

The need to blame

By [Bruce K. Modahl](#)

September 22, 2014

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Modahl's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

I begin sermon preparation by reading through the texts and writing a 200-word summary of the themes I observe in that initial reading. I include this summary in an online publication for the congregation I serve. It's called "Sunday is Coming," a title with an edge for the preacher.

When I do this reading I look for trouble—for the obvious, palpable problems in the text. In this week's Ezekiel reading, the people accuse God of being unfair. They shift the blame for their sin to their parents. In the Gospel, the chief priests and elders attempt to trap Jesus. Either way he answers their question, they will be able to find fault with him. Jesus in turn asks them a question. Their answer, "We don't know," reveals that they are people who wish to be blameless even at the price of playing dumb.

What is behind this need to find fault and avoid blame? Why do we have to be right, to stoop to being self-righteous in order to make ourselves right?

The most self-righteous people I know are the faithless. It stands to reason. They have no other way to be right except by their own self-assertion, which often comes at the expense of others. The observation, however, only begs the question. What is behind this compulsion to be right?

I think it is because in any critical word, we hear the echo of God's judgment. At some deep level we know our lives are at stake.

I believe we have to press the diagnosis of the problem to this level if we are to understand how good the good news is. Jesus says, "Pass all your blame to me. I

want it. And in its place I will give you my righteousness.”