Preaching Helps

Second Sunday of Christmas — Easter Day

Traveling on the Internet from Epiphany to Easter

With this issue of *Currents* you are reading on screen rather than on paper. (If you don't have a screen, hopefully someone printed "Preaching Helps" for you or you won't be reading this!) There are, of course, financial reasons for moving from paper to screen but there are other reasons as well. People who have never heard of *Currents* will discover us for the first time and hopefully, return for many visits. Other preaching websites will link with "Preaching Helps" to provide a rich store of resources from different perspectives. You can encourage members of the congregation to dig into the texts along with you. Even as St. Paul used roads built by the Romans to travel from Damascus and Jerusalem through Turkey and Greece, and finally to Rome, we now make use of the Internet, which we didn't create, to reach across miles and oceans to spread the gospel.

What will be happening in the larger culture during these days from Epiphany through Easter? For some it will be the heart of winter, dark days awaiting the coming of Epiphany's light. As the star announced Jesus' birth to foreigners, the season of Epiphany breaks through our borders to see and hear people from around the world. Perhaps we will sing songs and hear texts in languages that are new to us. As Mary and Joseph took the child Jesus to Egypt we remember millions of parents and children seeking refuge and safety in lands far from home. Lent comes early this year with Ash Wednesday on February 10—three days after the Super Bowl. By February the early primary caucuses will fill television and mailboxes with campaign ads. How will the texts of Lent sound with the TV on in the living room? Will campaign promises sound like the promises that tempted Jesus in the wilderness?

Palm Sunday processions may be chilly even though March 20 is the beginning of spring and daylight saving time. In these pages I encourage preachers to focus on Palm Sunday texts, even if it has become customary to emphasize Passion Sunday with a reading from the synoptic passion story and perhaps no sermon at all. Luke's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is especially compelling (even though there aren't even any branches!) How can we encourage people to draw a purple frame on their calendars around the days of March 20–27? Though we know people are busy, can we help them walk through these days to the rhythms of Holy Week? The wondrous news of Easter will touch people in more profound ways if they experience the Great Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. Easter should surprise us. Jesus was not a daffodil sleeping under ground waiting to bloom in spring. "Christ is risen!" is shocking. Perhaps it is good when Easter comes early, before neither the season nor we are ready.

In deep gratitude to our writers and our readers,

Barbara K. Lundblad

Editor, "Preaching Helps"

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Second Sunday of Christmas
January 3, 2016

Jeremiah 31:7–14 [or Sirach 24:1–12]
Psalm 147:12–20
Ephesians 1:3–14
John 1:[1–9], 10–18

Engaging the Texts

Some congregations may celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany on this Sunday rather than on January 6. If that is the case, see the commentary on the Day of Epiphany that follows.

Though we don't often read from the apocryphal book of Sirach, that alternate text is a good choice today because John borrows Sirach's imagery for his Prologue. In Sirach, the personified female figure of Wisdom praises herself! Such a poem of personal praise is associated with the Egyptian deity Isis (*Harper Collins Study Bible*). We hear echoes of Proverbs 8 and 9 where Wisdom is also female and was with God from the beginning. In Sirach, Wisdom pitches her tent (*kataskenoun*) in Jacob, among the people of Israel. This verb includes a form of *shekinah,* the cloud that descended on the mountain and sign of God's presence in the tabernacle.

When we turn to John's gospel, the word translated "lived" or "dwelled" among us is a form of this same verb: "And the Word became flesh and "tented" or "tabernacled" among us…" As Raymond Brown writes, "…it is quite possible that in the use of *skenoun* the Prologue is reflecting the idea that Jesus is now the *shekinah* of God…" (Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I – XII,* 33). The eternal Word pitched a tent in our midst. This was shocking, to say the least! The Word in Greek is *logos*, as in our word "logic" or "logical." *Logos* was introduced into Greek philosophical thought by Heraclitus in the sixth century BCE in Ephesus, the traditional site of John's gospel. The Stoics thought the *logos* was the mind of God (Brown, *The Gospel According to John,* Appendix II, 520). We could imagine Greek philosophers nodding their heads as John's prologue began: "In the beginning was the *logos* and the *logos* was with God and the *logos* was God…All things came into being through [the *logos*] and without [the *logos*] not one thing came into being." (1:1, 3) "Yes, that's right!" the philosophers said, moving their chairs closer. But they started to wonder as John went on, for the *logos* began to sound like a person. This became radically clear in 1:14: "And the *logos* became flesh and lived (tented) among us." As *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* reminds us: "'Word became flesh' is a paradoxical formulation since 'flesh' is all that is perishable and 'logos' is a divine quality that is eternal" (158).

Was John trying to converse with philosophers by calling Jesus the *logos*? Perhaps. But John's Prologue is shaped even more by the figure of Wisdom in Jewish writings, including the book of Sirach: "In the Old Testament presentation of Wisdom, there are good parallels for almost every detail of the Prologue's description of the Word…If we ask why the hymn of the Prologue chose to speak of 'Word' rather than of 'Wisdom,' the fact that in Greek the former is masculine while the latter is feminine must be considered" (Brown, Appendix II, 523).

Between Sirach and John we hear a beautiful blessing from Ephesians. A prominent theme is our adoption as God's children through Christ. We hear connections to John's gospel where those who believe in the Word are given "power to become children of God." Hopefully people will hear language from the Rite of Baptism: "adoption as God's children" and "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit."

Pastoral Reflections

If your sermon on Christmas Day focused on John 1, where will your sermon on John's Prologue take you and the congregation today? Thankfully, every text has a surplus of meanings and the Prologue is deep enough for many sermons. The connections between Sirach and John are very compelling. Pointing out these connections will call for some teaching since Sirach is not a familiar text. Pitching a tent in our midst is more down-to-earth than "dwelling" or "living." There's something reassuring about Jesus pitching a tent among us, moving with us wherever we go.

As Raymond Brown reminds us, almost every aspect in John's Prologue is shaped by the portrayal of Wisdom in the Old Testament. In Greek, Wisdom is *Sophia.* Perhaps John could not imagine saying, "And *Sophia* became flesh and lived among us." Could we imagine saying that now? What difference would it make? A sermon might explore how we can open ourselves to more expansive ways of naming God. In her book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse,* Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson urges us to expand how we speak of God:

> The mystery of God transcends all images but can be spoken about equally well and poorly in concepts taken from male or female reality…Only if the full reality of women as well as men enters into the symbolization of God…can the idolatrous fixation on one image be broken (*She Who Is, 56*).

Today we might sing "Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth" (*ELW* 735), a hymn based on a text by Julian of Norwich. The second verse sings the wonder of incarnation:

> Mothering Christ, you took my form,
> offering me your food of light,
> grain of life, and grape of love,
> your very body for my peace.

Barbara Lundblad

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2016

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

> May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles pay tribute,
> and the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts.
> May all kings bow down before him,
> and all the nations do him service.
> —Psalm 72:10–11

O MORNING STAR

In T. S. Eliot's familiar poem, "Journey of the Magi," one of the visitors from the East to Jesus' birthplace asks this haunting question: "Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" His further musing strikes with the force of an epiphany: "There was a birth certainly,/We had evidence and no doubt./I had seen birth and death/But had thought they were different;/This birth was hard and bitter agony for us,/Like death, our death" (*Harper Book of Christian Poetry* [New York, 1973], 236). Here in the very gifts brought by the magi—and soon to follow in the slaughter of the Bethlehem boys—the cross intrudes into the church's joyous celebration of the good news that came to birth in Bethlehem.

The answer to the question, "Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" is clearly "both." For myrrh, the third gift, was used for the embalming of corpses. A strange gift to present to a new-born king. But it is a gift that casts its shadow forward from the near ending of Jesus' story, also eerily presaged by his anointing for burial by the unnamed woman at the home of Simon the Leper in Bethany (Matt 26:6 ff). As an ancient hymn of the church sings, "The golden tribute owns him king,/But frankincense to God they bring,/And last, prophetic sign, with myrrh/They shadow forth his sepulcher" ("O Chief of Cities, Bethlehem," LBW #81). "Myrrh" and "sepulcher" constitute not only an ingenious, chilling rhyme, but also warning and promising us that Good Friday is already on its way, a presentiment of the future.

Pastoral Reflections

As in most years, January 6 does not fall on a Sunday in this new year of 2016, and so the choice is to celebrate the Epiphany on Christmas 2, January 3, or hold a special service on Wednesday, January 6. With either choice it is possible to hold a special "Lessons and Carols for Epiphany" service, like its Christmas or Advent counterparts, featuring a series of appropriate readings interspersed with seasonal carols, hymns, and special music by choir, organ, and instrumentalists. Of course, plenty of congregational singing is essential, providing a last opportunity to sing Christmas carols, new and old. I've sometimes used the sermon time to reflect on a particular Epiphany hymn.

A physician once shared with a pastor a story of how he had fought against the idea of a personal God who intervened in human life. The doctor instead sought refuge in music. Bach particularly appealed to him because of the mathematical precision of his fugues. Meanwhile, the doctor's life was falling apart. His wife had left him; he had started drinking too much. One day, while driving, he pounded the steering wheel and cried out: "God, if you're really there, you're going to have to say something! And you know what kind of person I am. No screwing around now—no lousy signs. You're going to have to talk my language!"

Just then, so the story goes, on the car radio Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" suddenly began to play. The doctor began to sob and laugh simultaneously as he marveled at what an idiotic but wonderful word this was to him. And, just in case he might try to explain away the moment rationally—that Bach, after all, was played on the radio now and then (although this was not a classical station)—the next song to come on was the Brazilian *bossa nova* classic, "The Girl from Ipanema."

As much as I personally appreciate Bach (as well as *bossa nova*), I know that Bach does not communicate God universally, as much as he may have dedicated himself to doing so. But isn't it interesting that Bach would end up using the tune of the great Epiphany hymn written by Philipp Nicolai, "O Morning Star" (*ELW* #308), which Nicolai had adopted from a psalm tune popular in Luther's day, no less than six times in his church cantatas, so taken was Bach with this tune?

But it's the words of Nicolai's hymn that the melody expresses so poignantly that deserve our attention on this day when the prophet announces: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. …Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. …Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice…" (Isaiah 60:1, 3, 5a). In the first verse of "O Morning Star" we hear the luminescent words: star, fair and bright, shine, light, aglow, and glorious. Verse two continues the brightness: diamond, light divine, shine, light, and flame undying.

Verse five is my favorite. It begins, "Oh, let the harps break forth in sound!/Our joy be all with music crowned,/Our voices gaily blending!" and goes on to include invitations to music-making that include ten—count them, **ten**—exclamation marks, more than I've ever seen in a single verse of a Lutheran hymn!

While five's my favorite verse, there's yet a sixth concluding verse that reminds us that Nicolai wrote this joyous hymn in the midst of a great plague that took the lives of many of his

parishioners including members of his own family. I'd never paid much attention to this sixth verse until we sang it at my father-in-law's funeral for which I served as preacher. Even with no harps in evidence but only the wheezy electronic organ played by one of my wife's cousins, the words of verse six hit me with the force of an epiphany. We grievers had been handed a script to express our mourning in the context of Christian hope. The words we sang were these:

> What joy to know, when life is past,
> the Lord we love is first and last,
> the end and the beginning!
> He will one day, oh, glorious grace,
> transport us to that happy place
> beyond all tears and sinning!
> Amen! Amen!
> Come, Lord Jesus! Crown of gladness!
> We are yearning
> for the day of your returning.

This old warhorse of an Epiphany hymn had become a transfiguring funeral hymn brimming over with Advent hope. What an epiphany. Birth or death? Yes, both—life out of death.

John Rollefson

Baptism of Our Lord
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 10, 2016

Psalm 29
Isaiah 43:1–7
Acts 8:14–17
Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

> The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
> the God of glory thunders,
> the Lord over mighty waters.
> The voice of the Lord is powerful;
> the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
> —Psalm 29:3–4

GOD'S DELIGHT

A novel of some years ago titled *Picturing Will* by Ann Beattie (New York, 1991) tells the story of a young boy told first from the perspective of his mother, then his father and finally, a brief epilogue from Will's perspective. There's a passage in its "mother's section" that nicely caricatures our human tendency to want to control our children's destinies:

> Do everything right, all the time, and the child will prosper. Agreed? It's as simple as that, except for fate, luck, heredity, chance, the astrological sign under which the child is born, his order of birth, his first encounter with evil, the girl who jilts him in spite of his excellent qualities, the war that is being fought when he's a young man, the drugs he may try once or too many times, the friends he makes, how he scores on tests, how well he endures kidding about his short comings, how ambitious he becomes, how far he falls behind, circumstantial evidence, ironic perspective, danger when it is least expected, difficulty in triumphing over circumstances, people with hidden agendas, and animals with rabies (p. 52).

Whew! Ours, it seems, is a radically open and yet contingent universe of possibilities in which it is utterly impossible to safeguard our offspring from what the future holds in store for them.

Is it too much to wonder what God, the Divine Parent, was thinking as s[he] saw her Son Jesus heading off to the River Jordan, falling into line with the rag tag rabble sprinkled with a few tax collectors and soldiers who had come out into the hinterland to see what this Elijah-come-lately named John was up to in his preaching of repentance and ritual dunking of willing folks in the river? Luke is the most restrained of the Gospel writers in telling the story, reporting only "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" (vv. 21–22). No word of John trying to prevent Jesus, claiming his own unworthiness, as in Matthew (3:14). No word of the heavens being "torn apart" as in Mark (1:10) but only "opened." No momentous announcement by the Baptizer, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" as in John (1:29). But just the heartfelt, personal, reassuring Word heard from the Voice from the opened heavens: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22b). "In you I delight," is my preferred translation.

As a parent myself I can't help but imagine God smiling with divine approval while mouthing the words "Attaboy!" and giving Jesus a congratulatory pat on the back—much better than that silly bird stuff, don't you think? Jesus' baptism was his ritualized stepping out into the deep waters of life. To run the risk of further anthropomorphizing God, as any good parent knows, it couldn't have been easy for God to let Jesus go where he needed to go, where the Spirit would lead—which was where? Well, Luke tells us in the very next episode, which begins chapter 4: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (4:1–2a). Apparently the Spirit sent by God to "possess" Jesus did exactly that!

Here, the newly Spirit-possessed Jesus would have good reason to rely on God's Voice of affirmation as well as God's

Word in his people's scriptures, words such as those in today's reading from Isaiah that have instilled courage in generations of the faithful, Jewish and Christian alike: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (vv. 1–2).

Baptism is the beginning of the road for us, too—a ritual cutting loose from all those other worldly strings that try to make us dance to the tune of their tugging. It's a setting free to be who the Spirit within us and out ahead of us is calling us to be, knowing that God has spoken an affirming "Yes" over us and has said, "…you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you…" (Isaiah 43:4a). There are many fine hymns putting to melody today's Gospel reading but Fred Pratt Green's, "When Jesus Came to Jordan" (*ELW* #305) is especially recommended as is Brian Wren's less known "Welcome the Wild One" (#31 in *Bring Many Names* [Carol Stream, Ill., 1989].

John Rollefson

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 17, 2016

Isaiah 62:1–5
Psalm 36:5–10
1 Corinthians 12:1–11
John 2:1–11

> How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
> All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
> They feast on the abundance of your house,
> and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
> —Psalm 36:7–8

God's Sommelier

Our Gospel reading from John 2 concludes: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (v. 11). The word "glory," in Greek "*doxa,*" as in our English word "doxology," is a common enough word in the New Testament but one that's difficult to pin down in its meaning in everyday English. Originally meaning simply "opinion" or "reputation," *doxa* with God as its referent came to refer to God's ineffability, God's extreme otherness and unapproachability—often mediated by an aura of brightness.

What characterizes this Epiphany season that culminates in the "transfiguration" when Jesus is "glorified" before the three disciples, is the way in which we will see God's overwhelming glory breaking through into ordinary life in the person of Jesus. Only occasionally, in John's telling of the Jesus story, this glory of God is revealed in what John calls "signs" which the synoptics typically call "miracles." (For more on John's use of "signs" see Robert Smith, *Wounded Lord*, (Eugene, Ore., 2009), 30 ff.). Today's "sign" is the peculiar occurrence of Jesus turning water into wine, something, we must admit, that doesn't happen every day, something certainly bordering on the miraculous. But more important is for us to see why, to John's way of thinking, Jesus here somehow "*revealed his glory.*" What does this sign signify?

Weddings, to be sure, are ordinary enough human occurrences that we all have experienced. Yet they are also extraordinary in the sense that nowhere else do we celebrate in quite the same way a solemn covenant being made between two people in a public ceremony. Here our first reading from Isaiah reminds us how the metaphor of marriage dominates Hebrew scripture's description of Yahweh's relationship with Israel, God's chosen. In our reading we find Third Isaiah, the prophet of the return from exile, consoling Israel with assurances teeming with wedding and marriage allusions: "…you shall be called by a new name…you shall be a crown of beauty…and a royal diadem… You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married…" The reading concludes: "…as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (vv. 2b–5). Weddings are quite extraordinary occasions, once we look below the surface of all the hoopla and anxiety that surrounds them.

But, of course, hoopla (an interesting word) is itself significant, including the wine that is an essential part of the festivities. What provokes the telling of the story is that the wedding party had run out of wine—a real problem as I can testify from experience when we ran out of beer at my son's wedding held on my family's Wisconsin farm! An interesting, if somewhat puzzling detail of the story is that it is Jesus' mother who initiates the action by informing her son, "They have no wine." Jesus doesn't say to his mom, "What am I, the caterer?" like a good, sassy Jewish boy might to his meddlesome mother, but we can detect a note of vexation in his voice nonetheless as he retorts, "Woman"—imagine calling your mother "woman" for a start!—"Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" In other words, "Keep your nose out of it, Mom." But then he adds a seeming non-sequitur, "My hour has not yet come"—an out-of-place kind of flash forward to the "hour" which will all too soon "come" when Jesus will face the destiny and destination of the cross to which his life will lead. But blithely, his mother does not seem to notice, and simply turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you"—apparently not ready to take "no" or "mind your own business" for an answer.

Then the story takes an odd and unexpected turn as Jesus instructs that six stone water jars standing nearby be filled with water, then tells the chief steward to draw some out. The steward tastes the water, which has somehow become wine, and marvels

at the quality of its vintage, paraphrasing what sounds like an old wisdom saying: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now" (vv. 7–10).

I always think that John may be having a bit of fun with us in the details of the story he recounts. For example, John shows us a wonder-working Jesus who responds to his mother's concern first by putting her off but then doing an over-the-top job of creating on the spot over a hundred gallons of wine. By my reckoning that would be over sixty cases of the stuff! But that's not all. This isn't two-buck Chuck from Chateau Fresno—this is the good stuff which should be served while folks can still appreciate it.

John ends the story on this phlegmatic note: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (v. 11). No more reference to Mary and her response to Jesus' wondrous deed. In fact, strangely, Mary won't reappear again in John's gospel until Good Friday, at the foot of Jesus' cross. Jesus will again address her as "woman" as he commends her to the beloved disciple's care. This is a favorite scene in medieval art where Mary is often pictured with Mary of Magdala, holding a chalice to catch the blood that flows from Jesus' wounds. No, Jesus' hour has not yet come in Cana, but we are offered a glimpse of his glory as the awesome power of God breaks through in answer to a nagging mother's butting in because she wanted more wine. Water becomes wine in anticipation of how wine becomes Jesus' own blood in the church's continuing eucharistic feast. Glory be!

John Rollefson

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 24, 2016

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12–31a
Luke 4:14–21

Engaging the Texts

The gathering power of the Word of God is a strong thread through our readings for today. In our encounter with Nehemiah we hear that the Jews under the postexilic Persian Emperor Cyrus have gathered at the Water Gate. Unlike many times in the past, "the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law" (Neh 8:3). They come ready for God's word to speak to them in a time of need. That word comes in the shape of fasting and prayer. Yet, there is an invitation for the people to be joyful and celebratory because of what the Law has given them. The Law or Torah is given to bring life and hope. Because of their encounter they go away and feast!

Flashing forward to the time of Luke, we see the Jews now under Roman occupation gathered in the synagogue to hear the Word of God again. Jesus is invited to read from the scrolls. (Personally, I find it humorous that Jesus the Word reads the word.) He finds the place in Isaiah 61 and reads the words of the Prophet. Was this the reading for the day or did Jesus "find" that particular place? This reading fortifies Jesus' prophetic presence in Luke. His declaration of the prophet's call for a leveled playing field of good news to the poor and a time of God's favor (Jubilee) creates short-lived amazement in his words. The prophet Isaiah's words ring deeply with liberation promises spoken in many ways throughout the Hebrew Bible. "Today," says Jesus, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This binding power of the Word empowers Paul's wonderful image in 1 Corinthians 12 as we are admonished to look at the *ecclesia* as the actual body of Christ. All believers are essential to the total biology, the living, breathing organism of the church universal. All are gathered into one functional body striving to live into the more excellent way.

The power of the Word comes to us in the musical flow of the psalm for today as well. Psalm 19 draws us to the power of the word to bind the whole cosmos together—the earth and all that is within it. Verse seven promises that the reviving of the soul comes from the Word. The lectionary this week borrows language from many prophetic places. We hear this powerful biblical language under the paradoxical shadow of the Luke text that quickly ends in Jesus' rejection in his hometown, rejection that ultimately leads him to the cross.

Pastoral Reflections

We live in a fragmented world of opinions at the same time the global world is shrinking. It seems more and more people live their lives in binary language of right or wrong. Today even within our church walls we may find these hard lines drawn. Lines always divide. In such times, I believe that the ears of our people are turning their attention to the law to borrow a phrase from Nehemiah. The law our hearts yearn for—like the words of Paul—are words that bring us together in one body beyond the lines that keep us apart.

Can we imagine ourselves in the presence of Jesus, the Word of God, declaring good news to the poor and a year of jubilee? If so, we sense that, on the one hand, these words are for us, and on another hand, these words are also for others. Jesus' proclamation of a year of God's favor means we are called to forgive, let go, watch our money, be forgiven. Like Mary's words before Jesus' birth, this jubilee year means that for the lowly to be lifted up, the mighty must go down. That can be offensive. Like some of the folks in Jesus' hometown, some might ask, "Who is he to tell me when it's time to forgive?" Jubilee may be good news if I owe a pile of money to someone but

how is it good news if I have more money than I need? Who is Jesus to be my accountant? Good news to the poor is not always good news to the rich. The setting free of the oppressed may not feel like good news to the oppressor.

The challenge with this text is to point out the gathering power of the word to ALL people. Our human nature may mean we love to gather with people that look, sing, and operate like us; however, we are not called to be a body of hands or a body of feet. As my Hebrew professor Dr. Gwen Sayler used to say, "We are called into a holy cacophony of sounds all singing praise to God in their own way."

The Epiphany of these texts for the rich and the poor, the lost and the found, exists in the powerful summons of Jesus, Paul, and Nehemiah. This law, this Word, is life and abundance for all people. In the presence of Jesus we can trust the words of Nehemiah: "Do not weep any longer." (Neh 8:9) The freedom of God has come to all people.

Mike Carlson

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 31, 2016

Jeremiah 1:4–10
Psalm 71:1–6
1 Corinthians 13:1–13
Luke 4:21–30

Engaging the Texts

The prophet Jeremiah is speaking in a time of political and societal fractions: the nation split into Northern and Southern Kingdoms, outside rebel forces threatening, and new lines drawn in the sand every day. Into such a time Jeremiah speaks on the Lord's behalf, stating that he was formed from birth to declare the words of God. He is promised that he can speak without fear and address the nations with the authority of God.

In Luke Jesus is resting in his prophetic authority to speak a word to the nations. He tells the people gathered in his hometown that Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in their hearing. But in Greek the word is not "hearing." The word is "being." The fulfillment of the prophecy is embodied in Jesus' very being. The text, *graphia* in Greek, is embodied now. Isaiah 61 comes true in the being of the one who is reading it. But, rather than rejoicing in that proclamation, the people are furious. They take the hometown boy to the brow of a hill to cast him off—much like the hill of the crucifixion. But Jesus escapes from his impending doom, true to the promise of Psalm 71.

The psalmist goes to great lengths to show us the refuge God promises—not a cliff of death, but a rock of refuge (71:3). The ones inflicting hatred or injustice are being thwarted by the saving power of God. We see evidence of this in Luke 4:29 when Jesus eludes his attackers. We hear the promise in Jeremiah, we hear the promise in the psalm, and we see the promise enacted in Luke when Jesus escapes being hurled off the cliff. This also reminds us of the temptation story of Jesus and the devil in Luke 4:9–10. The devil's question then was, "IF you are the Son of God then jump." In not falling off the cliff and dying in Nazareth, Jesus appears to be letting the readers make their own conclusions about who he is. Jesus did not fall off the cliff and he did not dash his foot against the stone. Jesus' rescue from harm holds together Jeremiah's words about the safety of the prophet, Isaiah's words about how God protects God's chosen, and the psalmist's promise that God is our refuge.

Given the witness of the texts to the person of Jesus and the power of God displayed in the embodiment of the promise, we move to 1 Corinthians 13. Paul is providing a strong polemic for the love expressed in a Christian community. Though often read at weddings, Paul wasn't thinking about weddings. He was writing to a community as fractured as Jeremiah's divided country. Paul ends this chapter by saying, "Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (13:13). We would have expected Paul to say "the greatest of these is faith"—for he was the great apostle of faith. But he knew that love was what was most needed in that fractured community of believers.

Pastoral Reflections

Christian love is risky business. Jesus embodied that love, lived that love, demonstrated that love, died and was resurrected by that love. For many years the church has been sustained by believers who lived as if they believed our very being is held in the hands of God. Even if we die we trust in the love of God to rescue us from the jagged cliffs of death.

The universal capacity of Jesus to love without fear shapes the communal life of the church. In the book *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed* by Phillip P. Hallie we learn of a Protestant village in southern France during World War II. The people of the town hide Jewish families in their homes to protect them from Nazi persecution. This kind of action taken by the body of Christ is emboldened by the power of the Holy Spirit and the agape love of Jesus. The people of this village grasped the depth of what it is to be the hands and feet of Christ.

In a time of dramatic church change and the decline of church membership it is easy for us as clergy to forget the promises that are abundant throughout scripture. Fear grips communities and some communities even use people's fears to promote their own growth. However, today's scripture texts call us to a new vision. They call us to imagine and become a community that can proclaim the good news of God here and now. If we are the body of Christ then we are free to love those we would never invite to dinner. Indeed, we are called to love people in the congregation with whom we disagree. What would it mean for us to put flesh on Paul's letter to the

Corinthians? Think about the Christian community you're part of. See specific faces and hear people's voices. How can we live out Paul's letter where we are? "Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." How can these words be fulfilled today in our hearing and in our living?

Mike Carlson

Transfiguration Sunday
February 7, 2016

Exodus 34:29–35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2
Luke 9:28–36 (37–43a)

Engaging the Texts

These texts have much in common regarding the holiness and majesty of God. They also have much to say about how we as humans respond to the glory of God. Imbedded in Exodus 34:29–35 is an understanding of the separateness of God from humanity. God is so holy that being in the presence of God changes one's being. This change is frightening and threatening to our very existence. God summons Moses up to Mt. Sinai. The mountain is covered with the veil of a cloud so that the glory of God can be held separate from the world. After his experience with God, Moses' appearance was changed for a time. His face evoked awe and fear from the people of God.

Some of the reasons for this understanding of God come to us in the psalm for today. Psalm 99 includes words of God's majesty that are extreme. Enthroned and exalted, God enacts justice and is beyond all human reproach. The dominating language of the psalm reminds us that we are talking about God here. This is not some philosophical idea, but God who can and will be set apart from humans in many ways.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus is often compared to Moses. In his prophetic illustrations, his reading from the prophets, and now his ascending the mountain, Jesus is connected to the history of God's revelations in the past. On the mountain, Jesus' appearance changed dramatically and his clothes became dazzling white. He talks with Moses and Elijah, as Peter, James, and John look on sleepily, wondering what this all means. The presence of the Law and the prophets not only fulfills the prophecy of the Hebrew Bible, but also points to who Jesus is. If that is not enough, God comes once more in a cloud to tell those present that Jesus is the Son, the Chosen one. The words echo the words Jesus heard at his baptism (3:22), but with one important addition: "listen to him." This isn't simply a time to connect to the past but to listen to God's story now in the present. This powerful exchange of God (*heteron* in Greek) portrays Jesus like Moses. But in this case Jesus does not cover his face. There will be no distinct separateness from the people. After his transfiguration Jesus walks back down that mountain and exercises his authority over the demonic powers on earth. Jesus, God's chosen one, is distinct from humanity but also profoundly connected to humanity.

Our Second Corinthians text draws a distinction between Jesus and Moses. Paul suggests that Jesus not using the veil reveals the true being of Christ. This isn't only about Jesus but also about us. "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another…" (3:18). That is, transfiguration also takes place in our lives through the power of the Spirit.

Pastoral Reflections

When we speak of glory some of us cannot talk about it without looking to the cross. It is there that glory is redefined. It is there in Matthew, Mark, and Luke when the temple curtain or veil is torn from top to bottom. This opening of God's kingdom for all people does not diminish God's power or authority, but this torn curtain makes the connection with God more intimate.

The power of God has become unveiled in Christ. The love of God has come near to us. And we as individuals and the corporate church are continually being transformed into the community God wants us to be. In so many ways our old selves implore us to put the veil back up in the temple, to cover up the face of Christ, to take glory away from the place of suffering. We would love to have a God who would never suffer. Clean it up and hide it away. But the veil—the curtain of separation—would never have been torn apart without the cross. We are invited down the mountain with the unveiled Christ at our side, full of grace and power, ready to embrace the wounds and wants of the world.

Do our churches place veils back on God? Do we want God kept inside a booth up on the mountain? Do we want to have our clergy veiled with a shroud of holiness? All too often, I fear the response is "yes." But the gospel is a gift that sets us free. In Jesus we are free to be church together with the fullness of God.

In many ways we reenact the experience of transfiguration in the Eucharist. In the bread and wine we experience the fullness of God. In the pouring out of wine and the breaking of bread we are blessed to see the down-to-earth God. At the end of Luke Jesus the stranger walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It was not until the breaking of bread that they recognized who he was. We are invited to take the presence of Jesus into ourselves, becoming part of us on a cellular level. We partake of the body of Christ and are transformed into the body of Christ. No curtain, no veil—just loosened love in the world.

Mike Carlson

Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Engaging the Texts

Ash Wednesday presents us with Old Testament texts that are hard to get a handle on for various reasons. Joel sounds the alarm with disorienting imagery and undefined threats. While the more extensive depiction is excised from our pericope, the first lines communicate a sense of dread, with the unknown only heightening the terror. Before we can make heads or tails of the situation our attention is directed to the one who can rescue us. We are implored to not just turn, but to set ourselves running in the direction of the Lord. There is also great ambiguity in the alternative Old Testament text of Isaiah. Scholars are uncertain of author, date, socio-historical location, or even how best to classify and approach these latter chapters for interpretation. The text can be located sometime in the generations following the return from diaspora and during the period of restoration. However, the haziness may have been intended by the writer(s) in order to affect a wider audience. As Christopher Seitz in his commentary "Book of Isaiah 40-66" proposes, "The text from its beginning was felt to have an ongoing, eschatological import, beyond the circumstances of its first delivery" (*The New Interpreter's Bible,* Vol. VI, 321).

The confusion continues in our New Testament texts. We do not know the exact situation Paul is dealing with in 2 Corinthians. Much like the Old Testament texts, the threat is vague. In addition, the "we" language throughout this passage puts the listener in an uncertain position in relation to the text. Is Paul speaking in the voice of "we" to remind the Corinthians that he is not isolated in his teaching and authority, but rather is in relationship with colleagues or the church universal? Or is Paul's intention to draw the listeners in, considering themselves a part of the "we"? Many a seminary professor has responded "yes" to such "this or that" questions. Perhaps the answer is indeed yes to both. Finally, we come to Matthew with its call to privacy and even secrecy in religious practice. This is strange instruction for the disciples to receive prior to beginning their public ministry. But it is even stranger considering that just a moment earlier Jesus told them to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works" (5:16). The entire "Sermon on the Mount" is full of impossibilities and paradox. Considering that the experience of following Jesus will be anything but straight forward, perhaps this was the best preparation the disciples could have had.

Pastoral Reflections

This year, the scriptures of Lent seem especially scattered—ricocheting from prophets to Pentateuch, from one epistle to another, from Gospel to Gospel. The only consistency appears in four lessons from Luke in weeks two through five, but even these passages come in a scrambled order. Perhaps the theme for this season is within the lectionary itself: a stirring up and unsettling from the usual routine.

From week to week in scripture, there seems to be very little continuity into which we can settle. This may prove challenging for the listener as well as the preacher. We cannot gather momentum by returning to the same book or letter for weeks in a row, but neither can we settle into a rut. In the world of exercise this is called "muscle confusion," in which routines are constantly changed so that the body never has a chance to get acclimated. This variety is credited with maintaining a high level of challenge and thereby producing greater results. Perhaps our Lenten period of "scripture confusion" can guide us through a season of variety and challenge in our spiritual exercises to similar benefit.

Now is a time for uncertainty. The lessons draw us in and assail us with challenges from a number of fronts. The ambiguity of each text creates room for the listener of any time or place to enter in. These undefined threats, unnamed opponents, and universal challenges call to mind our own fears and struggles. We emerge from these texts feeling overwhelmed and inept, just in time to take inventory of our lives. Our behavior, our intentions, our perceptions, our relationships, our means of self-protection, our efforts toward comfort, our worship—all that seemed good enough the day before, we now confess to have missed the mark. In our individualistic culture, it may prove difficult also for our parishioners to see these as confessions of structural sin. The Isaiah text is a great resource for contemplating the sin of the community. Speaking to the whole people of God, the writer contrasts the fasting of personal piety with the true fast for which God calls: "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke" (58:6). As a church we are nowhere near what had been hoped for us as "the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in" (58:12). It is time to acknowledge and repent.

The proclamation of Matthew is juxtaposed with the most visible display of piety in our Lutheran tradition. Even as a pastor, I still go back and forth every year, wondering, "Should I wash it off, or leave it on?" Following that, an even more significant question, "Should I share it on social media?" It may seem silly to some, but I truly do feel quite self-conscious and conflicted about displaying my piety. Maybe this is just one way we feel the intended effect of these lectionary selections.

The scriptures for Ash Wednesday leave us feeling unsettled and uncertain about a number of things in our lives.

Remember, just days before we basked in the bright light and clarity of Transfiguration Sunday. Now plunged into darkness, it is not surprising that we are left disoriented, reaching out for something, someone to steady us.

Sarah Trone Garriott

First Sunday in Lent
February 14, 2016

Deuteronomy 26:1–11
Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16
Romans 10:8b–13
Luke 4:1–13

Engaging the Texts

The first Sunday in Lent offers scriptures of encouragement for people beginning a journey. Deuteronomy recalls the story of God's deliverance from the time of Jacob's arrival in Egypt, leading to the exodus of his many descendants, continuing through their arrival in the land of Israel. Through every phase God was faithful to the people. This history may have served as a confession of faith for the original audience of Deuteronomy, people who were again yearning for the fulfillment of the covenant promise. According to Ronald E. Clements in his commentary on Deuteronomy, at the time of writing, "very little original territory that had constituted the Davidic-Solomonic empire remained under the control of Jerusalem" (*New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. II, 481). These foundational stories steadied the people in their time of disappointment, and helped them look toward the future with hope. In the text, the reforms of the deuteronomic movement become part of the story of salvation, giving them an active way to participate in and give thanks for God's unfolding promise.

Not only are the Romans beginning a relatively new venture as church, but they are also recovering from a recent experience of diaspora. According to N.T. Wright in his commentary of the Romans, "a large proportion of Roman's substantial Jewish population had to leave the city in the 40s CE following a riot that may have resulted from early Christian preaching among the Jewish community in Rome" (*New Interpreters Bible Commentary,* Vol. X, 406). Paul's letter is written in the mid-50s, around the time that expelled Jews were allowed to return to the city. Paul offers the conflicted community a way forward, identifying for them the central things of the faith. Much like the passage from Deuteronomy, this passage reminds the people of God's promise and offers resources to continue in hope. Also, similar to Deuteronomy, Paul presents the early church movement as a continuation of God's work of salvation.

In Luke, prior to beginning his ministry, Jesus endures a time of testing in the wilderness. Moving from the banks of the Jordan to the wilderness to the pinnacle of the temple, we are again reminded of significant moments in the history of the people of Israel. The devil brings Jesus to a high place and demands his worship, bringing to mind the reforms of the deuteronomic movement. Even the line "one does not live by bread alone," evokes the Hebrew people's monotonous diet of manna punctuated by the surprise treat of quail. The story of God's faithfulness is the subtext for the scene. Meanwhile at the forefront, for every challenge the devil makes, Jesus returns to the scriptures. Jesus' responses seem less intent on defeating the devil through debate, but instead, are confessions of faith. The devil knows he had been beaten, not by Jesus' logic, but by his resolve.

Pastoral Reflections

Where Ash Wednesday left us stumbling in the dust, the first Sunday in Lent gives us some solid footing on which to stand. Each scripture turns us again to the ancient truth: that God is the one who can and will deliver the people. Taken together, the scriptures give a sweeping story of God's faithfulness. There is much here that can resonate with God's people in your place and time. What decline or failure are your people feeling disappointed about? What conflict or change have they recently come through? What new and challenging journey are they facing? One thing is certain: God's people have never been able to stay in a state of equilibrium for very long. Things are always changing. No matter where they may be on their journey, as individuals or as a community, God will be faithful. But in every place and time, God's people have needed to be reminded of this truth.

In addition to the stories of scripture, your community has their own stories of God's faithfulness. Perhaps there is a way to help people give voice to these stories, as a way to remind one another. Testimony is very powerful, whether it is shared through writing, video or audio recordings, shared one on one, or proclaimed from the pulpit. Perhaps some of these remembrances can be fashioned into a kind of "confession of faith" for the community to speak out loud during worship. After all, the Apostles' Creed can be understood, not just as definition of belief, but as a litany of gifts we have been given. Perhaps that litany can continue with some of the experiences of your own community.

Fortified by the good news of God's faithfulness, the community can look toward the future with trust, even if that future appears ominous. The bulk of the Lenten season still lies ahead. The cross looms in the distance. And next week, our scriptures will bring a message of both hope and foreboding.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Second Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2016

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17—4:1
Luke 13:31–35

Engaging the Texts

The scriptures of the second week of Lent articulate God's promise, albeit with some menacing details. Many are familiar with God's promise to Abram, illustrated by a sky full of sparkling stars. But in this passage we also see Abram shooing carrion eaters away from his gory sacrifice. It is darkness, smoke, and flame that accompany the sealing of the covenant. There is something frightening and dangerous about this promise, an aspect of the covenant that the missing verses underscore. Before this promise will come to fulfillment, Abram's descendants will be enslaved for generations. And even though Abram is said to have "believed the Lord" (v. 6), we know that in the following chapter he will take matters into his own hands, bringing additional suffering into the story.

While joy and thanksgiving are at the forefront of Paul's letter to the Philippians, persecution and death are ever present. As Paul urges his brothers and sisters to "join in imitating" him in verse 17, he writes these words from a prison cell. There is evidence in the letter that the Philippians are also experiencing persecution. For the Philippians, the promise that Christ will "transform the body of our humiliation" in verse 21 spoke to actual matters of life and limb. Meanwhile, there are opponents living lives of indulgence—a tempting alternative to the life of bodily suffering and sacrifice. As Morna D. Hooker writes in her commentary on Philippians, the "citizenship" in heaven that Paul promises, "would have been particularly significant to the citizens of Philippi, who, because the city was a Roman colony, held citizenship in the distant city of Rome also" (*New Interpreters Bible,* Vol. XI, 535). The privileges and responsibilities of their dual citizenship could not help but come into conflict.

The gospel lesson begins with a Pharisee warning Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Jesus is not intimidated by the threat of Herod. He already knows where he will die, and it is not here in Galilee. Jesus has been teaching and healing extensively in the area, resulting in many opportunities to get the best of the Pharisees. Every attempt the Pharisees have made to make Jesus look foolish has failed, and their growing frustration is well documented in the preceding chapters. Jesus will not be bested by them, nor will he be scared away. It is not time yet to move on to Jerusalem. There is still more work to be done. However, Jesus reminds us that the time is coming, and soon.

Pastoral Reflections

The road to God's promise is always a bumpy one. As the people travel, they encounter significant delays, difficulties, and doubts. Perhaps you're tired of hearing this season referred to as the "Lenten Journey," but it certainly seems as if the scriptures are moving us closer, step by step, to the fulfillment of Easter Sunday. And now, the journey is starting to get tough. This week we are reminded of the obstacles on the way to God's promise—obstacles that range from inconvenient to seemingly insurmountable. These scripture texts not only acknowledge the difficulties that may come in the life of faith, they promise them. No one ever said it would be easy, or that the people would always be up to the task.

Perhaps at this point in Lent those who have adopted new spiritual practices for the season are starting to feel the strain. Like the Philippians, they may benefit from a word of encouragement. Others who have already stumbled may need a reminder of the grace God showed Abram, again, and again, and again. It helps to know that it ultimately is not up to us: where we may be frightened off our intended path, Jesus is unshakable in the face of threats. No matter the season and regardless of engaging in a Lenten practice, people are always struggling to be faithful, to trust, to keep going, to begin again. The scriptures for the day communicate the life of faith with honesty. Despite our best efforts to make it appear so, it is rarely pretty, protected, or polite.

Are there ways for your people to acknowledge the difficult parts of their journey? It can be very powerful for the individual to simply have the time and space to reflect. Consider asking questions followed by moments of silence. Is there a way to move beyond an individual experience to communal engagement? The value of having a community of faith is that we are not alone on this way. While it may not be commonplace in your context to give testimony, it could be a valuable practice to cultivate. Place slips of paper in the bulletins for parishioners to write prayer requests that will be collected and read during the prayers of the people. In the week prior, request selfies and short confessions of ways people struggle to be faithful. These images and quotes could be projected or printed and displayed. Prepare speakers to share their own stories in worship. In our strength and in our weakness, we can serve as faith role models for others. Just as Paul encouraged the Philippians to "join in imitating me," this is our call as Christians living in community.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Third Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2016

Isaiah 55:1–9
Psalm 63:1–8
1 Corinthians 10:1–13
Luke 13:1–9

Engaging the Texts

A call to repentance is the thread running through today's texts. But this call to repentance is not the cry of the modern American street preacher highlighting this or that moral failing, threatening hellfire and damnation. Many of our parishioners have heard more than enough of that message; indeed, some have been the target of this street preacher's condemnation. For this reason, many of us have learned to avoid the topic of repentance altogether. But sometimes we are too quick to shirk the subject. In today's readings, the call to repentance is a call to new life.

The Isaiah text comes from the final chapter of Second Isaiah. Following the judgment and destruction of Isaiah 1–39, in chapters 40–55 the prophet announces good news: the defeat of the Israelites' Babylonian captors and a return from exile. This good news, however, no doubt stirred anxiety among those Israelites who had been born in Babylon and had never known another home, and among those who had spent their years in exile putting down roots and building new lives. I suspect many of the Israelites had grown comfortable in Babylon. It is into this situation that the prophet speaks, drawing a distinction between life under Babylonian authority and the new offer of life with God. The free water, wine, and milk stand in contrast to the "resources offered by the empire that are always expensive, grudging, and unsatisfying." (Brueggemann, "Isaiah 40–66," in the *Westminster Bible Companion* series [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 158–159). Perhaps the prophet's call to repentance in 55:6–9 is directed at those who had grown accustomed to life in Babylon and had no intention of returning to Zion (Brueggemann, "Isaiah 40–66," *Westminster Bible Companion,* 160).

We hear a similar story in the reading from 1 Corinthians. The Apostle Paul offers a brief retelling of the exodus: God's chosen people, all of whom were "baptized into Moses," "ate the same spiritual food," and "drank the same spiritual drink," nevertheless were struck down in the wilderness, punished for their idolatry and immorality. This synopsis of the exodus story stands as a warning to the Corinthians: Do not think that being among God's chosen people makes you somehow holier than others or immune to God's judgment. "If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall." Like God's chosen ones in exile who were tempted to choose Babylon over freedom, the Israelites of the exodus fell into temptation even as they lived into the new life God was offering them—and they did not escape God's wrath.

Today's reading from Luke's gospel challenges the idea that the cause of suffering is sin. Sometimes bad things happen to good people—and that means we can't make simple judgments about who's good and who's bad, or who's in and who's out, based on their experience of either blessing or hardship. It is perhaps not so easy, therefore, to know where we stand before God. Like the Corinthians, we must not rest on our laurels, assuming that having been chosen by God gives us a free pass. We must examine ourselves, acknowledge our brokenness, and repent, lest we perish.

Pastoral Reflections

How often does God's offer of new life call us out of our safe and secure but ultimately unsatisfying comfort zones? Like the Israelites in exile, we may be tempted to reject God's offer of new life, choosing instead the more comfortable and familiar status quo that keeps us under Babylon's thumb. Or, like the Israelites of the exodus, we may accept God's offer of new life but grow impatient and rebellious, forgetting how much we suffered and groaned under Pharaoh's rule.

Last summer members of the congregation I serve participated in an "inreach." A few dozen congregation council members and other ministry leaders were trained to have intentional one-on-one conversations with other members of the congregation in order to build deeper relationships. These were to be conversations unlike those we are accustomed to having in our everyday lives. Rather than talking about the weather or the daily news, those who were trained to have these one-on-one conversations were encouraged to be courageous and curious, taking risks to ask questions about things that really matter.

Debriefing these conversations at the end of the summer, the leaders who participated in the project reported how profound and transformational the experience had been. These conversations were a source of new life. It was scary to ask questions about things that matter—about people's joys and sorrows, wounds and regrets, anxiety and pain—but when they did, they discovered their conversation partners were longing to be heard and known. These conversations built relationships of mutual trust and support that have enduring significance.

One place where God's offer of new life is found is in the invitation to be more vulnerable to one another. It is much easier to stay on the surface, asking questions whose answers are predictable and unlikely to challenge us, talking about things of little significance. It is safer to put up a façade that communicates that all is well and hides our brokenness and pain. But it's when we move beyond the safety and comfort of the mundane that we leave Babylon behind and discover new life.

Javen Swanson

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 6, 2016

Joshua 5:9–12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16–21
Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

Engaging the Texts

God's enduring love even in the face of thanklessness and rebellion runs through all of today's readings.

The brief reading from Joshua recounts a significant day for the Israelites who lived through it: the day the manna ceased and they began eating the food of the Promised Land. After forty years eating divine food in the wilderness—yet still complaining to God and longing for the culinary variety of Egypt—the manna days are over. We can perhaps understand if the Israelites occasionally reflected on their time as slaves in Egypt and wondered if slavery was really worse than their present situation. But now they have arrived in Canaan where they once again feast on the earth's harvest. Despite their grumblings in the wilderness, God has followed through on the promise to lead the Israelites out of slavery into a land of freedom.

When this passage from Joshua is paired with the rest of today's readings, it is important to recall the Israelites' grumbling about the manna. God had liberated them from slavery in Egypt and provided miraculous food to sustain them as they began their new life together, yet the Israelites responded: "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Num 11:4–6). How quickly the Israelites forgot how God had blessed them! Nevertheless, the Lord imputes no iniquity; their ingratitude is forgiven (Ps 32:1–2).

Paul sounds a similar note in 2 Corinthians: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (v. 17). God does not count our sins against us but seeks reconciliation (vv. 18–20). God meets the Israelites' thanklessness with unceasing love and forgiveness.

That, of course, is the lesson of today's Gospel reading. To say the younger son in the parable is merely thankless, however, would be an understatement. By demanding his inheritance, the son essentially tells his father to drop dead—yet his father complies with this request (Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* [Eerdmans, 2002], 294). In fact, the Greek word translated in the New Revised Standard Version as "property" (v. 12) is *bios*, which is more commonly translated "life," "livelihood," or "existence." The son extracts more than some of his father's wealth and possessions; he takes his father's life (Capon, *Kingdom, Grace. Judgment*, 294). This reading of the parable reveals the depth of the younger son's betrayal, which makes the father's response to his return even more astonishing.

Pastoral Reflections

There are, of course, two sons in the parable. The people who grace our pews may identify more with the other son—the one who stayed behind and did his duty, the one who faithfully served his family and lived according to convention. Many will sympathize with the older son's objection to the celebration upon his brother's return. Shouldn't this older son's constancy be celebrated at least as much as his delinquent brother's coming to his senses? The older son simply wants justice. He wants to be treated fairly. When his brother abandoned the family, the older son remained, working twice as hard around the house—so where's *his* party? As he sees it, the celebration for his good-for-nothing brother is unfair. The prodigal has done nothing to deserve it. This parable suggests that the kingdom of God doesn't always reflect human notions of justice.

It helps here to reflect upon the difference between "equality" and "equity," two words that are often used interchangeably. "Equality" is treating everyone exactly the same, whereas "equity" is giving each person what they need to achieve the same results. "Equality" seeks to promote fairness but only works if each person is starting from the same place. "Equity" is intentionally unfair, recognizing that people start in different places and need different levels of support in order to be equally successful (Amy Sun, "Equality Is Not Enough: What the Classroom Has Taught Me About Justice," on *Everyday Feminism*, http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/09/equality-is-not-enough/). "Equity" is the logic behind affirmative action, which intentionally favors members of historically disadvantaged groups in order to achieve equal levels of employment. "Equity" is also behind the "preferential option for the poor" in Catholic social teaching—the idea that Christians are to care first and foremost for the poor and vulnerable, even if that doesn't always seem "fair."

The father in this parable seems inclined toward a policy of equity over equality. In one sense, the older son is right: his father's response to the prodigal's return is *not* fair. But fairness isn't the father's goal. Rather, his goal is to ensure that both sons realize they are loved and have a place in the family. The older brother knew that all along; he never had reason to doubt it. But the younger brother has betrayed his family and reasonably doubts that he will be welcomed back. An "undeserved" party is the father's way of assuring the younger brother that he is still part of the family.

Javen Swanson

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2016

Isaiah 43:16–21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b–14
John 12:1–8

Engaging the Texts

God is about to do a new thing. That's a fine idea in theory, but one that has always challenged God's people.

In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet recalls how God acted to save God's people in the past, alluding to the Exodus. In that story, God parted the waters of the Red Sea to provide a dry escape for God's chosen people as they fled Pharaoh's armies. With the Israelites safely on the other side, God used those same waters to destroy the Israelites' pursuers. God was saying, "Remember all I have done in the past." Then God says a strange thing: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing." This time, God will act to save God's people not by parting the waters but by sending water where there was none before. This time, water will be used not to destroy but to quench thirst and nourish creation. This time, God will draw others in—even the wild animals—rather than escorting God's people out. The salvation story the Israelites knew so well has been turned inside out.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul describes how he discovered that God was doing a new thing—how the salvation story upon which he had built his entire life was turned upside down. Paul (technically, at that time, Saul) had been doing everything right. He had checked all the boxes on the salvation to-do list. And yet, his encounter with Jesus brought his world crumbling down. He now dismisses all the qualities and accomplishments he had previously counted in his favor and seeks only the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. Paul recognized the new thing God was doing and learned to shape his life around it.

Judas, on the other hand, never does figure out what in the world God is up to in Jesus. In today's Gospel, Mary senses that there is something special about Jesus, and she demonstrates her devotion by anointing his feet with expensive ointment. But Judas doesn't see it. All he knows is that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Recognizing that God is doing something new, Mary prioritizes a profound relationship with Jesus, while Judas remains stuck in old ways of thinking.

Pastoral Reflections

What are the old ways of thinking that we find ourselves trapped in today? Where do our blinders and biases hinder our ability to see God doing a new thing? Do we see only desert where God is trying to reveal the waters of new life?

Maybe we are being called to set aside our expectation that God will answer our prayers exactly the way we expect them to be answered. When we pray for healing, for example, are we expecting God to provide a cure? Or are we attuned to the ways God might be doing a new thing, offering healing in other ways, even as we continue to hope that a cure may be found? When we open our hearts to God in prayer but remain closed to God's unexpected response, we are unlikely to find God doing a new thing.

Or maybe God is calling us to resist the mindset of scarcity that pervades our culture—the mindset that tells us that what we have will never be enough, that we need to keep acquiring more for ourselves. Lurking beneath this scarcity mentality is a desperate desire to secure our own future rather than placing our trust in God. There isn't much space for God to do a new thing—or, really, to do anything at all—when we cling so tightly to control.

These texts also call us to consider people who can help us see what new things God is up to among us today. Note that it is Mary—a woman, not one of the twelve in Jesus' inner circle—who recognizes that God is doing a new thing, while Judas, who is among the twelve, doesn't get it. In John's gospel it is often women who point the way. Consider, for example, the Samaritan woman at the well, who describes Jesus as "a man who told me everything I have ever done" and wonders aloud whether he could be the messiah (4:1–42). She becomes an evangelist by inviting her whole village to come and see—they would have missed the new thing God was doing without her witness. Later, Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Jesus. She announces the good news to the other disciples (20:1–18). It is significant that the gospel writer chooses to tell the stories of these women of inferior status who nevertheless demonstrate superior insight. Who are the people we would least expect to be agents of revelation in our midst? Do we even know when we're writing off the people who are most likely to show us what God is up to today? Or are we so quick to reject those we think couldn't have anything important to say that we never have an opportunity to hear from them, and never discover what new thing God is trying to do here and now?

Javen Swanson

Palm/Passion Sunday
March 20, 2016

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29 (Psalm for Palm Sunday)
Philippians 2:5–11
Luke 19:28–40
[For Luke's Passion account, see Good Friday]

Engaging the Texts

In many congregations Passion Sunday has preempted Palm Sunday. The Passion story from Luke will be read and may replace the sermon, while John's Passion story will be heard on Good Friday. Traces of Palm Sunday remain in the distribution of palms and the entry rite that includes the reading from Luke 19. There are many reasons to mark today as Passion Sunday, including the reality that many people may miss the services of Holy Week. They will go from the triumphant procession of Palm Sunday to the triumphant Alleluia's of Easter without stopping at the cross.

But there are reasons to reclaim Palm Sunday as the focus for the beginning of Holy Week. As parish pastors we can encourage people to experience the rhythm of this week: entering the city, gathering at the supper, watching at the cross, keeping vigil until the first light of Easter dawns. What happens if we stay with Luke from Palm Sunday through Easter?

Engaging Luke 19

There are no palms in Luke's story, not even branches—only cloaks spread on the road. As in Mark and Matthew, the colt is where it's supposed to be. Everything happens as Jesus predicted. Some people may ask, "Did God plan all of this? Did God want Jesus to die?" Some aspects of Luke's story are unique. The procession is large and joyful: "the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen…" There must have been more than twelve people in that multitude! Who had seen Jesus' deeds of power? Take that question into your sermon. "Hosanna" (save us) is missing in Luke, but we hear political overtones in praising "the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" Praising a king would trouble Roman soldiers on Passover duty. Even as Jesus rides toward death, we hear echoes of the angels' song that announced his birth: "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven" (19:38, 2:14). Jesus' response to the religious leaders is found only in Luke: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out." This isn't the first time stones come to life in Luke. At the Jordan, John challenged those who boasted of their ancestry, saying, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:8). Now those stones have come to life and refuse to keep silence.

Pastoral Reflections

Today's sermon can be an invitation not only to enter the Holy City with Jesus but also to enter the services of Holy Week. Yes, people are busy. Their commitments to work and school don't let up this week. But we can help people reclaim Holy Week, not out of guilt but to experience the three-day drama unfolding.

How might Luke's telling of the story shape our sermons? Each synoptic gospel includes the story of the colt tied where it was supposed to be. Today's sermon could explore whether everything was preordained, even whether God wanted Jesus to die. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson challenges this belief:

Jesus' death was an act of violence brought about by threatened human men, as sin, and therefore against the will of a gracious God. It occurred historically in consequence of Jesus' fidelity to the deepest truth he knew…What comes clean in the event, however, is not Jesus' necessary passive victimization divinely decreed as a penalty for sin, but rather a dialectic of disaster and powerful human love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost (Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is,* 158–159).

A different sermon might focus on the "whole multitude." Recall people in Luke who had experienced Jesus' "deeds of power." Imagine: "Look, there's Zacchaeus running in front so he can get a good view—Jesus just stayed with him in Jericho. There's the man who'd been paralyzed until his friends let him down through the roof to see Jesus. Do you see that woman? She interrupted Simon's dinner party. Oh, there's Jairus' daughter walking with the woman who'd been healed of a twelve-year hemorrhage. It would be wonderful if the rich man who went away sorrowful had returned. Who knows? People can change."

Luke's story ends with Pharisees in the crowd telling Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." We're so accustomed to blaming the Pharisees that it's hard to consider that they could have been genuinely concerned for Jesus' life. Extra Roman troops were always sent to Jerusalem during Passover. Hailing Jesus as king was downright dangerous. At the beginning of Holy Week it is important to remind people that the Jews did not kill Jesus—better to say that today than wait until Good Friday.

"I tell you," said Jesus, "if these were silent, the stones would shout out." What stones are crying out now? Millions of refugees searching for home away from home, Black people hoping against the evidence that their lives matter, unemployed people longing for work, children crying for safety in their own homes. Ray Makeever's hymn "Even the Stones Will Cry Out" captures the impact of Jesus' words. Soloists or choir might sing the verses with everyone joining on the refrain:

Even the stones will cry out for justice;

even the trees will sing out for peace.
The fire and water, the earth and sky,
all of creation will cry out: Cry out!
All of creation will cry.

Barbara Lundblad

Maundy Thursday
March 24, 2016

Exodus 12:1–4 (5–10), 11–14
Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19
1 Corinthians 11:23–26
Luke 22:1–23 [or John 13:1–17, 31b–35]

Engaging the Texts

The name of this day comes from John 13: "Maundy" from *mandatum*—as in mandate or command. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." If worship includes foot washing it will be important to read this text from John. But I suggested following Luke from Palm Sunday through Holy Week. Even if Luke 22 seems repetitive alongside 1 Corinthians 11, there are important perspectives unique to Luke.

Looking back to the First Sunday in Lent, we recall that after the third temptation, the devil departed from Jesus "until an opportune time" (4:13). That opportune time has come. The tempter, now called Satan, enters into Judas Iscariot moving him to "look for an opportunity to betray Jesus." We sense a connection to Luke's story of the entry into Jerusalem. Here, too, things seem planned out. "When you enter the city a man carrying a water jar will meet you—follow him." That mysterious man should be easy to spot since women were usually the ones carrying water jars! Was everything preordained? Luke's account of the supper is a Passover story, linked to Exodus 12 and to Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Fred Craddock reminds us that the Passover Lamb was not a sin offering: "The lamb sacrificed for sin was another ritual; the Passover lamb was the seal of the covenant, and the Passover meal commemorated that covenant offered to the faith community by a God who sets free" (Craddock, *Luke,* 256). Neither Luke nor Paul calls this meal a sacrifice for sin, but in both accounts, Jesus emphasizes the covenant.

Luke's description of the meal is in two parts, verses15–18 and 19–20. Hearing Luke after Paul's letter is confusing because here Jesus takes the cup first and tells the disciples to divide it among themselves. Jesus' focus is on the future: "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then verses 19–20 describe a scene closer to 1 Corinthians 11. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them. The verbs follow the same pattern as in the feeding of the five thousand and the Easter meal at Emmaus. (9:16, 24:30) Then, after supper, Jesus took another cup. Again the emphasis is on covenant rather than an offering for sin. Some scholars believe verses 19–20 were later additions to make Luke's account correspond to Paul's, written earlier. However these verses came together, this meal is both remembrance of the past and covenant for the future. "Luke gives the entire meal a double interpretation appropriate to its situation on the boundary, where Jesus' own ministry is ending and the life of the church is already being called into being" (Sharon Ringe, *Luke,* 261).

Pastoral Reflections

Following Luke through this week we can focus more intently on the meaning of Jesus' supper with his friends. We hear a very human Jesus say how much he has longed to share the Passover meal with his disciples before he suffers. Think of all the meals Jesus has shared in Luke: a dinner interrupted by a woman at Simon's house, a meal shared with five thousand on the hillside, eating with Mary and Martha, dinner with a leader of the Pharisees eliciting parables about inviting the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame when you give a banquet, and eating with Zacchaeus shortly before entering Jerusalem. When we repeat Jesus' words "Do *this* in remembrance of me" perhaps we can hear him saying "Remember me in how you eat—and with whom."

If we argue about who is welcome at communion, we might remember that Judas was there for the meal. He had gone out earlier to plot against Jesus, but now he is sitting with the others, sharing the Passover meal. We know this because of what Jesus says: "The one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table." Churches have long argued about who is welcome at the table. Are children welcome? Are divorced and remarried people welcome? Are unbaptized people welcome? Are non-members welcome? If Jesus could share a meal with Judas perhaps we don't need to worry about protecting the purity of Christ's table.

Communion is a counter-cultural meal. Some years ago the Rev. Jon Nelson of Seattle protested the deployment of a nuclear submarine christened *USS Corpus Christi,* named after the city in Texas but also meaning Body of Christ. For his protest, Jon was arrested and thrown in jail. Some friends wanted to share communion with him. They brought a loaf of bread (no knife) and wine in a plastic bottle (glass was out of the question). The prison authorities confiscated the bread and wine as contraband. Jon's friends were distressed for they so wanted to share communion with him in prison. But when they told Jon what had happened he broke into an enormous grin: "Communion as contraband! That's it, isn't it?" he said. "Communion as contraband. Threatening to the powers who that think they own the world." Bread leavened by the word is testimony to resurrection in the midst of death. Do this to remember Jesus.

Barbara Lundblad

Good Friday
March 25, 2016

Isaiah 52:13—53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16–26
Luke 22:39—23:56 [or John 18:1—19:42]

Engaging the Texts

[Note: If Luke's account of the passion was read on Palm/Passion Sunday, then John's gospel will probably be read today. In John's account, Jesus' opponents are always called "the Jews." This is tragic, especially if people hear John every year on Good Friday. See Frank Henderson's proposals for reading John: www.jfrankhenderson.com/pdf/goodfridaypassio.pdf]

Luke's Passion Story

Often, there is no sermon on Good Friday. The reading of Luke's Passion will be the center, perhaps read by different voices with hymns corresponding to portions of the reading. If there is a sermon perhaps poetry is better than prose or brief reflections after each portion of the biblical story. One possible way to structure the service is to follow the time line of Luke's gospel.

Night Luke 22:39–65

Perhaps it is at night that we dare ask questions that daylight keeps in check. Does the darkness bring with it ghosts of things past? Fred Craddock was a gifted preacher and teacher who died last year. He remembered a night years before he began to teach. "I was in graduate school at Vanderbilt," he said.

I had left my family and the parish I served to prepare for comprehensive exams. Every night about 11:30 or 12:00 I'd go to an all-night diner to take a break. The fellow behind the counter knew when I walked in to prepare grilled cheese and a cup of coffee. I sat there, hovering over coffee, thinking about possible questions on the oral exams.

Then I noticed a man who was there when I came in, but hadn't been waited on. I had been waited on and had a refill. He was an old, gray-haired, black man. Finally the cook went to him and said, "Whadda ya want?" Then he scooped up a dark patty from the back of the grill and put it on a piece of bread without any condiments, without a napkin. He handed it to the man who gave him some money. The man went out the side door by the garbage can and sat on the curb with the eighteen-wheelers of the night.

I didn't say anything to the cook. I didn't go out and sit on the curb beside the man. I didn't do anything. I was thinking about the questions coming up on the New Testament exam. I left and walked up the hill, back to my room to resume my studies, and, off in the distance I heard a cock crow" (*Craddock Stories,* edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward, Chalice Press, 48–49).

Early Morning Luke 22:66—23:25

"When day came..." the trials began. Jesus hadn't slept at all. In the morning he was questioned by the religious authorities, then Pilate, then Herod, then back to Pilate. The charges against him were all political: perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and claiming to be a king (23:1). Finally, Pilate left the verdict up to the people: "Jesus or Barabbas?" *Barabbas. Bar* meaning "Son." *Abbas* meaning "Father/Papa." Barabbas: Son of the Father. We remember the words Jesus heard from heaven at his baptism: "You are my Son, the beloved." Jesus, Son of the Father. Barabbas, Son of the Father. Which "Son of the Father" will they choose? Some truly wanted Barabbas freed because he was committed to using violence against the violence of Rome—what Walter Wink calls "the myth of redemptive violence." That myth still tempts us today.

Late Morning: Crucifixion Luke 23:26–43

Two criminals were crucified with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. In Matthew and Mark, two disciples asked for places at Jesus' right and left hand. Surely this wasn't what they had in mind. Jesus speaks words found only in Luke. As he is taunted with words that echo the devil's temptation in the wilderness, Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." When one of the criminals asked to be remembered, Jesus replied, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." As in life, so in death, Jesus spent time with outcasts.

Noon: Death Luke 23:44–49

We might imagine Pilate, still uneasy after the morning's trial. Soon it would be Sabbath and even he knew that the Jews wouldn't cause trouble on the Sabbath. He looked at his watch. "Strange," he said to himself, "so dark at noon and it doesn't look like rain." Jesus does not cry out in despair as in Mark and Matthew. His dying words are the psalmist's words of deep assurance: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46; Ps. 31:5).

Late Afternoon: Burial Luke 23:50–56

A good and righteous man named Joseph came to get Jesus' body. He was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, waiting as Simeon had waited until he held the infant Jesus in his arms. (2:25) Strange, isn't it? When Jesus was born he was wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger as Mary and Joseph watched over him. Now another Joseph came and wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth and laid him in the tomb. Jesus

is dead and we pray for him:

We commend to almighty God our brother Jesus,
and we commit his body to its resting place:
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
May God bless him and keep him,
May God's face shine on him and be gracious unto him,
May God look upon him with favor and grant him peace.
Amen.

—(From the burial service,
Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 284)

Barbara Lundblad

Notes on the Services of Easter: Twelve readings are appointed for the Easter Vigil, each paired with a psalm. Four readings are marked as "required" but dare to color outside the lines to include more stories about women. Whatever readings are chosen, hopefully they will be read or performed in a way that is lively and engaging. Involve all ages in presenting these stories, including children. After the Easter acclamation, the service continues with a reading from Romans and the Gospel—but which Gospel, Luke or John? The reading from John 20 works well at the Vigil because Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb "while it was still dark." In this issue of "Preaching Helps" we've been following Luke through Holy Week. For this reason Luke 24 is suggested for Easter Sunday. Though several readings are appointed for both of these services, most preachers will focus on the Easter Gospel texts. Ralph Klein shares reflections on the Easter gospels from John 20:1–18 and Luke 24:1–12. You can choose when to preach each one.

Vigil of Easter
March 26, 2016

Twelve possible readings from the Old Testament (see *Evangelical Lutheran Worship,* 269)
Romans 6:3–11
John 20:1–18 [or Luke 24:1–12; see "Notes" above]

Engaging John 20:1–18

John's story of the resurrection of Jesus begins with Mary Magdalene (vv. 1–2), interrupts her story to tell an anecdote about Peter and the Beloved Disciple (vv. 3–10), and resumes the story of Mary Magdalene (vv. 11–8). According to Luke 8:1–3, Mary Magdalene was among the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, and seven demons had been cast out of her. When she saw that the tomb was empty, she went to Peter and the Beloved Disciple and reported that the body of Jesus had been stolen. She did not say he was risen.

The Beloved Disciple and Peter then had a foot race toward the tomb, with the Beloved Disciple winning, but he did not enter the tomb at first. Naturally Peter barged right in, saw the linen cloths, and the napkin that had covered the head of Jesus rolled up separately on the side. But there seems to have been no consequence for Peter. Only then did the Beloved Disciple enter the tomb, and only he saw and believed. No angels spoke to him and he did not see the risen Jesus. He is an example for all future generations who do not have sight of the risen Jesus but nevertheless believe.

The scene shifts back to Mary Magdalene, with no indication that she had seen the two disciples. She also looked inside the tomb and saw two angels who ask: "Woman, why are you weeping?" She responds by saying that they have taken her Lord away, meaning his body. For she assumes that Jesus is still dead. She saw a man, but did not recognize him. Jesus repeats the angels' question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Thinking Jesus was the gardener, she asks if he had taken the body and where he had put it so that she could restore it to the tomb.

Then Jesus says "Mary," and she replies in Hebrew, "*Rabouni*" (that is, Teacher). One thinks immediately of John 10:3–4 where the shepherd knows his sheep by name, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. Jesus says to Mary, "Do not keep clinging to me!" No, he must ascend. Only then will there be mutual indwelling, as Jesus put it in John 17:23:"I in them and you in me."

Pastoral Reflections

We are all faced with the question asked by the angels and by the risen Jesus himself: "Why are you weeping?" The discarded burial cloths told the Beloved Disciple that Jesus had defeated death. When Mary finally recognized the voice of the gardener as the voice of Jesus, she recognized the truth of what he had promised in 16:20–22: grief at the absence of Jesus would turn to joy.

Jesus' impending return to the Father means that the believing community receives a new identity. The believing community now knows God, as Jesus knows God. The love that God and Jesus have for each other would be opened up to include the believing community thanks to Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

Easter does mean the death of death and the promise of an everlasting life with God. But in John it means much more than that, an intimate relationship with God and Jesus that begins right now. The love of God embodied in Jesus did not end with his life here on earth. Rather: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Mary Magdalene ran off to tell the disciples and now also us: "I have seen the Lord." Clinging to Jesus just outside the tomb is not the goal for Mary Magdalene or us. No, the goal of Jesus is his complete oneness with his heavenly Parent, and his oneness with his sisters and brothers in fellowship with the

same Parent and God. This was and is Jesus' promise: "I will not leave you orphaned" (14:18).

Indeed, why are you weeping?

Ralph W. Klein

Easter Day
March 27, 2016

Acts 10:34–43 [or Isaiah 65:17–25]
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24 or Psalm 114
1 Corinthians 15:19–26
Luke 24:1–12 [or John 20:1–18; see "Notes" above]

Engaging Luke 24:1–12

The women who set out to anoint the dead body of Jesus did so only after observing the Sabbath as a day of rest (Luke 23:56). Like Zechariah and Elizabeth they were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord (Luke 1:6). They did not find what they expected to find: the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away, and they did not find the body of the Jesus. Instead, two figures in dazzling clothes stood before them. Similarly clothed figures appeared at the transfiguration of Jesus, namely, Moses and Elijah (Luke 10:18) and two will appear at his ascension (Acts 1:10). In the Hebrew Bible one witness is not enough to convict a person of a serious crime (Deut. 19:15), and the two witnesses in Luke 24 confirm the reliability and adequacy of their message. These figures pose a penetrating question: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" The question must have seemed strange to the women for they hadn't come to seek the living! But Jesus is alive and cannot be found in a cemetery. Luke recalls Jesus' message back in Galilee days: the Son of Humanity must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Remembering his past words, counting on his promises, and taking Jesus at his word are all part of living as his sons and daughters. There is no mention of Jesus going to Galilee in Luke as in the other Gospels. The risen Jesus spends all of his time in and around Jerusalem.

Three women are named in v. 10, along with other nameless women. They are unlike the women in Mark who said nothing to anyone because they were afraid (Mark 16:8). No, these women told all they had experienced to the apostles and the other disciples of Jesus. But those apostles and disciples did not believe the women and considered their words as an idle tale. Their unbelief seems to include more than a little sexism as well. They considered the witness of these women foolishness or humbug. These women had initially been only perplexed; the apostles themselves displayed unbelief.

In v. 12 Peter ran to the tomb, stooped down, looked in, saw the linen cloths no longer associated with a body and went home in amazement. Readers will recall the similar incident in John 20:3–10 when Peter is joined in his race to the tomb with the Beloved Disciple.

Luke tries to tie things together. The shepherds had gone with haste, found the child lying in a manger, swaddled in cloths, and his parents wondered. Now Peter ran to the tomb, looked in, saw the cloths lying there, went home, and then he wondered.

Pastoral Reflections

We often look for Jesus in all the wrong places. You are not going to find him in a cemetery. Rather, the presence of the risen Lord is in human experience. In our moments of doubt, loneliness, and bewilderment, we find Jesus' presence in his word of promise, in his walking in our shoes, in sharing his meal with us.

If the Romans had set up a security camera to photograph the events of Easter morning, it would not have made the Lord's presence more believable. The resurrection of Jesus is his vindication by God. Paul adds that if Christ had not been raised, then his proclamation is in vain, and our faith is vain (1 Cor 15:16–17). Paul adds that Christ's reign means that he has subjugated all his enemies, including that last enemy which is death itself.

Where will preachers urge their hearers to look for Jesus in all the right places? In the life of the believing community? In places that have not yet experienced justice and peace? In the sister or brother who needs a cup of water or a loving hug from us? In promises that only become real through the cross?

Ralph Klein