Preaching Helps

Palm/Passion Sunday through the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
April 2 — June 25, 2023

Gwen Sayler: Teacher, Scholar, Deaconess, Pastor, Friend

The Reverend Dr. Gwen Sayler, to whom this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* is dedicated, taught generations of students at Wartburg Theological Seminary. Most of her students are now pastors, their preaching still shaped by Gwen's insights into scripture and her deep faith. I never studied with Gwen, but I have been blessed by her writing and her friendship over geographical distance. My most sustained time with her was at The Leaven Center in Lyons, Michigan. That retreat center held a special place in Gwen's heart. She often went there on retreats and accompanied several Wartburg students for preaching workshops. The values that shaped The Leaven Center matched Gwen's own passion. The Rev. Dr. Melanie Morrison, Leaven's director, was also "a fierce advocate for inclusion, with particular concern for women and those marginalized because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression," words used to describe Gwen in the Intro to this issue. Gwen found an affirming home at Leaven where she could be totally herself.

Gwen was a scholar who also had a wonderful sense of humor, something her students and colleagues surely experienced. One evening during our workshop at Leaven we were all invited into a circle of storytelling. There were no rules or guidelines, just an invitation to share stories. Gwen told a story about Christmas Eve in the parish she served years before. I can't tell it the way she told it, but I'll do my best. The church sanctuary was decked for Christmas with candles and poinsettias. A boy named Christopher was the acolyte that night. He walked up the aisle with dignity, his white robe almost covering his sneakers. She watched him as he bowed before the altar. Then he lit all the candles on the candelabra and bowed again. And again. He kept bowing over and over, going lower every time. She couldn't remember that he was an especially pious teenager, nor was he steeped in liturgical practice. When she looked more closely, she realized he was spitting. Spitting every time he bowed. The paper around one of the poinsettias had caught fire somehow. He kept trying to spit out the fire, bending lower with each genuflection. Finally, an usher saw the flames and brought a pitcher of water to put out the fire. Christopher bowed one more time and sat down.

This wasn't a profound theological story, but one that showed Gwen's remembrance of an ordinary boy who did his best to save the church from destruction! (Maybe it is a profound theological story!) She honored lay people of all ages, and this story is one reminder of her attentiveness and care. No doubt she brought that same attentiveness to her work with biblical texts. Some of our Preaching Helps writers were shaped by her deep engagement with scripture. As her colleague, the Rev. Dr. Craig Nessen said in his introduction: "She lived her courage and her witness to the wideness of God's mercy in everyday life and as a support to many students." Thanks be to God for her faithful life.

This issue of "Preaching Helps" includes two of the great festivals of the church year: Easter and Pentecost. We'll journey from Palm/Passion Sunday to the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, from Spring to Summer. We welcome new writers to this issue of "Preaching Helps," as well as writers now familiar to many of our readers. **Liv Larson Andrews** is the pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in the West Central neighborhood of Spokane, Washington. She lives in Spokane with her husband and two sons with whom she takes long hikes and bakes bread. **Amanda Gerken-Nelson** is currently serving as priest in charge at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Yarmouth, Maine. She lives in Portland, Maine, with her wife and son. Both where she resides and the location of her church are on the unceded territory of the Wabanaki Confederacy, specifically the lands of the Abenaki and Aucocisco tribes. **Eric I. Hanson** currently serves as pastor of East Koshkonong Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Wisconsin. His wife, Carina Schiltz, serves as pastor of Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Watertown, Wisconsin. Eric authored the essay "The Hope of Grace: An Essay Exploring the New Atheism, the Church, and the Gospel," published in Vol. 44 No. 2 of *Currents in Theology and Mission* and has also made previous contributions to "Preaching Helps." He is passionate about faith-based advocacy and is actively involved with the Midwest Chapter of Bread for the World and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services. **Mary Halvorson** retired in 2021 after thirty-five years of ministry. She lives on the NW Wisconsin countryside with her husband and two dogs. She plants and tends trees, gardens, quilts, plays with color, and consults with congregations in times of transition. Her grandchildren bring her great delight.

Jen Nagel serves as lead pastor of University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis, near the University of Minnesota campus. Jen and her spouse, the Rev. Jane McBride, share this life of love, preaching, and parenting. They have two children, 9 years old and 13 years old. Holy Week and Easter at their home? A whirlwind of egg coloring, family juggling and worship services, and then the big sigh on Easter

afternoon. Hallelujah! **Benjamin M. Stewart** serves as Distinguished Affiliate Faculty at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and as pastor to Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Two Harbors, Minnesota. A recent migrant to Duluth, Minnesota, Ben is a member of the North American Academy of Liturgy and contributes to its Ecology and Liturgy Seminar. He is author of *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology* (2011). **Matthew Stuhlmuller** serves as campus pastor at Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park and Lutheran Campus Ministry at The University of Chicago. Prior to his call at Augustana, he served as the pastor/mission developer at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Chicago. Matthew has a BA in economics from the University of California, Los Angeles; an MDiv from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago; and an MA in religious studies from the University of Chicago Divinity School. When he is not pastoring or parenting, he is most likely riding his bike around Chicagoland.

Deepest thanks to all these writers for accompanying us on the journey from Holy Week to Ordinary Time.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Editor, Preaching Helps

Palm Sunday
April 2, 2023

Zechariah 9:9–10
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 21:1–11

Engaging the Palm Sunday Gospel

Palm Sunday holds an interesting place in Christian liturgical practice. In recent decades, many communities have taken to observing Sunday of the Passion. While the account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is still read at the beginning of worship, most of the Sunday service is focused on the passion narrative from one of the synoptic gospels. As a liturgical innovation, Passion Sunday accomplishes many noble ends. For one, it provides congregations the opportunity to hear from the synoptic writers. If Good Friday is the only time the story of Jesus' passion is told, then congregations typically only hear John's account. Second, as a more pragmatic matter, Passion Sunday gives people a chance to encounter the story without attending Holy Week services. While church leaders do their best to encourage Holy Week participation, we know that many people will not attend.

The flip side of this positive innovation is that congregations may find themselves neglecting the Palm Sunday narrative. In my view, this is unfortunate, because if we do not stop to reflect on the triumphal entry, we can easily miss the political context in which Jesus' passion plays out; that is, we risk abstracting the story from its political context, leaving us with an otherworldly gospel detached from its social milieu. Especially when the reading of the lengthy passion does not leave much time for preaching on Passion Sunday and Good Friday, many listeners may lack the necessary background knowledge to understand the social implications of the gospel.

I do not have a simple solution for how to effectively balance the multiple priorities of Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. I encourage communities to find their own creative ways to honor these various commitments in the church's liturgical life; however, I suggest that there is value in pausing on Palm Sunday and not immediately switching gears to the passion. To that end, I offer some reflections on how preachers might engage the Palm Sunday texts and use them to set the stage for the events to come in Holy Week.

Like the rest of Matthew's gospel, Matthew 21:1-11 draws connections between Jesus' ministry and Israel's history. This pericope is filled with allusions to texts from the Hebrew scriptures. For example, verses 4-5 are a composite quote drawing on Isaiah 62:11 and Zechariah 9:9. The Zechariah text is the appointed Old Testament reading for Palm Sunday, so preachers may find this text particularly useful for highlighting Jesus' continuity with Jewish tradition. Interestingly, Zechariah appears to name both a donkey and a colt as a poetic repetition, but the author of Matthew seems to interpret these as two separate animals. Either way, the important point is that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem fulfills prophecy, and thus fulfills God's will as expressed through Israel's prophets.

Moreover, Jesus' mode of transportation signals the political dimension of his actions. As the crowds spread cloaks and branches on the road, they provide Jesus with a welcome fit for an emperor. As they shout "hosanna" (which literally means "save us" in Hebrew), they acknowledge Jesus as one who is uniquely positioned to bring hope to their lives. Of course, such praise directly contradicts the Pax Romana, a vision of peace, order, and stability wrought by Roman imperialism. Presumably, these crowds know the truth about Roman propaganda, as they now place their messianic expectations upon Jesus, but Jesus' choice of a donkey is a sign that the rule he promises is of a fundamentally different character. Far from the majesty of a Roman military parade, Jesus comes trotting into Jerusalem on a lowly barnyard animal. Whatever can be said about Jesus, he is a different kind of ruler.

Placed in its social context, the Palm Sunday readings set up the passion account as a collision of two worlds: the Roman Empire, and the kingdom of God. As the author of Matthew is expressing in these texts, Jesus' power is different, not merely greater, than Rome's power. The full meaning of Jesus' power will unfold in the coming passion, but here

already on the road to Jerusalem, two worlds are colliding. Each world has a vastly different understanding of power, offering competing narratives for explaining how reality functions at its most basic level. One is the world embodied by the Romans, where might makes right. The other is the world embodied by the peasant Jesus on a donkey, where humble love conquers all.

Whether in the first century or the twenty-first century, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem promises us that there is a different way, that a different world is, indeed, possible. As these worlds collide on Palm Sunday, our understanding of the present world is shattered, opening our gaze to a new horizon. This horizon is the dawning of the reign of God, foretold by Israel's prophets and now enacted through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Palm Sunday texts afford preachers an opportunity to orient their audience to what God is doing *here and now*. While the coming passion of Jesus certainly holds an eschatological dimension, the triumphal entry and passion are events firmly rooted in *this* world. We preachers are entrusted with the gift and task of helping people understand Christ's ministry, death, and resurrection as good news for their lives and communities *today*.

Matthew Stuhlmuller

Passion Sunday
April 2, 2023

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Matthew 26:14–27:66

Engaging Matthew's Passion Story for Preaching

The readings for Sunday of the Passion provide an opportunity for preachers to talk about the events leading to Jesus' death from the unique perspective of a particular synoptic gospel. Unlike the passion account on Good Friday, which is appointed from John's gospel, the Passion Sunday texts are drawn from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, depending on the year in the Revised Common Lectionary. As such, Passion Sunday is an opportunity to highlight the uniqueness of a particular evangelist's account. Given the length of the Passion narrative, most preachers will likely offer only a homily or short reflection on these texts, so my thoughts here are intended to make the most of the limited scope of the preaching task on this Sunday.

I suggest leaning into the uniquely Jewish character of Matthew's gospel. Throughout this gospel, the author goes to great lengths to connect Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with God's preceding history with Israel. Matthew consistently places the story of Jesus within the larger story of salvation history that begins with God's covenant with Abraham, moves through the history of the exodus and exile, and stretches forward to the messianic expectations of Israel's prophets. Matthew's account is filled with allusions and quotations from the Hebrew scriptures. Preachers may find these references useful as they help listeners situate Jesus' passion within the larger narrative of God's salvific purposes in history.

In Matthew 26:31, Jesus quotes Zechariah 13:7 and alludes to Isaiah 53:6 to make the point that his betrayal must take place to fulfill the words of the prophets. This pattern of connecting Hebrew scriptures with present events is a consistent feature of Matthew's gospel. Sometimes, these connections are made by Jesus himself in his interactions with the disciples and crowds. At other times, the narrator draws these connections. Either way, their intent is consistent with Jesus' point: "But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" (26:54).

In the passion narrative, some of the most prominent Old Testament references are given as formula quotations. Throughout Matthew there are 14 quotations introduced with almost identical formulae: "But all of this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled" (Matt 26:56). Even more than other quotations and allusions, these formula quotations are central to the author's argument for Jesus' continuity with Jewish tradition. The passion account contains the 13th and 14th formula quotations in Matthew. In verse 56, Jesus states the formula quotation, although he does not refer to a specific scriptural text; rather, Jesus is conveying that his betrayal and impending death are consistent with the messianic picture painted by the prophets of old. Similarly, Matthew uses a formula quotation in 27:9 to connect the chief priests' purchase of the potter's field with the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Despite the author's explicit naming of Jeremiah, this is actually a loose reference to Zechariah 11:13. Jeremiah is likely mentioned because of features from Jeremiah's life, such as when Jeremiah purchased land (Jer 32:6-15) and visited a potter (Jer 18:1-3, 19:1-13).

Jesus again makes a significant gesture to his own Jewish tradition with his cry in 27:46. "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*?" is a transliteration of the Hebrew, which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is taken directly from Psalm 22:1. The psalms were the prayer book of the Jewish people. As a faithful Jew, it would make sense that this rabbi would turn to the first language of his faith in a moment of crisis.

Perhaps the most potent symbol in the entire passion finally comes with the tearing of the temple curtain in Matthew 27:51. The curtain is a likely reference to the veil that

hung at the entrance of the Holy of Holies, the innermost and most sacred area of the temple. In the first temple, this place held the Ark of the Covenant, a symbol of God's special relationship with Israel. Accessible only to the high priest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the Holy of Holies was understood as the literal dwelling presence of God on earth. The tearing of the curtain symbolizes that the presence of God has been made accessible to all through Jesus, the new high priest through whom we are given access.

Of course, nobody is interested in listening to preachers simply list off a bunch of biblical references, as if they are proof texts for the continuity between Israel and Jesus. The challenge for preachers is to use these scriptural threads to talk about the meaning of the continuity between Israel and Jesus. One possible angle is to help people understand that the biblical story is a story of grace from start to finish. The story of God and God's people is not a story of law and then gospel but one continuous story of grace, communicated through both promises and commands. By showing this gracious continuity, preachers can contend against supercessionism and anti-Semitism, which can easily creep into our telling of the story whenever we Christians talk about our relationship with our Jewish forebears.

If preachers can deftly discuss the continuity between Israel and Jesus, then it is also fair and helpful to address the places of discontinuity between Jesus and Jewish tradition. Even in Matthew's gospel, the reactions of the religious leaders show that Jesus' ministry did not fit their expectations for how God would act in the world. This discontinuity must be handled with care, but if handled well, this is an opportunity to recover the genuine surprise of the empty tomb on Easter morning. Nobody expected salvation history to unfold this way. Nobody expected the messiah to associate with the poor and outcast, suffer a political execution, and be raised from the dead. But what God has done through Jesus is more gracious and glorious than we could have ever imagined.

Matthew Stuhlmuller

Maundy Thursday
April 6, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The Maundy Thursday readings evidence a complicated —even partly competing—set of interactions between various texts and rituals.

The Passover meal referenced in the reading from Exodus likely emerges from two earlier festivals that over time were brought together: a spring barley harvest involving a meal of unleavened bread and a spring migration to new pastures that called for the sacrifice of a young lamb as a plea for protection of the flocks. Onto these earlier festivals, stories related to the exodus were layered, combining into the festival of Passover, celebrated under the first full moon after the spring equinox.

So even before Passover received additional layers of meaning through traditions such as those narrated in the second reading (1 Cor 11) and the Gospel text (John 13), Passover itself was already holding together theological convictions that are at least somewhat in tension with each other. For example, while the spring barley harvest emphasizes the goodness of one's local homeland, and the unleavened nature of the bread embraces the symbolism of the truly new (no old leaven from the past year), the migration to springtime pastures demands a break with local place in order to travel (the grass is literally greener elsewhere), and the blood of the slaughtered lamb holds the ritualized memory of dangers from prior migrations and seasons. New and old, goodness and danger: Passover has held these meanings together in a complex set of memories and practices.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Christian layers of meaning that have accreted to Passover are also complex and tensive.

Paul's account of the institution of the Lord's Supper in his letter to the church in Corinth—written before the canonical Gospels—emerges with such forcefulness because it is responding to abuses at meals that predate his letter. The wealthy were hoarding the food and drink of the common meal, so Paul writes to remind the community of the gracious sharing at the heart of the meal of the new covenant, flowing from the broken body and poured out blood of Christ.

The fourth gospel's account of the last supper, written later than Paul and the synoptic gospels, seems to contribute yet another layer of reconfigured meaning. In John, the meal itself recedes in prominence, and the practice of foot washing takes center stage. It may be that the community of the fourth gospel had experienced abuses of leadership at the meal and so had articulated the memory of the meal in a way that was less hierarchical and more explicitly about the hosts becoming servants, communing in the mutual love of Christ.

John underscores the radical nature of this servanthood at table with three commonly overlooked motifs.

First, when Jesus "took off" (*tithēmi*) his outer robe as he prepared to wash the disciples' feet, the same verb elsewhere describes Jesus laying down his life: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15), and "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Second, the structure and terminology for the "new" ritual practice of foot washing that Jesus teaches in today's text is practiced on Jesus earlier in the Gospel when Mary anoints Jesus' feet with precious ointment at table "six days before the Passover." In this scene, like the last supper, the setting is a dinner, and it is disrupted by Judas' machinations. The fourth gospel's first use of the verb "wipe" (*ekmassō*) is here, when Mary anointed Jesus' feet and "wiped them with her hair" (John 12:3). The only other use of the verb is in today's text, when Jesus wipes the disciples' feet with the towel.

Third, while this dimension of the text is hidden by the lectionary's omission of the complicated and partly problematic verses of John 13:18-31a, the fourth gospel is at pains to point out the presence of Judas at table with Jesus, specifically narrating Judas receiving the bread and cup in the supper. Indeed, Judas is the only member of the gathering who is specifically portrayed as having shared this food with Jesus.

From this vantage point, the twists and turns in the meanings and enactments of this last supper are mystically dizzying. From a spring barley harvest and slaughtered lamb to a servant-style foot washing apparently taught to Jesus by a profoundly generous woman, the rituals in these accounts are constantly in motion, correcting imbalances of power, redistributing food, and reimagining leadership.

Luther continues this tradition that we preachers are called into on this day as he draws on these ancient ritual texts to propel us again into the contemporary world:

> "…even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, Take, eat and drink; … meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words. As if to say, Here am I myself, given for you, and this treasure do I give to you; what I have you shall have; when you are in want, then will I also be in want… These are the words [Christ] speaks to us; these we must take, and repeat them to our neighbor, not by the mouth alone, but by our actions." [1]

Benjamin Stewart

1. From Martin Luther's "Confession and the Lord's Supper," in *The Sermons of Martin Luther Vol* 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), para 24.

Good Friday
April 7, 2023

Isaiah 52:13–53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16–25
John 18:1–19:42

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Except for a few verses appointed for Reign of Christ Sunday in Year B, today is the only occasion appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary for assemblies to hear the Johannine Passion narrative. Given the unique theological perspective of the fourth gospel—especially including its distinct portrayal of the crucifixion—this is an especially crucial preaching opportunity.

With characteristic overstatement, the preacher Martin Luther wrote, "John's Gospel is the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them."[2] We can set Luther's exaggeration mostly aside. However, we can agree that since this is the only opportunity appointed in the lectionary to help our assemblies think theologically with John's unique account of the passion, preachers will want to make this one count!

The first words of Jesus in John's passion narrative echo two other profound moments in the gospel: the first call Jesus extends to disciples, and the first words spoken by the risen Christ.

When Jesus first speaks in John 1, he turns to face two disciples of John the Baptist who are following him and asks them, "What are you looking for?" (*ti zēteite,* John 1:38). These are in fact the very first words of Jesus in the fourth gospel. In the opening verses of today's Good Friday text, Jesus steps forward to address the armed soldiers and police and asks them also, "Whom are you looking for?" (*tina zēteite* John 18:4). The final time the phrase is used in John's Gospel is Jesus' address to Mary at the tomb on the day of resurrection, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" (*tina zēteis* John 20:15).

Perhaps this is a Johannine hint that despite peoples' repeated confusions and failures to recognize Jesus' true identity, everyone, even the soldiers, are in the end seekers who are looking for Jesus. The question Jesus asks the soldiers who will execute him points to a mysterious way in which they are also seekers, and, as Jesus has promised, in the end "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Even this verse needs to be expanded beyond

2. Martin Luther, "Preface to the New Testament," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings,* Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 111.

the NRSV's translation. The Greek text is not "all people" but is the wider category of *pantas*, "all things, everything, the whole."

Each time Jesus asks, "Whom are you looking for?" he follows up with a theologically significant response. To the first disciples he called, Jesus continued to beckon them with the theologically pregnant phrase, "Come and see." To the soldiers who said they were seeking Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus responded not with the NRSV's lowercase "I am he," but with what would be more accurately rendered "I AM," the name of God (there is no "he" in the Greek text here, but rather the direct *egō eimi*.). After he asked Mary for whom she was looking, Jesus brings her fully to her senses by calling her name: "Mary!"

When Jesus speaks "I AM" to the soldiers and they fall to the ground having heard Jesus speak the name of God in reference to himself, we see foreshadowed that the powers of the world are being overcome in Jesus being lifted up on the cross.

John's theological portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion offers theological resonance with the second reading. The text from Hebrews portrays Jesus as both lamb and priest, and has images of the efficacy of both blood and water, which John 19:34 portrays as flowing from Jesus' pierced side.

On the other hand, the motif of the suffering servant in the first reading from Isaiah is in some tension with the Johannine passion account. The closest the fourth gospel comes to depicting Jesus as suffering in his crucifixion is his expression of thirst, "I am thirsty," though even this, Jesus says is "in order to fulfill the scripture," and because he knows that "all has now been accomplished" (John 19:28).

Luther was correct that the Johannine passion is a theological wonder. There are powerful motifs throughout this passion account that are unique to John. Another example is the charcoal fire where Peter warms himself and beside which he denies Jesus three times (John 18:18). The only other appearance of a charcoal fire in John's gospel is the resurrection account in which Jesus graciously feeds the hapless fisherfolk and gives Peter—three times—the chance to reverse his denial and speak his love for Jesus (John 21:9). The charcoal fire is a true literary easter egg! But John's Passion narrative is not without significant problems.

The Passion narrative in the fourth gospel is infamous for its role in contributing to anti-Jewish bias and violence. Regardless of how it functioned in its original contexts, the repeated antagonistic use of the phrase "the Jews" (*hoi Ioudaioi*) in translations like the NRSV is irresponsible on this side of the holocaust. Some form of the phrase appears in over 25% of the verses of this passion reading from John.

While a new translation cannot prevent every potential abuse, the newly updated emended version in Gordon Lathrop's and Gail Ramshaw's *Readings for the Assembly* (Augsburg Fortress, 2022) is a profound improvement. Because the fourth gospel itself uses the same blunt phrase to refer to clearly distinct groups of Jewish people, *Readings for the Assembly* helpfully uses more accurate phrases such as "Judeans," and "Judean authorities," and "chief priests of the temple," while continuing to use phrases from the NRSV such as "King of the Jews" and "Jewish day of preparation."

Preaching begins with the scripture text. Before we begin to preach our sermon on Good Friday, we preachers need to ensure that the scripture translation itself can speak faithfully a life-giving word in today's context.

Benjamin Stewart

Easter Sunday
April 9, 2023

Jeremiah 31:1–6 or Acts 10:34–43
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
Colossians 3:1–4 or Acts 10:34–43
Matthew 28:1–10 or John 20:1–18

Engaging the Texts

First things first: look at that list of texts! There are lots of options with which to engage! Decisions are before us. Some congregations have a pattern that is "always" followed, a few don't even realize there are options, most leave it up to the preacher or worship leaders. At my best, I read through all the texts some weeks in advance, listen for the pulls of the Spirit, and then settle into what feels like the best combination for *this* season in *this* faithful community, mindful that on a day like Easter less can certainly be more. **Acts 10** is a synopsis of sorts, Peter's sermon for Cornelius and his household when the Spirit widened the circle. It captures Jesus' activity (doing good and healing all who were oppressed), death and resurrection, then claims Peter and the community's role as witnesses, and invites the listeners (let's include us in that cadre) to be witnesses. That witness thread can go a long way any day, especially on Easter. **Jeremiah 31** and **Psalm 118** share themes of steadfast love, survival, endurance, faithfulness, and whole-bodied praise. I enjoy the rhetoric of Jeremiah (again I will build and you shall be built… again tambourines and dancing… again you shall plant and enjoy the fruits). Psalm 118 similarly includes building images and the classic "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." **Colossians 3** is small but mighty: seek the things above. For the Gospel this year we have the option of engaging Matthew 28, or the perennial John 20. Since **John 20** is so familiar, I'll lean toward **Matthew 28** for this writing. Unique to Matthew's telling are the pairing of Mary Magdalene and

the other Mary—and an earthquake! If an earthquake isn't enough, the helpful angel's appearance was like lightening and his cloths as white as snow. Seeing him, the guards posted at the grave became like dead men. Fear/afraid gets four mentions while joy gets one. There's clear practicality in the ordering of this story with its acknowledgement of emotion and their search for Jesus, the wisdom to come and see, then the direction to go and tell. Before the two women get far, Jesus greets them with similar practicality and understanding: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Pastoral Reflections

Going to tombs. Matthew's telling of this ancient story doesn't include carrying spices or enacting burial rituals. In Matthew the Marys simply go to the grave to be there. I imagine this was a brave and risky act, for this expedition meant potentially facing the male guards. But they needed to go, they needed to be there. This makes me curious about the cemeteries, the places of death, where we and our congregations must go. Maybe it's the bereaved who finds themself at the gravestone of a loved one at lunch time, hot coffee in a thermos and sandwiches wrapped in cellophane, pulling up a lawn chair, simply needing to be close. Where are the tombs that we (like the Marys) must visit? What does it feel like in these spaces? How do we respond? I'd certainly include cemeteries and gravesites, but also other places where we experience death or fear of death: the uncertain diagnosis, the injustice, the site of violence in the church's neighborhood, the place of war. Grounding ourselves in grief and at the tomb reminds us that Easter new life doesn't simply happen; rather, it begins with Good Friday, it begins at the tomb.

Fear and joy. "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples." This combination of emotions holds so much and can provide an entry for many. Fear and joy. Nervous and excited. Terrified and hopeful. On the cusp of resurrection, the emotions that Mary and Mary express are key: pushing and pulling, drawing them (and us) into Easter life. Where do we experience both fear and joy? How do we let these emotions draw us where we need to go? Too much fear and we may never dare take the step. Too much joy and maybe it doesn't have the same impact. Living with aging and changing bodies, holding onto hope for our children, addressing an addiction. Fear and joy are a potent duo. I'm drawn to a simple song by John Bell (Iona Community, widely found on the web) called "Don't Be Afraid." *"Don't be afraid, my love is stronger, my love is stronger than your fear. Don't be afraid, my love is stronger and I have promised, promised to be always near."* I've used this in varied ways, but often with the most impact by briefly teaching it, and then interspersing it through the Easter sermon.

Go and tell. In Matthew's resurrection story twice we hear: "Go and tell." While this gospel begins at the tomb, it doesn't end there. Go and tell, and they are off and running, emotions and all. In Acts Peter speaks of himself and his community as witnesses chosen by God. The Marys certainly become these witnesses. With a bit of curiosity and a keen trust in the Spirit, we too can be witnesses of new life in Jesus. Where is God doing a new thing in our community? Our neighborhood? Our life? How can grounding ourselves at the tomb (impossible as it may feel) and being honest about our fear and joy carry us into resurrection new life? With a few prompting questions (perhaps in the weeks prior to Easter if you hope to integrate them into an Easter sermon, or in a series during the Easter season), how could we gather, curate, and share this new life in our midst? Witnesses, all of us!

Jen Nagel

Second Sunday of Easter
April 16, 2023

Acts 2:14a, 22–32
Psalm 16
1 Peter 1:3–9
John 20:19–31

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Since the Acts reading for these two Sundays is part of the same story, I will be offering one joint commentary for both. This reading is in the middle of a larger passage from Acts 2, with the conclusion in verses 33-41, part of which is the reading for the Third Sunday of Easter.

Before either passage begins, the disciples are gathered together on the day of Pentecost when "Divided tongues, as of fire…rested on each of them,"[3] and they "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." "Devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem" were "bewildered" by this "because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." Peter offers a speech explaining what has happened, which narratively is where the Acts readings for these two Sundays happens. In verses 14-21, most of which have been left out of this pericope, Peter attributes this phenomenon to fulfilling what was foretold by the Prophet Joel.

The lectionary picks up Peter's speech at verse 22, when he proclaims that Jesus was "a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you." Peter explains that Jesus was then "handed

3. Unless otherwise noted, translations cited from biblical texts in my articles come from the NRSV.

over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law." Yet, "God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." Peter goes on to describe how "David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah "and that "all of [the disciples] are witnesses" to this good news. He declares, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah." Peter implores the audience to "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus…For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." The passage concludes that "those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added."

Easter is one of the only times when readings from the book of Acts appear in the Revised Common Lectionary. Those preaching on these lessons should be mindful that some of the members of the congregation(s) which they serve may not be as familiar with Acts as they are with other books of Scripture. It may be helpful to share some background information about Acts in your preaching.

Over the last few years, I have had conversations with many other clergy members serving faith communities in different contextual settings. While we each experience distinctive differences among the areas and people we serve, several commonalities have arisen in almost all my conversations. The first is that no matter where they are located, many of the congregations which we serve are struggling to know what their identity or role is in this current reality where things do not look like they did 40, 30, or even 20 years ago. Another commonality I have heard from our conversations is that across creation, many human beings are experiencing deep division, isolation, and conflict. Amid these realities, preachers can share the good news with the congregation(s) they serve that the Holy Spirit was present with the young faith community in Acts, who similarly experienced conflict as well as division and also struggled at times to understand their identity and role in a changing world. That same Spirit is still moving among and through us today. Further, preachers can also remind people of the central unifying good news: God's promises are for "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."

One final consideration is that as I write this article, I have heard and read several recent headlines involving anti-Semitism around the world. Some of my Jewish neighbors have also shared how the traces of anti-Semitism are much more pervasive and widespread than what the media reports. Preachers should be very considerate of how this passage, particularly verse 39, has been used to promote and perpetuate anti-Semitism over the years.

Psalm 16

Psalm 16 concludes with the hopeful declaration that יְהוָה (Yahweh) has shown the psalmist "the path of life" and that with יְהוָה (Yahweh) "there is fullness of joy. "This is a wonderful message for almost any preacher to share with the congregation(s) they serve.

1 Peter 1:3–9

Since this pericope is closely tied to the 1 Peter reading for the Third Sunday of Easter, I will offer one joint commentary for both, as I did for both Acts passages. Throughout the centuries, many Christians have found hope in the words and message of 1 Peter, especially those in the early church who were suffering oppression.[4] This hopeful message is proclaimed in the reading for the Second Sunday of Easter which declares, "By [God's] great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The passage concludes; "for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." The pericope for the Third Sunday of Easter is part of a larger section of 1 Peter which instructs the audience to respond to the good news in the first section through "being holy yourselves in all your conduct." Specifically, the audience is reminded "that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love."

Throughout my ministry, I have not preached on any passages from 1 Peter. Further, I cannot recall hearing anyone else preach on a reading from 1 Peter, either. With that in mind, it is likely that a large percentage of the parishioners we serve probably are not very familiar with 1 Peter, so offering some introductory information about 1 Peter may be helpful.

One does not have to look very far to find communities facing peril and confusion today like the communities to whom 1 Peter was addressed. Thus, preachers have an opportunity to point to these words of God's promise and hope once again. One important thing to understand when preaching on this particular passage is that the word translated *love* in verse 22 comes from the Greek ἀγαπάω (agapaó), which means "to have a warm regard for and interest in another."[5] Throughout my life I have heard the word *love* often used to describe how people feel about things such as a particular food, sports teams, and even household appliances. This is obviously a very different understanding of *love* than what the author of 1 Peter intended. Preachers, especially those serving in North American contexts, should be mindful of this discrepancy and use it as an opportunity to proclaim ἀγαπάω (agapaó) *love.*

4. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 463.

5. BDAG, s.v. "ἀγαπάω"

John 20:19–31

The Second Sunday of Easter is a time of the year in which many clergy, including myself, often take vacation. It is also one of the few days on which the lectionary readings are the same every year. Thus, those preaching on this day should be mindful that many members of the congregation(s) they serve have been hearing these lessons as preaching texts year after year, especially this John passage.

One of my seminary professors told a story from when she was a parish pastor. She gave a children's message in which she described that she had something living in her backyard with brown fur that collected lots of nuts and had a big bushy tail. She asked, "Who can tell me what it is in my back yard?" One of the kids immediately answered, "Jesus." The pastor was confused and said, "No, I was talking about a squirrel. What made you answer Jesus?" Without hesitation the child responded, "Because every time you ask us a question, the answer is always Jesus." Perhaps you've heard that story before!

The danger in preaching on this John passage is that it can quickly turn into a *Jesus-the-squirrel* kind of moment for many of the parishioners who have already listened to countless sermons on this passage from different preachers. Some, or even many of them, might check out mentally when listening to one more. Trying a different preaching method than what the congregation(s) you serve are accustomed to hearing might lend itself better to capturing the attention of those hearing your sermon, helping to proclaim the good news in this passage where the risen Christ's encounters his disciples. This will look differently for each of us but some things I have done to change things up in my preaching on a very familiar text have included doing dramatic reenactments, showcasing depictions of those biblical passages in artwork, and showing videos that have some relevance to those scriptures.

May the Spirit inspire your imagination as you share the good news "that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Eric Hanson

Third Sunday of Easter
April 23, 2023

Acts 2:14a, 36–41
Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19
1 Peter 1:17–23
Luke 24:13–35

Acts 2:14a, 36–41

[Commentary on this reading is included in the Second Sunday of Easter, Acts 2:14a, 22–23 entry]

Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19

This psalm begins with the phrase, "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications." During a time in which people from almost all walks of life want to be heard and feel unheard, preachers can point to the hopeful words of this psalmist which remind us that Yahweh hears our supplications.

1 Peter 1:17–23

[Commentary is included in the Second Sunday of Easter 1 Peter 1:3-9 entry.]

Luke 24:13–35

The Emmaus Road story is the first time that the risen Christ publicly interacts with his followers in Luke's gospel. Just before this story, "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James" and other women brought spices to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body. Yet, when they arrived, they found that the body was not in the tomb and were greeted by "two men in dazzling clothes" who informed them that Jesus had been raised. The women then remembered the words Jesus told them and returned to tell the other disciples this good news, but their "words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe."

This pericope takes place later "on that same day" as two of the disciples, Cleopas and one who is unnamed, are traveling to Emmaus. While they travel, "Jesus himself came near and went with them." However, these disciples' "eyes were kept from recognizing" that this was Jesus. When Jesus inquiries about their sadness, the disciples share, "how our chief priests and leaders handed [Jesus] over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." They continue explaining how the women reported "they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that [Jesus] was alive" and how some of the other disciples had gone and found the empty tomb. Jesus responds, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe." Then he declares how it was "necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory." "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to [the disciples] the things about himself in all the scriptures." When they finally reached their destination, Jesus "took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to [the disciples]. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." The story concludes as these two disciples go back to Jerusalem and proclaim the good news to the others that "The Lord has risen indeed."

Food is a recurring motif throughout Luke-Acts, which has a total of nineteen meals mentioned. Some scholars argue that Luke's use of food might be a way of establishing links between the stories in the Gospel of Luke and the meals which

the early Christians shared together.[6] "What happens at meals in this Gospel corresponds to what can or should happen 'at church.' "[7] With this in mind, it is fascinating how the moment the two disciples finally recognize the risen Christ does not come during the theological instruction Jesus gave or when others told them of the resurrection. Rather, it is while they are sharing a meal with the risen Christ that "their eyes were opened." In his book *Dear Church,* pastor and public theologian Lenny Duncan describes a similar experience the first time he participated in communion at Temple Lutheran Church in Havertown, Pennsylvania. Duncan came into the sanctuary and heard the Reverend Tim Johansen announce, "This is Jesus' table; he made no restrictions, and neither do we."[8] As a black man who has been a victim of much exclusion throughout his life, this was revolutionary for Duncan. He writes, "This welcome to the table was something I had never experienced before. I didn't even know what it was. It awakened the shadow side of my relationship with God…It was like a knife that cut instantly through years of shame and brokenness and released me from the bonds."[9]

Preachers have a tremendous opportunity with this passage to draw a parallel with how the risen Christ meets us at the table of communion, filling us with God's grace and justice, and opening our eyes as well.

Eric Hanson

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 30, 2023

Acts 2:42–47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19–25
John 10:1–10

Engaging the Texts

Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. The psalmist assures us in words many know by heart: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Jesus leads his sheep out and they follow him because they know his voice. Some people will hear Jesus say, "I am the Good Shepherd" even though that verse isn't read! The other two readings for this Sunday are a bit farther removed from the shepherd theme. The reading from 1 Peter has been moved up in the lectionary. (We'll return to the earlier verses of this chapter next Sunday.) This choice was probably made so the reading would connect with the Gospel: "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. "(2:25) This reading from 1 Peter 2 is also dangerous (see below).

What about the First Reading from Acts? I suppose it's possible to relate this reading to the Good Shepherd theme with a question like: "Where does the shepherd lead the sheep?" Your answer could be, "The shepherd leads them into a community of sharing described in the reading from Acts!" That could work but a sermon doesn't have to say something about every reading. Acts 2: 42–47 is the very end of the Pentecost story. In this chapter, the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to witness in many languages to people gathered from across the empire. The Holy Spirit empowered Peter to preach so powerfully that 3000 repented and were baptized that very day. But Pentecost hadn't ended! "Those who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need"(2:45). Pentecost ends too soon if we don't hear the part about economics.

A word of caution about 1 Peter 2. The appointed reading omits verse 18 that urges slaves to accept the authority of their masters, whether kind or harsh. But the remaining verses seem to exalt suffering: "If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval." (vs. 20) How does the woman abused by her husband hear these words? How does this verse sound to relatives of the nine people shot at Mother Emmanuel Church? Can words like these justify the terror of lynching in the United States? Does God approve of such suffering? This dangerous text from 1 Peter needs attention if it is read during worship.

Pastoral Reflections

From the comments above it may be apparent that a decision needs to be made about which text(s) will shape the sermon. Will Psalm 23 and John 10 guide the choice of music as well as preaching? If the answer is "yes," then what other text(s) will be read? If we read a dangerous or confusing text, we need to say something about it.

The Gospel text itself is confusing. Jesus mixes metaphors in ways that will disappoint an English teacher. Jesus starts with the metaphor of a shepherd who enters the sheepfold through the gate—not like a thief or bandit who climbs over the walls to steal or destroy. After setting up this metaphor of the shepherd who enters by the gate, Jesus says: "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." Well, is Jesus the shepherd or the gate? Yes! Jesus is both.

Jesus' mixed metaphors paint an important picture of what it means to be the Church. "The shepherd calls his own

6. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 158-159.
7. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 159.
8. Lenny Duncan, *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 1.
9. Duncan, *Dear Church*. 2.

sheep by name and leads them out." For years I pictured the shepherd leading them into the fold where they'd be safe. Some scholars think a sheepfold might have been shared by several different shepherds. They'd bring their flocks in at night, safe in the sheepfold. In the morning, the shepherds would call their own sheep by name. What I had missed in this text is that Jesus is leading his sheep OUT.

What does this mean for church? We can't stay in the sheepfold! Most of our work as followers of Jesus doesn't happen inside the church. What we do in here should make a difference for what we do out there. "When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him…" We don't leave Jesus behind when we leave church! We listen for Jesus' voice in the midst of so many other voices. Will we treat people who are different with respect? Will we be honest even if it means losing a sale or a promotion? Will we refuse to laugh at racist or sexist jokes? Will we accept Medicaid patients or send them away? What we do in here shapes what we do out there.

But what about that other metaphor? Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters by me will be saved…" The Greek word translated "will be saved" can also be translated "shall be kept safe." That sounds different, doesn't it? Often that word "saved" means saved from hell and separates the saved from the unsaved. Is the church a place where every person will find safety?

I have a friend who was pastor of a Lutheran church in the Bronx years ago. Many people had moved away when the neighborhood changed, and the Cross Bronx Expressway cut through the church's backyard. A long-time member of that congregation always stood outside the church on Sunday morning. He and his wife had decided to stay even though many people had left. Every Sunday he stood at the end of the sidewalk leading to the front doors of the church. Whenever African Americans came along, he said respectfully, "You must be looking for the Baptist Church. It's just around the corner." He fully believed they must be Baptists and felt they would be more comfortable there. He wasn't a bad man. He knew the Twenty-third Psalm by heart -- but he had forgotten that Jesus was the gate.

Jesus the shepherd calls us by name and leads us out. Jesus the gate welcomes people we might not let in. How can the shepherd who enters the sheepfold by the gate also be the gate? It's confusing, those mixed metaphors. But Jesus didn't come that we might have good grammar. Jesus came that we might have life—and have it abundantly.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2023

Acts 7:55–60
Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16
1 Peter 2:2–10
John 14:1–14

Engaging the Gospel Text for Preaching

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," said Jesus. "Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (14:1–2).

We hear Jesus' words often at funerals, but can we hear these words today, on the Fifth Sunday of Easter? Chapter 14 is the beginning of Jesus' last conversation with his disciples, the farewell discourse that comes after sharing the Passover meal. Jesus moves beyond his opening promise to say some rather startling things toward the end of this passage: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (14:12). If anyone other than Jesus had said those words, we would call it blasphemy. Greater works than Jesus? How can that be?

Jesus is not talking about heaven here; Jesus is talking about earth. Later in this same chapter Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live" (14:18). Jesus promised to be present with the disciples in a different way: "I will ask my Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever" (14:16). But "forever" wasn't postponed to a time after death; "forever" included life in the present. Jesus' presence will be deeper than memory and closer than heaven.

Though this promise is surely personal, it is primarily communal. These words are Jesus' last words to the community of disciples that would become the Church. In his book *Costly Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about Christ's body, the Church: "The body of Christ takes up space on the earth," he said. "A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities…that is all. But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him." The body of Christ takes up space on the earth. This is more than a spiritual metaphor: it is bodily reality.

Perhaps this is why we are often so dissatisfied with the church: if the church didn't take up space, it (or we) could be more faithful. If we were spiritual instead of earthy, we

could do those things Jesus promised the disciples long ago. Yet, Jesus calls us to claim space on the earth, to do the kingdom-work begun in Galilee. Those of us who are part of the Church know we are not what Jesus called us to be. We spend too much and share too little; we judge too many and love too few; we wait too long and act too late. Maybe you've heard someone say, "Show me a church where ministers aren't self-serving, where there's no hypocrisy, where love is genuine, and I'll become a member." You'll wait a long time, my friend, for such a church takes up no space on this earth. Perhaps, such a church lives as a memory -- a time when disciples believed, when faith could move mountains, and motives were pure.

Annie Dillard writes about such yearnings in her book *Holy the Firm*. She admits that we get nostalgic about people in the Bible--prophets and publicans, tax collectors and disciples-- "as though, of course, God should reveal himself, if at all, to those people from the Sunday school leaflets. They were simple and faithful, while we now are complex and full of doubt. We are busy. So, I see now, were they."

> Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in God's holy space? There is no one but us.
>
> There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth … but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent ancestors are all dead and our children are busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to pressure, and grown exhausted … But there is no one but us. There never has been.
>
> There have been generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; here has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day.

There is no one but us, not in this time and space. The twelve disciples are gone and heaven is not yet our home. We trust Jesus' promise about the dwelling places in God's house, about a future with Jesus that we cannot see. But do we also trust the promise that the Spirit has come now to this earth? Do we believe that the Spirit continues to call and shape the Church? "Very truly, I tell you," said Jesus, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father."

Jesus, help us trust your promise.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2023

Acts 17:22–31
Psalm 66:8–20
1 Peter 3:13–22
John 14:15–21

Engaging The Texts

Paul's testimony in **Acts** starts this pericope from a place of passion and bravery. This confidently poised, poetic preacher testifies to the connection between God's creation of the world, the fall, and our redemption in Jesus in inclusive words rather than using "insider" language. Paul's effort to make the Gospel a universal story of redemption goes so far as to quote Greek proverbs and poetry in defense/description of God (vs 28). For as often as I've heard it in prayers, I was unaware that "In him we live and move and have our being" wasn't a quote from the Hebrew Bible but rather from Greek texts. Does Paul, or rather our author Luke, make a case here for the inclusion of contemporary and contextual poetry in our testimonies, liturgies, and prayers? How does the use of common, contemporary poetry open up communities to perceiving God in ways differently from "what we've always prayed"?

The first eight verses of the **Psalm** for this Sunday offer imagery of a God who leads us *into* temptation and hardship and sees us through. Both Paul and Peter seem to have taken to heart vs. 16: "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what God has done for me." The overall theme for the psalm seems to be God is faithful.

I'm curious about **Peter's** use of the term "conscience" in this text partly because as a citizen of the twenty-first century, my own conceptualization of "conscience" is influenced by nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. I also recall a lesson in seminary in which we discussed the attributes we as a society give to our body parts: head to thinking, heart to feeling, etc. The lesson was, and I fear I don't recall an academic source, that for our Hebrew ancestors, those attributes were shifted down: heart to thinking, stomach to feeling. So, I wonder if consciousness is perhaps aligned with a "clean heart" (Psalm 51:10)—to which I am attributing not just a purity of thoughts but more so sentiments and actions of love and compassion?

Within these seven verses from **John**, our author goes from speaking to "you" to speaking to "them:" "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (vs 15), "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me" (vs 21). It makes a connection to our first two lessons and Acts and Peter's documented argument as to whether the Jesus

movement was to be a global movement or a movement for insiders. John's interpretation of Jesus seems to lean toward a global invitation conditioned on the "having" and "keeping" of Jesus' commandments. But what commandments? In other gospels, Jesus summarized the commandments of his Jewish tradition to two: love God and love your neighbor (Mark 12:30-31, Matt 22:36-40). But, in John's gospel, the only commandment Jesus has given was on Maundy Thursday when he washed his disciples feet and said: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34).

Pastoral Reflections

While my propensity to use curse words does sometimes surprise people, the word that has caused the most concern recently in my community is the "E" word: evangelism. Yet, I believe it is a word that needs to be reclaimed from some of our more conservative Christian siblings whose behaviors and proclamations have been messages of hatred and hurt rather than the good news of God's radical love and grace. I wonder what it would look and feel like if I thought of my sermons each week as evangelism and not simply preaching?

We know from many polls that the number of people in the United States who identify as religious is diminishing. What I am finding in my congregation and community is that we are having visitors who, perhaps due to this diminishing trend, didn't grow up in the church. I cannot make assumptions in my preaching that everyone knows the stories to which I'm referring nor can I assume they have any formal formation in the Theology, Christology, Ecclesiology, etc. of the church. Serving in an ecumenical setting means that I am also regularly curious about how my "Lutheran" is showing. As new members are coming to our congregation very few of them are cradle Episcopalians. The community to whom I'm preaching has wonderfully diverse backgrounds.

This does feel like an opportunity, like Paul and Peter had after Jesus' death, to think intentionally about not only what to preach but how to preach to my community in a way that connects them to that radical love and grace of God, how to be an evangelist. I wonder if this practice could be helpful to consider even if your congregation is more homogeneous and filled with cradle Lutherans. Does our worship and our preaching help to prepare our communities to go into the world as evangelists themselves? What in our worship and preaching inhibits our community's empowerment as evangelists?

This week's texts offer us something to think about in terms of incorporating evangelism into our ministries: Paul utilizes poetry from the community to whom he is preaching, the psalmist gives honest testimony to both the highs and lows of life and God's faithfulness, Peter's "clear conscience" might appeal to the more intellectually engaged faithful seekers, and Jesus points to commandments that are actions of service and love in the world. What does evangelism look like in your context? What does evangelism look like in the broader community that you and your congregation serve?

Perhaps the psalmist's invitation, "Come and listen, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what God has done for me," is the invitation our congregation needs to share with those sitting next to them a testimony of God's love and grace in their life. When was the last time you asked your congregation to account for the hope that is in them or gave your members the opportunity to share with gentleness and reverence the source and sustenance of that hope?

Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Ascension of Our Lord
May 18, 2023

Acts 1:1–11
Psalm 47
Ephesians 1:15–23
Luke 24:44–53

Engaging the Texts

One resource suggests reading the Acts lesson *after* the gospel with the understanding that both have the same author and Acts is the "sequel"[10] to Luke. This may be something to consider in terms of how it affects your preaching and as an educational tool about the authorship of books of the Bible.

The **Acts** text reminds us of Luke's audience in both his gospel and this follow-up text. Both are addressed to "Theophilus" or "lover of God," either a person or a community of people, but also you and me. Luke's description of the resurrection—"he presented himself alive to them" (3)—is a unique expression of resurrection. I am intrigued by the actor in this phrase: "he" is Jesus and "he presented himself alive" (emphasis added). Usually the language is "God raised him" but this use of "he" connects Jesus to God in a powerful way. Jesus' resurrected time on earth is sandwiched between the appearance of two messengers of God: at the tomb, Luke writes "suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them" (24:4) and here at Jesus' ascension, Luke writes: "suddenly two men in white robes stood by them" (10). Who are the messengers today who help us make meaning and sense of resurrection?

10. Nathan Mattox. "Ascension Day." *Process & Faith,* 10 May 2018, https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/ascension-day-10-may-2018/. Accessed 3 March 2023.

Psalm 47 encourages us to read Jesus' ascension in the long-held, hierarchical imagery where Jesus and God reign on high as a King. It's no wonder that this psalm is picked to accompany today's festival; however, is this how you imagine Jesus' or God's role in our lives and in creation? Psalm 47 gives us a wonderful invitation to "clap your hands" and "sing praises" on this holy day!

The **Ephesians** reading picks up the imagery of "God and Jesus as rulers" (20-21). For ELCA's governance, with "a spirit of wisdom and revelation" and "the eyes of our hearts enlightened" (17-18), what is it that Jesus, as head of the church, has called us to? What are the riches of Jesus' glorious inheritance among the saints? What is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe? (18-19). How does this relate to your congregation?

I have usually associated Pentecost with the birth of the church. Is Ascension the birth announcement? **Luke's gospel** seems to be an anointing or consecration of the new ministry that will be birthed after Jesus leaves and the "power from on high" is bestowed on Jesus' disciples (a foreshadowing of Pentecost). I sense a Holy Saturday kind of feeling to the Ascension celebration: Jesus tells the disciples "I am sending you" but they must wait for that power before they can truly begin their ministry. The waiting and anticipation are hard for me. In my frustration I've totally lost sight of Jesus' actual Ascension, which is the celebration today. How does our anticipation of what's to come prevent us from appreciating what's in front of us right now?

Pastoral Reflections

I recall an exercise in seminary where our instructor read the Nicene Creed and students either stood or sat to show belief or doubt/disbelief of each line. As a creedal church, some may be discomforted to know that as a class we sat and stood like we were doing squats at the gym. This exercise wasn't meant to shame or weed out whether we were actually called to be ministers, but to highlight and treasure the critical thinking, reflection, and faith of all who speak these creeds. The creeds may be one of the only places members of your congregation have acknowledged Jesus' ascension unless your church makes a point of celebrating Ascension Day regularly.

When I first moved to Maine, some friends hosted a Pesach-Easter gathering to honor the Jewish and Christian traditions of their respective families of origin. Before eating, one friend described the history of Pesach, "Passover," and the beliefs, rituals, and traditions of their Jewish faith. As the resident Christian clergy person, I was asked to explain Easter. When I got to the part of Jesus' ascension to heaven 40 days later, every Christian in the room responded "What? We believe that?" Though many of them had spoken the words in the creeds, the ascension is not something that is often talked about or preached!

Is this my argument for celebrating Ascension, either on Thursday or the following Sunday? Perhaps! For all our talk about sharing a birth, death, and resurrection with Jesus, we rarely claim that "just as Jesus ascended to heaven, we, too, will ascend to heaven." The ascension is Jesus' thing (and Elijah's and Moses'). But ascension is a necessary part of the story. Jesus no longer walks the earth in the physical form his resurrection took to his disciples in the locked room. We see Jesus in our midst all the time, but not necessarily as the one with the marks on his hands and the hole in his chest. While it may have made our evangelism a bit easier if he had stayed on earth, Jesus ascended to heaven and his role in the church and ours changed.

Debra Dean Murphy wrote in a blog for the *Ekklesia* Project, that "Jesus' ascension into heaven, then, is … that which makes possible the Church's existence. Because Jesus is not here, the Church *can* be, *must* be … his worshiping, witnessing body here and now"[11] (author's emphasis). Jesus doesn't abandon the church, rather Jesus ascends and becomes the head of the church as Ephesians tells us, and (spoiler alert) we are bestowed with the great power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to become the church incarnate. It's important to acknowledge Jesus' ascension in general and as the moment we are called to be the bearers of the tradition.

Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2023

Acts 1:6–14
Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35
1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11
John 17:1–11

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

We are nearing the end of a long, multi-week Easter celebration. How to keep the good news of Christ's resurrection, God's shattering of death and all that entombs, and the cosmic in-breaking of life and newness, is the preacher's great challenge.

These texts gift us with language, imagery, and vision; they propel us to be church, to claim this Easter-way for ourselves. To this end Jesus has to be mobile. That is what the ascension claims. The one we follow is not tied down to a particular place or people or time. Jesus' power and spirit

11. Debra Dean Murphy. "Ascension Politics." *Intersections: Thoughts on Religion, Culture, and Politics,*10 May 2010, https://debradeanmurphy.wordpress.com/2010/05/10/ascension-politics/, Accessed 3 March 2023.

are dispersed and unleashed. His departure, his ministry of absence, is his final laboring push, so that the church can be born, pushed out into the world, filled with God's breath.

Many congregations do not hold mid-week Ascension services. It is a good Sunday to expound on this mysterious event, as it was so important to our ancestors of faith they included it in the Apostles' Creed.

Jesus comes from God, returns to God, as we all will. The challenge for us is to live in the meantime--to be rooted, grounded in God, here and now. Much of our lives are spent in-between: in between elections, in between work and play; teenagers living in between childhood and adulthood. We live in between doctors' appointments, good news, and bad news, in between what is and what could be, the here and the not yet, life and death, always on the precipice of both.

In Acts and John we find fearful communities, anxious and bewildered. The glue, the person that held them together is leaving. It's a grace time. A powerful time. They have what they need. Jesus' teaching and stories are in their ears, Jesus' actions in their bodies, Jesus' presence in their hearts. They don't need to look to the sky for interventions. They can look to each other. Yet the future looms large and unknown. They are caught between a familiar here and a shadowy there, an anxious now and a hopeful tomorrow. Those seeking church today bring similar anxieties and burdens. So much seems unmoored, so much uncertainty. But in these texts there is plenty to excavate to proclaim God's presence among a weary people.

In Jesus' extremely long farewell speech in John's gospel, Jesus instructs, warns, and encourages. Not wanting his disciples to strain their necks looking to the heavens for a sign, Jesus gives them food for their journey, equips them with power: the ability to love, forgive, heal, welcome, challenge.

This story was told on NPR's Fresh Air. When Maya Angelou was a child a traumatic event removed her desire to speak for years. During that time she thought of herself as a giant ear, absorbing and eating up all sound. She said, "There is no sound which is more beautiful to me than the human voice."

When she was 11, her teacher, Mrs. Flowers, who encouraged her reading, asked her, "Do you love poetry?" Maya took her pad and pen she carried around to communicate and wrote, "Yes," thinking this was a silly question. Mrs. Flowers asserted, "You do not love poetry. You will never love poetry until it comes across your tongue, over your teeth and across your lips. No, you do not love poetry, not until you speak it." Challenged by this, Maya took a book of poetry and tried to speak it, and she found her voice.

Imagine Jesus saying this to his beloved disciples in his farewell speech: you do not love God, you do not know me, if you do not love and speak me with your lives and actions and love. No you do not love me, until it shows in your heart, in your getting along, in putting love before rightness, relationship before doctrine, loving kindness before rules, justice before comfort. No, you do not love me until that love rolls off your tongue, and over your teeth and across your lips, into your whole body then out into the world.

We are not left bereft in this in-between time. The ascending Jesus brings all his humanity with him to the right hand of God, all the joy, the worry, the hurts, the waiting, the unfairness, the brokenness, the love and it rolls off his tongue, over his teeth, across his lips, through his very body, to the cross, and all of it is taken into the heart of God. See how God so loves the world.

Mary Halvorson

Pentecost Sunday
May 28, 2023

Acts 2:1–21
Psalm 104:24–34, 35b
1 Corinthians 12:3b–13
John 20:19–23

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Pentecost is often referred to as the birthday of the church. At coffee hour you may find a lovely birthday cake for all to enjoy. These days I think of Pentecost in less neat and tidy ways, and more like the pandemonium of our house after our young grandkids have left. Things are not where they should be, it's messy with the evidence of activity and play scattered everywhere.

The early church is experiencing its first disruption. The Spirit comes, answering our persistent Advent prayers of "Stir us up, Lord"--and just like that, it happens. Like that final push before birth, the Spirit breaks through our membranes, pushing through what feels impossible, and out the church comes, watery and Spirit-drenched. Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls this breath, this spirit "world-mothering air. "

The Spirit arrives in a big way, bringing chaos and disruption. In the rush of a mighty wind the Spirit whips up a United Nations-like, multi-lingual flash mob, igniting energy, fiery tongues, and forming a diverse community. All languages barriers are lifted, there is universal understanding. No wonder some think this is a drunken orgy.

In John's gospel the Spirit's arrival is like an old friend who calls at just the right time, when you are at loose ends, desperate for a listening ear, or a sponsor whose wise, life-changing word you need at that moment and gets you moving toward the life God intends. The Spirit is quiet as breath and speaks peace to disciples in a locked room.

The Spirit arrives just in time, after Jesus ascends to the right hand of God and is no longer present to walk about on earth. The Spirit moves in, functioning as the stirrer, the disruptor, the energizing force for God's action. This is strategic on God's part. The disciples no longer have Jesus to follow along the road, to shadow and take notes about how to do this ministry business. There will be no more apprenticing with Jesus, hanging on to his every word and action. But with the Spirit's arrival, for the disciples, for the early church of Acts, and now for all of us, we are the vehicles through whom God's Spirit works. We are God's tributaries.

Have you ever considered yourself a living stream, a tributary? Years ago I heard the late Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl say words that have never left me: "the church is not a monument, it is a river." We are meant to move, bend, carve new pathways to water dry and parched places. As Jesus said, "Out of believers' hearts shall flow rivers of living water"(John 7: 38). Jesus said this on the heels of the Jewish Festival of Booths. This harvest celebration is rooted in the memory of Israel's long wilderness wanderings. Part of the ritual of the festival is the daily offering of water brought to the Temple from the Pool of Siloam. The water was poured on the altar while prayers for rain were recited.

As Jesus often does, he takes something traditional, then re-interprets and re-shapes its meaning. In John's 7th chapter, Jesus is not talking about water poured out once a year in a ritual act. Jesus is the living water who teaches us, models for us, how to be tributaries for the living water. He's talking about water that is radically new, transforming, poured out through our lives of love and service, no matter how messy and complicated and uneven our lives may be.

We are called to be God's Spirit-ed watery disciples. Where there is disruption and tension, there is opportunity. This could be the very moment God's Spirit is agitating us, calling us to deepen our dreams and visions and commitments for clean air and water, to be caregivers in how we live together with limited resources, to cross boundaries of language and discover common ground and new understanding.

Here's what I'm imagining on Pentecost Sunday (and I can because the congregation I recently served had a concrete floor in the sanctuary). I see water being poured into the baptismal font, poured by persons of all ages. When the font is full, they keep pouring as water runs over and onto the floor, down the aisle and under worshippers' feet. I see excitement, concern, disapproval, I see energy and laughter, I see people jumping out of their pews and playing in the water, and bumping into each other: a ritual calling us all to be God's people, the church, living tributaries for a church on the move.

Mary Halvorson

Trinity Sunday
June 4, 2023

Genesis 1:1–2:4a
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 13:11–13
Matthew 28:16–20

Engaging the Texts

"Finally…put things in order," we hear Paul urge the Corinthians in the second lesson. I trust Paul doesn't mean that we must be orderly about our proclamation of the Triune God. Creative, expansive, relational—yes. Orderly? Probably not, at least for me. I find that most attempts at ordering the Trinity make preachers into explainers rather than proclaimers, and we often get lost in doctrinal weeds. Having two options for the Prayer of the Day tells us something about the complexity of preaching on this day. We have at least two ways to "put things in order" liturgically, two different open doors to exploring the imagery and themes of the day. Paul's concluding line to the Corinthians is repeated in assemblies of Christians across the globe every Sunday as the greeting. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." This three-part address orders and unites us as the Body of Christ. Whatever direction we take with preaching, we will be held by the triune God.

The first lesson for this day is a lengthy poem about God's creativity. Perhaps your people heard this text not so long ago as the first lesson at the Paschal Vigil, where we tell as many stories of God's mighty acts as we can. How does this story resonate differently on this liturgical day? The great thing about poetry is that it yields fresh meaning with changes in context.

God is creativity. Preaching on this day of beauty and mystery is more like the creative work described by the psalmist in Psalm 8 appointed for today, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers…" Delicate work requires dexterous fingers, like those of a skilled artist or surgeon. Tatting lace. Watercolor painting. Etching in glass. Inlaying wood. With this level of care and attention, God went about the orderly work of placing the stars in the the heavens and the moon, sun, and earth into their cosmic dance.

God is community, seeking relationship by making all things and knitting them into mutual dependence. God attends to our communal rhythms by resting and hallowing a day of rest for all created things. For us, this is a day to gather, feast, sing, and remember in whose image we are made.

God is eternity, hovering over and breathing into the life-birthing dark of the beginning.

And God is now, walking around Galilee in a body risen from death, promising to remain with us "to the end of the age."

Pastoral Reflections

Dwelling in the poetry of our creation story turns our attention to the land and to our neighbors. We have the challenge (added to the challenge of preaching about the Trinity!) of hearing Matthew 28 and the "great commission" with decolonized ears. Can we "go, therefore" and share a message of good news in a nation—and a church—that still colonizes?

Gail Ramshaw once said that every Christian denomination has a "Trinity affinity." Our Catholic neighbors center on God the Father. Our Pentecostal siblings lean on the Holy Spirit. We Lutherans look to Jesus. If we back up from the "therefore" in verse 18, we recall that authority rests not on any human institution, denomination, or doctrine, but in Jesus. Our calling to "go," then, is no triumphal commission. It is a mantle of servanthood and self-giving love.

We have a model in Paul, taking so much joy in the absurdity of his own call and boldly sharing a message of healing, freedom, and grace in Christ. And he visited or kept fellowship with just about "all" the nations of the ancient world of the Mediterranean. What does it mean to be baptized "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"? Live in peace. Greet one another with a holy kiss. And bless the saints.

The triune name of God dances over each one of us in baptism, joining us with the communion of saints. The saints, that mystical body of imperfect people, is an image that I believe helps us resist colonizing theologies. We are linked with the saints through the gift of baptismal grace. We are linked with all living things through God's breath in creation. If everything is already connected, already sacred, and every living thing is already my neighbor in the web of creation, how can I greet them with anything but a holy kiss?

This was the message of one such saint that the church remembers in the week following Trinity Sunday. The Commemoration of Seattle, Chief of the Duwamish Confederacy, is coming up on June 7th. Maybe the most needful message for us to hear on this Trinity Sunday is what Chief Seattle frequently spoke about—that humanity is but one thread in the web of life and we are linked with all things. Can we preach about the Trinity as sacred weaving? God is dancing, weaving, linking all life. Let us go, therefore, and dance, weave, work, and bless those lives we're linked with. This, finally, is the good order we find ourselves in by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Liv Larson Andrews

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 11, 2023

Hosea 5:15–6:6
Psalm 50:7–15
Romans 4:13–25
Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

Enaging the Texts for Preaching

Matthew 9: I envision a large banner draping the word "MERCY" over the remainder of year A in the lectionary. Maybe that would be helpful for every year, every season. "I desire mercy" Jesus proclaims in Matthew 9. What a helpful lens to look through as we encounter the unfolding story of Jesus in this gospel, in our lives, and in our congregations. For the tax collector Matthew, mercy shows up in a bold moment of calling. For the child and woman who are sick, mercy is healing that flows freely. At the beginning and to the end, this is a story about God's mercy.

We relish a delectable story sandwich here in Matthew: a healing within a healing. The layered narrative illustrates how Jesus describes his merciful purpose in verse 12, "I have come for those who are sick." Healing the sick is not only a metaphor about sin and righteousness but a major part of Jesus' tangible ministry on earth. Mercy is given flesh and blood.

Comparing these two healing stories in Matthew and Mark offers insight about what each gospel desires to share in the telling. Though Mark's gospel is often spare with narration, it is in Mark that the synagogue leader is named, and the age of the young girl is given which equals the length of time the woman has suffered hemorrhages. Mark's telling takes up twice as many verses.

Why is Matthew so spare on this story in comparison to Mark? This could be a fruitful question to consider as a preacher, especially if exploring the uniqueness of Matthew's narrative is a priority for you in preaching in the remainder of year A. We hear this story paired with the calling of Matthew and the affirmation that Jesus is about mercy. Does this story serve to instruct potential Jesus followers about what the baptized will be up to? Is it painting a picture for us to remember what our baptismal call is about? Mark features the sending of the twelve soon after this healing story and accompanies it with Jesus being rejected from his hometown. In Matthew, there are several more stories of healing that follow this one in chapter 9. The whole section begins with Jesus getting questioned in the home of the tax collector, "Why does your teacher eat with sinners?" The story seems to offer an answer.

Jesus keeps table fellowship with sinners because God's mercy needs to come in flesh and blood to heal the sick. Jesus—the teacher, the healer—is God's mercy in flesh and blood. Jesus is mercy; Jesus is Messiah.

Hosea 5 and 6: For the prophet Hosea, God's mercy is like a faithful spouse. In a prophetic book that gives many verses to illustrating God's judgments, this pericope gives voice to the people as they are deciding to return to God. God has waited faithfully for them. Then, we hear the voice of the Lord again, lamenting the fleeting nature of the people's worship and devotion, fading like morning dew. Echoing forward to the voice of Jesus, we hear the Lord declare, "I desire steadfast love." Steadfast love that tirelessly waits. Mercy that pulls up a chair to the dinner table and touches the sick with healing power. These images kindle hope for all of us who have been counted "as good as dead." Why does our teacher eat with us? Because we need his mercy and fellowship. Because this is the way of Jesus in the world.

Romans 4: Paul never got to keep flesh and blood fellowship with the church in Rome. Yet his words bear the powerful echo of Christ's mercy that we also long to receive. With the Romans, our churches can "hope against hope" in our God who gives life to the dead, mercy to the sinful, healing to the sick.

It might be a scary question to consider: What is "as good as dead" in your midst? Our church structures are undergoing necessary and major change. Our planet continues to be in peril. Many relationships have changed as a result of deep isolation in recent years. In all these changes, and even in death, God's mercy does not flee or fade. It comes close. It touches us. It permits us to touch.

We know that in cycles of systemic trauma, "hurt people hurt people." Perhaps this Sunday is a good day to explore how it is also true that "healing people heal people."[12] Our bodies contain the capacity for metabolizing pain through communal practices and ritual caregiving. Together, we can end cycles of hurt through embodied healing. We need each other for this work. There is generous grace in that truth. God's mercy continues to come close for those who are hurting, sick, and suffering. This means that God's mercy, in flesh and blood, is sitting right beside us in the pews and walking with us around the neighborhood.

"Call on God in a day of trouble," urges the psalmist in Psalm 50, appointed for the day. The hemorrhaging woman and the leader of the synagogue did so when they came to Jesus. Take heart, preacher. God also uses you and your words to bring mercy in flesh and blood to all who need it. Thanks be to God that the banner of mercy covers us, too.

Liv Larson Andrews

12. As explored in *My Grandmother's Hands*, by Resmaa Menakem.

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 18, 2023

Exodus 19:2–8a
Psalm 100
Romans 5:1–8
Matthew 9:35–10:8 (9–23)

Engaging the Texts

Exodus 19 will remind some people of the hymn, "On Eagle's Wings." (The hymn's verses are from Psalm 91 but the psalm says only "his wings" so Exodus is needed for the refrain!) This text is a reminder of God's covenant with the people of Israel. When Moses told the people God's covenant command, they answered, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." (Exod 19: 8a) When we hear their response, we're suspicious because we know the people will often forget their promise. What about us? Consider the Baptismal liturgy or the Affirmation of Baptism where we make promises "… to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth." When asked if we will do these things, we answer, "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me."

Romans 5 is one of Paul's strongest affirmations of God's amazing grace. This passage ends with the surprising promise: "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (5:8). Sometimes at a funeral I've wanted to skip one phrase in the Commendation for the Dying at the end of the service: "Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant _____. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock…" Here I stumbled, "…a sinner of your own redeeming." I didn't want to remind the family and the congregation that this beloved one was a sinner. But, of course, that part can't be left out. This beloved person was a sinner redeemed by God and so was every person gathered there, including the pastor. What if we had to wait until we had no sin to be loved by God?

Matthew 9:35–10:8 Jesus was very busy: "…he went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness" (9:35). Jesus was not only filled with compassion for the people, but he had a sense of urgency: "the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few" (9:36–37). He came to understand that it was unreasonable and unrealistic to proclaim the good news by himself. If Jesus had decided to proclaim the Gospel without any help, then when he died that message could have died with him. Jesus

understood that the kind of transformation he had in mind was most likely to continue when ordinary people became enthusiastic advocates for it.

Jesus commissioned his disciples to do what he had been doing. For the first time in Matthew the twelve are listed by name—even Judas was commissioned along with the others (10:2–4). They were to go first to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10: 6); however, later in Matthew, Jesus' message becomes more expansive: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations…" (28:19). Wherever the disciples went, their message was the same as Jesus' message from the beginning: "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17; 10:7).

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus commissioned the twelve to do what he had been doing. This seems audacious, especially if we see ourselves as descendants of the disciples. Colin Tuckman writing in *Working Preacher* says, "…to be sent by Jesus is, in some sense, to be sent as Jesus." To be sent as Jesus! But we can't do what Jesus did even if we wear a tee shirt that proclaims "God's Work, Our Hands." Curing the sick, cleansing lepers, and even raising the dead can be seen as miracles of medical science. But what about casting out demons? If these actions are listed in ascending order of importance, then casting out demons becomes the most important of all. But we don't know how to talk about demons.

There are people in our communities who can teach us about demons. If you are in recovery or know someone who is, you know the first step in Alcoholics Anonymous: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable." Some admit being powerless over drugs, nicotine, sex, or over-eating. I had a dear friend who became addicted to crack cocaine after trying it once. Before crack grabbed him, he was the pastor of five different congregations in city, small town, and suburbs. He was a wonderful pastor and people loved him. When he went to Hazelton for treatment, members of the congregation he was serving sent him over 700 letters and cards. He came through treatment but couldn't make it. He knew the truth about demons: he was powerless over crack. He could never hold onto Step Two: "Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."

Those of us not in recovery also need a recovery program but we hardly know what Step One is for us: "We admitted we were powerless over greed/powerless over competition/powerless over jealousy…" How can the church be a community where we can be honest with ourselves and one another, even if we don't believe in demons?

Barbara K. Lundblad

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 25, 2023

Jeremiah 20:7–13
Psalm 69:7–10 [11–15] 16–18
Romans 6:1b–11
Matthew 10:24–39

Preaching About Jesus' Family Values

The texts for this Sunday offer several options for preaching. Jeremiah feels a burning fire inside when he tries to suppress speaking God's word. (Do we preachers have that same feeling?) Paul offers a wonderful promise, "If we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom 6:5). The gospel text itself offers several possible sermons before confronting us with Jesus' hard words:

> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household (Matt 10:35).

This weekend is Pride Weekend in many communities, celebrating LGBTQ people and relationships. Because we hear so much about "family values," I want to focus on Jesus' difficult words. The family is the center of attention in cultural and political discourse. Support Christian family values: do not teach children about same-gender relationships. Remove library books about sexuality and different kinds of families. Punish parents who seek sex reassignment for their transgender children. Churches and government should protect "Christian Family Values." But Jesus doesn't seem to protect families at all.

Did Jesus come to divide families? Most biblical scholars agree that this passage reflects the reality of what was happening in Matthew's community: families were divided over commitment to Jesus. Matthew wrote out of this reality of pain and division. We don't have to agree to see that these words were encouraging to many. Those rejected by their families received assurance that following Jesus was more important, even more life-giving than family ties.

Is this the only thing Jesus said about the family? Jesus spoke out clearly against adultery -- even thinking about it was wrong (5:27-28). Jesus' teaching about divorce called both men and women to stay married (and he allowed for no legal loopholes!) (5:31-32). But Jesus also said some strange things about families. He commended people for leaving families behind. James and John left their father in the fishing boat to follow Jesus. When Jesus' mother and brothers wanted to speak to him, Jesus replied: "Who is my mother and who

are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:46-50). It became clear that Jesus was defining family beyond blood and tradition. He treated outcasts as family and called his disciples "children" and "little ones." It's hard to find a portrait of the Christian family in the life and teaching of Jesus.

Indeed, it's hard to find such families in the Bible. What biblical family would we choose as our model? Abraham fathered children by two women, Hagar and Sarah. Jacob married Leah and Rachel and also fathered children by two concubines. King David was married and so was Bathsheba when he took her for himself (and made sure her husband was killed in battle). One of the most beautiful portraits of love in the Bible is the relationship between David and Jonathan, love remembered in David's lament when Jonathan was killed in battle: "I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan, your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women…" (2 Sam 1:26).

So that's the Old Testament—what about the New? Joseph surely loved Mary, but we know little of their life together and Joseph disappears after Matthew 2. We have evidence that one disciple, Simon Peter, was married because Jesus healed his mother-in-law. But that's not much help for the average family. Timothy, one of Paul's dearest co-workers, had a Greek father and a Jewish mother. We hear little about his father, but Paul praises Timothy's grandmother, Eunice, and his mother, Lois, for teaching him the faith. (Was Timothy raised by these two women?) We know of at least two married couples in the Book of Acts. Priscilla and Aquilla were commended as teachers and leaders (Acts 18:18, 26). Ananias and Sapphira hoarded money that should have been given to the church. They fell dead at the apostles' feet. Now marriage didn't cause their death, but it surely didn't assure faithful discipleship! (Acts 5:1-11).

It may seem strange, but it's almost impossible to find examples of "Christian family values" in the Bible. But the Bible isn't like those magazines in the grocery check-out line—"Seven Simple Steps to the Perfect Family." No, the Bible isn't like that. Then how can some people speak with absolute certainty about "Christian Family Values"? Where did they find them and how do they know? If we are honest (and I hope we can be) we will acknowledge that our family values are shaped by memories of our own childhood (happy or tragic), the neighborhood where we grew up, our personal reactions to gay people, our relationship (or lack of contact) with people of different races, our Sunday school lessons. All these things have shaped us and our values. We now feel that some families are better than others and some can't be valued at all. But personal feelings are not the same as Christian values.

We need to be at least as humble as Paul was when he struggled with the Corinthian church over matters of sexual morality. "Now concerning virgins," he wrote, "I have no command from the Lord, but I give my opinion…" (1 Cor 7:25). Such humble honesty is refreshing! If we claim authority from the Bible, we need to know what the Bible says. And what it doesn't say.

Jesus said many different things about families. Some of what Jesus said will affirm our feelings and opinions about the family. Jesus said other things that will challenge much of what we hold dear. He relativized the importance of family and expanded the definition of what a family could be. To many, this was threatening and divisive. To others it was an invitation to new life and forgiving love.

Barbara K. Lundblad