of the LORD.
In the fire of his jealousy,

all the earth shall be consumed;
for a full and sudden end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 25:14–30

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ He also who had

received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Judges text (track one)

Our text from Judges this week is the smallest sliver of the story of Deborah, perhaps the most powerful woman in the Bible, whose story deserves so much more than just two chapters. But this is all we have of her, and even in those two chapters we begin to see the way that her role has been diminished in the telling. It is an indicator for us of the way that the roles of women throughout the Bible have been lessened first in the text itself. The history of the interpretation of these two chapters also tells us of the way that the readers of the text (men) have undermined women's contribution to the history of God's people.

I would encourage you to take a moment (for that's all it will take) to look up Judges 4 and 5 and read them both. Get the whole story. There is a subtle but significant contrast between Deborah's song of victory in chapter 5 and the story as it is told in chapter 4. Chapter 5 is the older of the two texts, perhaps one of the two oldest passage of Scripture to be found in the Bible. (The other being the song of Miriam, the sister of Moses, after the crossing of the Red Sea.) In the way that the song depicts events, there is no hint of the shame suffered by Barak because of his refusal to go up to battle unless Deborah goes with him. Deborah is simply the leader. She calls up the commanders of the armies of Israel and they come, and defeat General Sisera.

By depicting Barak as weak, the chapter 4 already begins to undermine Deborah's place in the story. That is, her leadership comes in part from the failure of men to do what they should have. This theme is echoed among the various interpreters of these chapters, even to this day. But in the older text Deborah's place is simply one of leadership. There is no hint of the "failure" of men to assume their rightful place as

leaders. Neither does the song say that she entrusts the battle to Barak, only agreeing to accompany him. She leads, simply leads.

In spite of chapter four's subtle reduction of Deborah's place among the Judges of Israel, it still gives indications of just how powerful a woman she was. Some of these we find in our text for this week. First and foremost, she is said to have been both prophet(ess) and judge. The only other person who filled both these roles in Scripture is Samuel. Deborah is also a skilled military strategist. She tells Barak to take his armies to the banks of the River Kishon, where the muddy ground will counter the superior technology of Sisera's iron chariots. Only David is described as both a leader and military strategist, but he is not a prophet. So in Scripture, only Deborah is said to have filled all three of these roles. Two of them we find in today's reading.

In the opening sentence describing her we find another possible way that the translators of the fourth chapter seek to diminish her. She is said to have been the "wife of Lappidoth." Her identity remains tied to a man the man whose wife she is. And yet it's quite possible to translate this another way. In Hebrew, the way one names a man's wife is to say that she is the "woman" of the man. So Deborah is the "woman" of Lappidoth. But the Hebrew word *lappidoth* just means "fire." Now, it could be that this was the man's name. Barak means lightning. It is quite possible that Deborah was "the woman of fire." This certainly fits with her character. An intriguing possibility.

This is the only time in the entire three year cycle of the Lectionary that we find any mention of Deborah, so I do commend both chapters 4 and 5 of Judges to your reading. They're not long and it's a great story. I would also commend the paper by Cathy and Daniel Skidmore-Hess from which I learned all these interesting things about Deborah and her place in Scriptural history. There is so much more to it than I could include here. Here's the LINK.

Zephaniah text (track two)

I checked. We only have two readings from this prophet in the entire three year cycle of the Lectionary. But then, there are only three chapters attributed to Zephaniah, 57 total verses. And when I went to see what other text we read as part of the lectionary I realized why I found this passage so…. repellant. It couldn't be farther in tone or message than the other text we read during Advent in Year C. You'll probably recognize it. It begins:

> Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
> shout, O Israel!
> Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter of Jerusalem!

I included in italics the verses that our lectioneers had omitted, but those don't begin to suggest the horror that I felt when I read the verses that came *before* this week's. Here they are:

Zephaniah 1:2–6

"I will utterly sweep away everything
from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.
"I will sweep away man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds of the heavens
and the fish of the sea,
and the rubble with the wicked.
I will cut off mankind
from the face of the earth," declares the LORD.
"I will stretch out my hand against Judah
and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal
and the name of the idolatrous priests along with the priests,
those who bow down on the roofs
to the host of the heavens,
those who bow down and swear to the LORD
and yet swear by Milcom,
those who have turned back from following the LORD,
who do not seek the LORD or inquire of him."

I am adding these earlier, horrific verses because they are the nest within which our reading for this week is cradled. This vision of absolute destruction, not only of human beings but of all the creatures of the earth found in Judah, is the backdrop for our track two text, and it gives us context for the study that I will try to lay out.

As I searched for scholarly studies on our text for this week, I came across two articles that were really illuminating, and, though they did not reference one another, they reinforce each other's conclusions.

First, I should note that many scholars over the years have found the dissonance between one part of Zephaniah and some other to be so discordant that they insist that they must be from different sources. We have only to compare this week's chapter with the one that we read in Advent to imagine why that might be so. Fortunately, this is not a universal approach, and both of the authors I found this week prefer to read

Zephaniah as a unified whole. (This would not preclude some editorial emendations, as this prophet's work is included in "The Book of the Twelve" that we've studied elsewhere, and would have been edited here and there to help it fit into the collection of "lesser prophets.")

Readers who know me would recognize that I prefer to treat books like Zephaniah as from a single source, not only because I have a higher theology of "prophecy" than most biblical scholars, but also because I place a lot of weight on the inspiration of the canonical process that brought the text to us as it is. So that, whether written all by one person, there remains one Spirit that shapes the text that comes to us now.

Enough of that. First I'll give you links to the two articles I read this week that really caught my interest, instead of making you read through all my drivel to get to them.

First is "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?": The Polemic against the Wealthy and Zephaniah's Day of Yhwh by Tyler Kelley. This helps us to narrow the objects of the wrath we find in those opening verses, even though the wrath remains immutable. The second is Sanctified or Dedicated? הקדישׁ in Zephaniah 1:7. (I don't believe it. My word processor allowed me to paste the Hebrew.) Now, I can't read Hebrew, but the conclusion of this article is startling. I'll get to it shortly.

Now that I've wearied you with a lot of prologue, my thoughts on this passage from Zephaniah shouldn't take too long to read, so please hang in with me.

First - The author of the first article successfully narrows the object of the inexorable wrath to come on the "Day of the Lord" to the wealthy and powerful. In particular, the animals (but I suggest also the "man" of "man and beast") refer not to particular living things, but living things in general that are used to create idols. God seeks to cleanse the land of the idolatry that is mentioned in verses 4-7.

Second - The author of the first article also concludes that for Zephaniah there is no hope whatsoever for the powerful and wealthy. The only ones for whom there is any hope are the "humble of the land" of 2:3, the poor. Zephaniah speaks of those with gold and power as though they are everyone, but then makes note that a few, the poor, may be spared.

This remains a bitter pill for me, as there is no room for repentance and salvation for the rich in Zephanaiah's prophecy, but at least there is hope for the powerless.

Third - And this is the most startling bit I came across this week. The word translated as "consecrated" in our text this week, "the LORD has prepared a sacrifice and consecrated

his guests," is better translated "dedicated." This new approach comes to us from the second article, and may seem a small thing, but it really isn't.

This is because "dedicated" refers to the way that a sacrificial animal is "dedicated" to YHWH. There are two Hebrew roots that speak of consecration (or sanctification) and dedication. One of them speaks of a temporary "making holy" those who would attend a ceremony or feast. The other refers to a permanent "dedication." This is the root that is used to refer to the "dedication" of Solomon's Temple, but in the context of a sacrifice it is used to speak of the object of the sacrifice, not some temporarily "consecrated" attendee.

So, to use the author's words, "the guests *are* the sacrifice." (italics mine) As horrific as this image is to me, it fits hand-in-glove with the utter destruction the first author understood Zephaniah to foresee for the wealthy and powerful (in my reading, the ones who would expect to be invited to such a ceremony).

Thanks be to God that Zephaniah also gave us the hope that lives in chapter three. It provides a badly needed counter-balance to the gloom of the first two chapters. And while I am usually loathe to inject modern day political discourse into these Divergences, it did occur to me this week that Bernie Sanders and Zephaniah would probably have gotten along well.

Second Reading

Because this passage from 1 Thessalonians is so different in tone and vocabulary from the reassuring verses to be found in chapter four, some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that it is a later, non-Pauline insertion into the letter. However, the form this section takes is too similar to that of 4:13-18, and the shift in vocabulary and tone can be explained by Paul's use/adaptation of a pre-Pauline source, so the interpolation theories don't carry much weight. Rather, this section of the fifth chapter really functions as a conclusion to the reassurances found in the fourth.

This leaves us with a bit of a dilemma. Paul depicts the coming of the Lord as a sudden, violent and disastrous event, one that even threatens those whose preparedness might falter. What are we to do with that?

As Paul might have said, all I can offer you is my own thought on the matter. It isn't meant to be authoritative.

First, I am reminded that Paul says of us all that we "see as in a mirror, darkly." (1 Cor 13:12) This can be no truer than when we try to speak of the coming of the Day of the

Lord. Paul's vision of that future is only partial. While he reiterates some of the exhortations to soberness in the light of Jesus' return in Romans 13:11-14, I note that the warning of impending disaster has disappeared. It seems entirely likely to me that Paul's own understanding of that Day has evolved, matured in the years between the two letters.

Next, while employing the themes of dark and light, night and day that were common both to his Jewish traditions and to the secular philosophy of his day, Paul reshapes "day" and "light" to refer to the coming "Day" of the Lord. To say that his Thessalonian readers are "of the day" means that they belong to that future event and therefore have no need to fear it. But by the time he writes Romans the emphasis on fear and destruction (and therefore the need to be prepared against it) has gone. Now the night/day contrast has a much clearer sense of the believer's walking in the present in a reality that will be fully manifest at some future point.

Surely this is in better keeping with a Messiah whose taught us that the Kingdom of God is among us? This reminds me of teachings I've heard from Graham Cooke in which he says that God "lives backwards," from the future to the present, not that past to the present. We are encouraged to have that same mindset, living in the Day that is just as real as the past because in God all moments are "now." To live with an eschatological mindset isn't to wait patiently for the future, but to live so thoroughly in that hope that we draw that future into the present. This is how we become "light" to the world, by living as those who already walk in the promised Day.

Then I incorporate the suddenness and violence, the disaster of the coming of that Day this way. For those who walk in any security other than the one we draw from Jesus' expiating death, the sudden recognition of the truth of the nature of all reality will indeed be disastrous. Not eternally, but in the moment. It utterly crushes all false understandings of ourselves so as to make room for the Truth. I know that in my own experience there have been moments where Jesus has delivered me from false ideas about myself on which I'd leaned for decades. Even as a believer I had walked slowly up to the moment of transition and still found that stepping over that threshold caused the earth to shift under my feet. It was disastrous - to my (false) sense of self - but no more so than demolishing a derelict SRO in order to make room for the luxury dwellings God intended for me.

In my reading of this passage against the rest of Paul's writing, I believe that his eschatology changed from the emphasis we find in 1 Thessalonians to something much closer to what we find in Jesus by the time he wrote Romans. Yes, there remains a "not yet" but the emphasis is on how we live as those for whom the "already" is dominant. Set in the context of Paul's concerns for the affliction and faith of the Thessalonian

congregation, I see this passage less as an exhortation to moral behavior and more as a reminder of their identity(ies) in Christ so that the future might be more fully manifest in the present.

Gospel Text

Oh, my goodness. When I began to research papers written on the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25, I was looking for a view point sufficiently different from my own to shake up my usual interpretation and get me thinking again. I did *not* expect to find what I did. Even so, the one article I did find (and by extension three others that it mentions) did unsettle my traditional reading of the text, even though I finally rejected it.

You see, there's a way of reading this text that has emerged in the last 30 years or so, one that reads the text in light of the social location of Matthew's audience, that is, the poor. These authors view the profits earned by the first two servants as unjust exploitation in a capitalist environment. The retainers of the wealthy using the master's wealth to make the wealthy even wealthier. To these authors the third servant who refuses to participate in this usury is the hero of the story.

I'll be honest. When I first started reading this I began thinking, "Heavens, have I been reading this entirely wrong for my whole life?" I try to be open-minded about each text that we read in the Lectionary, not relying on what I've historically thought, so this new (to me) approach gained some initial traction. But the farther I read, the more I found myself shaking my head, thinking, "No, no. There's something amiss here." And there is. These authors read the text much too concretely, completely overlooking the "hiddenness" side of "parable." Yes, this and many other parables have direct connections to the lives of Jesus hearers and Matthew's congregation, but the whole point of the parable is to invite the reader/hearer to look beyond the immediate to find the deeper meaning.

So the reading I did on Matthew 25 did serve its intended purpose. It broke up some hardened soil and got me thinking again, and yes, even added a little bit to my older readings of the Parable of the Talents.

Jesus does use the image of an unjust system that would have been well known to His hearers. The system of crop loans with exorbitant interest rates that allowed lenders to foreclose on many properties thereby exponentially increasing their wealth would have been very familiar to them. Had Jesus concluded the "parable" with some condemnation of the rich man who went away or the servants who'd used such methods to increase his

wealth, we might conclude with those authors I mentioned earlier that Jesus intended to condemn them and that system.

Instead, Jesus turns that system on its head. His hearers are invited to be those who participate in a system that accrues at least one hundred percent profit simply by trying, a system that earns the praise of the master for the attempt, not the result. This functions as "parable" precisely because it would be heard in two ways by two different groups of people. The "elite" would a have heard it as a commendation of their practices, the poor as a promise that they who so much as try to use what Jesus has entrusted to them will enter into the pleasure of their master on His return.

There is another aspect of this reversal that I think is worth considering. Joachim Jeremias thought that this parable was directed specifically against the Scribes of Jesus' day, to whom great wealth (even one talent was worth roughly 20 years' earnings for the average worker) had been entrusted, but who had failed to use it as God intended. I give some weight to this possible reading because of Matthew's location of the parable during the portion of the Gospel in which Jesus' conflict with the Jewish authorities was most intense. Yes. It falls among other parables that are also focused on the interim between Jesus' ministry and His return, but it's proximity to the constant antagonism of chapter 23 suggests to me that Matthew's hearers might have heard this parable with Jesus' (and their) opponents in mind.

So what were the "talents" that were entrusted to the servants? Some suggest that they're the "gifts" with which we're endowed, even at birth, and that we're called to put them to use. I don't think they're quite that mundane. I liken this parable to that of the Sower and the Seeds. The "talent" entrusted to us is something with which we work to create a great harvest. It is the Gospel itself. When it lands on fertile ground, it produces thirty, sixty, even one hundred fold. Those who do not make use of the talent, the Gospel, to produce such benefit for the master are those who do not know Him. If we think Him harsh and unfair we will live in fear and hide even what we've been given in the ground. I liken this to certain Christians who have heard of the profligate love of God, but who continue to cling to the God whose primary desire is to set boundaries on that love, and so they never share the real Gospel, hiding it away lest their "hard" master find fault with them.

In the end, I believe that these people will one day face their master, and find the God they expect. Not in the sense of eternal damnation, but when they realize how wrong they've been their first reaction will be to expect the wrath they've always believed in. In that moment I think there will be ample weeping and gnashing of teeth, but not forever.