

Desolation and compassion

By [Cornelius Plantinga](#)

September 30, 2013

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Plantinga'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.*

Our texts *du jour* include passages from Lamentations and Habakkuk that lament or anticipate the desolation of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. What's it like when calamity or God's judgment leaves the land, the houses or the people desolate?

To see what it's like, preachers could wander through Detroit, or some of the emptied-out towns on the American prairie. They could then report on desolation from their own experience.

Or they could read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which tells what happened when the banks pushed the sharecroppers off the land and the wind swept away the crops and auctioneers sold the animals and the houses were left behind.

What's it like for a house to be left behind? In one of his virtuoso inter-chapters, Steinbeck tells us:

The weeds sprang up in front of the doorstep, where they had not been allowed and grass grew up through the porch boards. . . Splits started up the sheathing from the rusted nails. . . On a night the wind loosened a shingle and flipped it to the ground. The next wind pried into the hole where the shingle had been, lifted off three, and the next, a dozen. The wild cats crept in from the fields at night, but they did not mew at the doorstep any more. They moved like shadows of a cloud across the moon, into the rooms to hunt the mice. And on windy nights the doors banged, and the ragged curtains fluttered in the broken windows.

From Steinbeck the preacher learns in detail how abandoned houses break down. Maybe she could have gotten that much from reading *The Complete Idiot's Guide to*

*Purchasing Foreclosed Houses*, but it wouldn't be the same. Reading great literature about forsaken houses makes you care about the people who used to live in them. You *feel* the desolation—and maybe your feeling has the texture of compassion.