

Preaching Helps

Easter Sunday — First Sunday of Pentecost

The Lure of Abundant Life

In his introduction to this issue of *Currents*, Craig Nessen offers a preview of the essays in this volume, including these enticing words: “Steve Oelschlager’s essay asserts that Jesus did not ask us to follow him to make our lives worse. Even though there is a cost to discipleship, there is a corresponding benefit that is meant to lure us into something better: abundant life and the life that truly is life.” Those words provide an important frame as we move into the first two weeks of Easter. Three days after Easter Sunday, we will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. The day after the Second Sunday of Easter we will commemorate the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, hanged in Flossenburg prison on April 9, 1945. The cost of discipleship was very tangible in the lives of these two pastors who were both tragically taken from us at the age of thirty-nine. But neither of them sought to be a martyr. Each of them experienced the “lure...of something better: abundant life and the life that truly is life.” From prison Bonhoeffer wrote to his dear friend Eberhard Bethge in words that speak of how much he cherished life and friendship and ordinary things:

What is the food like? When do you get leave?
When are we going to baptize your boy? When shall
we be able to talk together again, for hours at a time?
Good-bye, Eberhard. Keep well!...God bless you. I
think of you every day. Your faithful Dietrich.¹

Dr. King, too, loved life—family and friends and gospel hymns. He heard Jesus’ promise of abundant life and longed for that promise to be real for people of every race and class (including the garbage workers of Memphis). In his last testimony the night before he died, he felt the weight of death threats against him, but he also felt the strong lure of God’s call and the assurance of God’s presence in his life:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.
Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about
that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s
allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked
over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get
there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that
we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I’m

happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m
not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of
the coming of the Lord.”²

Hopefully our preaching from Easter through Pentecost can lure people toward Jesus’ promise of life in all its abundance. That word “lure” doesn’t mean that we trick people or present discipleship as easy, but it does mean that we help people see that following Jesus is life-giving, not boring or tedious. After all, “Jesus did not ask us to follow him to make our lives worse.” Blessings on your preaching in this holy season.

Writers in this issue of “Preaching Helps” include pastors who have served rural, suburban, and urban congregations; authors and professors; those newly ordained and those ordained decades ago. **Christa Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a B.A. in English and a master’s in teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa started her career as a high school teacher in Columbia, South Carolina. She was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a Ph.D. from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2013 and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. **Ann Fritschel** is professor of Hebrew Bible and director of the Center for Theology and Land at Wartburg Theological Seminary. She previously served congregations in Dickinson and Mohall, North Dakota. **Brad Froslee** serves as senior pastor at St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Brad grew up on a farm near Vining, Minnesota, and studied at St. Olaf College and Harvard Divinity School. He is passionate about preaching, worship, and prophetic witness. He enjoys spending time with his husband and son, traveling, and working on genealogy and poetry projects. **Wilbert “Wilk” Miller** began his ministry as pastor of The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City in July 2016. Prior to coming to Holy Trinity, he served: First Lutheran Church-San Diego; St. Paul’s Lutheran Church-Ardmore, Pennsylvania; Augustana Lutheran Church-Washington, D.C.; and Calvary Lutheran Church in center city Philadelphia. Wilk and his wife, Dag-

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 219.

2. James M. Washington, ed., *Testimony of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.*, 286.

mar, are like kids at Disneyland as they explore and celebrate the wonders of New York City. **Heidi Neumark** is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in New York City. She is also one of the founders and the executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for homeless LGBTQ+ youth. She is the author of two books: *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* and *Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory, and Faith*. **Jan Schnell Rippentrop** is a homiletics professor with the Association of Chicago Theological Schools DMin in Preaching Program and an adjunct worship professor with Wartburg Theological Seminary. She is particularly interested in how eschatology liberates people to hope in and work toward the justice that God creates. Jan is the co-founder and pastor of JustChurch in Iowa City, a community enacting that to know Jesus is to do justice. She is committed to interdisciplinarity, theories that have street cred, and methodologies that recognize the inherent value and wisdom each participant brings. A conference speaker and preacher, she delights in God's spirited movement in the fabric of our daily lives and on the streets of our public spaces. **Peter Carlson Schattauer** serves as the associate pastor at Advent Lutheran Church in Maple Grove, Minnesota. A graduate of Yale Divinity School and St. Olaf College, Peter's ministry focuses on the connection between worship and life in the world as well as creating spaces for young adults to explore their faith and inquire after God. In his free time, he enjoys reading, swimming, and spending time with friends.

May these preaching companions encourage you and stir your own creativity from April 1 until the end of June (and beyond).

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Easter Sunday April 1, 2018

Acts 10:34–43 (or Isaiah 25:6–9)

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Mark 16:1–8

Easter is one Sunday when most congregations swell with first-timers and visitors. It is important to address the reality that everyone may not be feeling part of Easter joy. The first three readings share a common thread that ties in with those and others who have decided to check out the church and wonder if this might be a community for them.

In the Acts reading, Peter has come to see that the insurmountable divisions between Jews and Gentiles can be overcome. This text can help us address people who feel disconnected and wonder what barriers might exist to their

full participation in the community. It also speaks into the national climate of divisiveness that splits many churches and families by presenting the power that rolls the stone away as a power to overcome divisions that seem intractable.

The psalm picks up this theme in verse 22: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone." The cornerstone was the first stone set in the construction of a foundation. Its position determined the place of everything else. Who has felt rejected? In our church, do Black Lives Matter? Immigrants? Homeless queer youth kicked-out by their families? Whom does Jesus position in the center? How can our Easter preaching do the same so that all may rejoice and be glad?

The reading from 1 Corinthians also speaks to those who may feel unfit for Easter. Paul shares his own testimony that the risen Christ appears not only to insiders but to the ultimate outsider—the one untimely born: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Paul's past was not a predictor of his future. Gerard Manley Hopkins writes: "Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us"—Easter as a life-changing, world-changing verb.

Turning to the gospel, many will prefer to skip Mark and move into John's lyrical telling that ends in a burst of triumph fit for Easter trumpets. In contrast, Mark ends on a note of dissonance. The women flee in terror, and say nothing "for they were afraid."

There are several striking details unique to Mark. Only Mark refers to a single young man who meets the women at the tomb. Who is he? There is only one other instance in Mark where a young man appears and Mark introduces him right after Judas' betrayal and Jesus' arrest: "A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked." We might recall Adam and Eve in their nakedness trying to hide and pretending that everything was all right. Despite our Easter finery, we all find ourselves on the wrong side of paradise—and it is easy to come up with examples of that!

But this young man now appears again at the tomb, dressed like the brave martyrs of Revelation, speaking words of hope to the women. The stalker of Good Friday has become the herald of Easter. What might become of us in the grace of this holy day?

Perhaps the most compelling part of Mark's Easter account is the odd, uneasy ending. In Greek, "for they were afraid" is *εφοβουντο γαρ*, *ephobounto gar*. *Gar* can mean "for" or "because," but can also be translated "and yet," "and they said nothing to anyone, being afraid, and yet..." The scholar, Lamar Williamson asks: "When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb—and when a

gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.”

Isn't that where we all find ourselves? Somewhere between the beginning and the end without knowing exactly how everything is going to turn out? Mark's community lived under the violent rule of Emperor Nero. They must have wondered: "Will I meet the same brutal end as Paul and Peter? Will I be able to stay faithful in this terrible situation? And where is Jesus in the midst of this awful time?" Our communities have their own questions. Will we engage in nuclear war with North Korea? Am I ever going to meet the love of my life? Will I be deported? Will my child beat their addiction? Will cancer get the best of me? We are all living in the middle of a sentence—and yet, there's more to come. That's the joyful promise of Mark's Easter story. They were afraid, and yet, (*gar*) they didn't remain silent. If they had, the story would never have gotten out.

Gar, is the final word in Mark, but it's not the end of the story. "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you...they said nothing to anyone, being afraid, and yet...and yet..." There is more to come. Back in Galilee where the whole story in Mark began. We see that Mark is less interested in the fabulous moment of high Easter drama than he is in daily life back in Galilee where so many things are unfinished. The poet Georgia Harkness captures this:

*The vision fades; the Easter joy is past;
Again in dull drab paths our lot is cast.
The heavens no longer sing. The war clouds lower.
O Lord, where are you in your risen power?
The calm voice speaks—it answers all I ask,
I am beside you in the daily task.*

Heidi Neumark

Second Sunday of Easter April 8, 2018

Acts 4:32–35

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1–2:2

John 20:19–31

For most people, Easter is over, but the Second Sunday of Easter pulls us into the days of Eastertide. In 1972, the North Vietnamese army launched what they called the "Eastertide Offensive," a turning point in the war that left several hundred thousand dead. John Dominick Crossan reflects on the season as a different kind of Eastertide Offensive: "God's Great Clean-Up of a world grown old in evil and impurity, injustice and violence has already begun ... and we are called to participate in it. The end of the world is not what we are

talking about. We're talking about cosmic transformation of this world." An Eastertide Offensive confronts death-dealing powers and is transgressive and provocative.

The first reading indicates that Eastertide sweeps away many of our economic assumptions and brings people into new relationships, with economic implications. Some will hear the account in Acts as out of touch with the real world and dismiss the offensive challenge it represents to most of our churches. Easter 2 calls us to imagine what the economics of Easter look like beyond a boon to candy makers. The reading urges us to think and learn about economic justice—worker rights, minimum wage campaigns and the church's own generous, stewardship of resources.

The psalm offers a related image of the abundance that emerges from authentic community, a picture of overflowing hospitality and kinship. Like the first reading, it may seem overly idealistic, especially in times of disunion, but it is a reminder that Easter pulls us toward our neighbor. The text invites us to share our own visions of overflowing hospitality and calls us to imagine how our community can widen its welcome.

The second reading offers a possible way forward toward beloved community. God is light and the image of light shining in the darkness is often a comforting one. Light helps us find our way and chases away the shadows. But there is a less comfortable side to light when it reaches places we prefer to remain secret. Sometimes what is required for a community to heal is for what was hidden to be brought into the light, to face the difficult truths of what has caused and perpetuated division: "but if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa is one outstanding example. Lesser known are the Reconciliation Villages where churches created a process to connect Rwandans following the genocide. Jacqueline and Mathias grew up in neighboring villages and knew each other as children, but in 1994 when Jacqueline was 17, her father, brothers, sisters, and uncles were murdered. Mathias was part of the group that killed them, pushed by the government to do so, "but we massacred them and I offended them gravely."

When Mathias was in prison, he heard about this program allowing perpetrators to be released if they would seek forgiveness from their victims. He reached out to Jacqueline. "He confessed and asked for forgiveness. He told me the truth," Jacqueline explained. Not surprisingly, the healing process has taken time. At first, both feared for their safety. Nonetheless, living in facilitated community has allowed them to gradually come to a place of trust and forgiveness. Today, Mathias has a wife and nine children. Jacqueline and her husband have four children. "Our children have no problem among them," Mathias says. Her children go to his home to make meals, and

she sometimes asks him to look after her children when she is away. Jacqueline points to her front door, “this is the entrance of my home. Whenever Mathias encounters problems, he may call me and ask for help, and it is the same thing for me.” “If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...”

Lutherans, in particular, dare not approach the first line of today’s gospel without confessing the incendiary way “for fear of the Jews” has been used to foment anti-Semitism. Even if it is not the focus of our preaching, we should not skip over it without some recognition of the suffering it has caused. The hateful history of Luther’s writings against the Jews, the church’s complicity in the murder of millions, needs to be brought into the light. It may be worth noting that the following day, Monday, April 9, 1945, is the day that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was murdered because of his resistance to Hitler, his own Easter Offensive.

Moving beyond this first verse, we enter into a story often focused on Doubting Thomas. A doubting disciple is certainly relatable but we might also consider the opposite. If the other disciples truly believe the word of peace from Jesus, why are they locked away in fear? A week after their first encounter with the risen Christ, they are in the same old place. Maybe Thomas is showing more faith. After all, he is out and about while the others cower behind locked doors. We might want to reflect on how our church doors are closed or open. How do we keep the gospel locked inside? How might we take it out and about, as Thomas did?

The story also shows Easter working its way into the disciples’ lives, not in one grand event, but bit by bit, appearance after appearance. The fear in the disciples persists, but so does the word of shalom. This reminds us that resurrection is not just on the Last Day when all is made whole, but on days back then when Rome had not put down its weapons and today when much remains broken. According to this story, some days, getting up in the morning and stepping out of the door can be a little resurrection. God comes to revive us, to inspire us, and to empower us to keep on keeping on when we feel that we just can’t. This gospel also points to the embodied resurrection, with scars intact, an enduring sign of Jesus’ solidarity with us and the scars we bear.

Heidi Neumark

Third Sunday of Easter April 15, 2018

Acts 3:12–19

Psalm 4

1 John 3:1–7

Luke 24:36b–48

Engaging the Texts

The reading from Acts 3 makes me wonder what’s gotten into Peter. Perhaps Peter is giddy from having just healed a man who had been unable to walk his entire life. But Peter seems a bit full of himself. He’s quick to accuse the crowd of being complicit in Jesus’ death. Apparently, he’s forgotten about his own denial of Jesus during those dark hours. Or his dismissal of the women’s report of the empty tomb as “an idle tale.” Or his recent time huddled in fear with the other disciples.

We remember, as we prepare to preach, that these words of Peter have often been used for anti-Semitic purposes. It would be worthwhile to help our listeners understand the tensions that existed as Luke-Acts was being recorded, particularly with regard to who would be included in the emerging Christian community. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, is a helpful resource in clarifying the context for Peter’s remarks.

Ultimately today’s texts are about what it means to be children of God who are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Though we are afraid, we carry the good news of resurrection to a world that is often more interested in inflicting death than embracing life.

Note how today’s gospel contains the elements of worship. The people are gathered together. In the midst of their fear and uncertainty, Jesus wishes them peace. He helps them to understand the scriptures. They share a meal together. Then he sends them out into the world as witnesses to what they have encountered and experienced there.

Pastoral Reflections

I once met a woman who, without knowing I was a pastor, shared her spiritual history with me, one that included growing up as an Episcopalian and converting to Judaism after she married. She explained that she wanted to share a faith tradition with her husband and children. Then she leaned forward and added in a whisper: “To be honest, I wasn’t sure I believed in the resurrection any more.” I assured her that many Christians aren’t sure what to make of the resurrection either.

The disciples were among the first to be confused about resurrection. When the women brought news of resurrection,

the disciples dismissed their testimony as “an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Two unknown disciples told them how Jesus had broken bread with them at Emmaus—but where was he now? He vanished before they had time to eat the bread!

They were still talking about this when Jesus suddenly stood among them. “Look at my hands and my feet,” he said, “Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” He offers his hands and feet, the skeletal angles of his fingers and joints, the solid structure of his toes and heels. Ghosts may be scary, but they do not have bones.

Jesus also eats with them—a simple meal of broiled fish. I picture all the disciples gathered around, watching his every move as Jesus picks up the fish with his flesh-and-bone hands, tears a piece off with his teeth, chews each bite, and carefully swallows. Ghosts may be scary, but they do not eat fish. Slowly it sinks in. It’s really him. In the flesh. In his body, back from the dead.

These details—the invitation to touch his hands and feet, the meal of broiled fish—emphasize that Jesus is a real person in a real body that is really resurrected. We usually ponder the miracle of incarnation at Christmas. It’s what makes our Christmas nativity scenes so beautiful—all those characters gathered around a manger in awe of the baby Jesus waving his fat little baby fists.

Imagine if Easter resurrection scenes were just as popular as those Christmas nativity sets. What would *that* look like? A fully-grown, back-from-the-dead Jesus, wounds on his hands and side, chomping down on a bit of fish while terrified disciples gathered around to stare in disbelief. It’s not as pretty, but it’s just as real.

The theological debates about resurrection have raged for centuries, but for me it comes down to this: If the resurrected Jesus appears in a body and not as a ghost, then it means bodies are important. A resurrection of the body means that we don’t worship and serve some abstract presence. We worship and serve someone who was a real person in a real body who cared tenderly for other people in real bodies—the hungry, the poor, the sick, the suffering.

For that reason, we are called in our own time and place to care for real people in real bodies—bodies that are hungry, bodies that need shelter, bodies that are wounded by violence, bodies that are lonely or addicted or diseased or hurting.

In her book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, Barbara Brown Taylor includes a chapter on incarnation in which she reminds us that Jesus calls us to an *embodied* faith, not a faith that’s only about intellectual propositions and doctrinal debates. She writes, “We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, who have run frighteningly

low on the bread of life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more *about* God. *More God.*”³

That’s what our worship and preaching can offer people this week. Not just more *about* God. *More God.*

Christa Compton

Fourth Sunday of Easter April 22, 2018

Acts 4:5–12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16–24

John 10:11–18

Engaging the Texts

One challenge with the texts for this day is that they are at once too familiar and too strange. We hear Psalm 23 at practically every funeral. We’ve seen countless stained-glass windows and paintings that portray Jesus as the Good Shepherd. But in reality, shepherding is far removed from the lives of most people in modern-day pews.

One question that arises from the texts is: “What do we do in Jesus’ name?” Peter boldly proclaims that the healing that he and John have just carried out was done in the name of Jesus Christ. The reading from 1 John implores us to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. We love one another because we believe in the name of Jesus, and he has commanded us to do so. That love is more than just lip service. To love in Jesus’ name means we actually do something to help those in need.

The good shepherd shows us this way of loving. For the hired hand, supervising the sheep is purely contractual. The hired hand has neither loyalty to nor love for the sheep. But the shepherd is another story. He will lay down his life for the sheep—freely and willingly—because he loves the sheep that much. So how, then, in the name of the good shepherd, do we lay down our lives for others?

(See last week’s entry for a brief comment about Peter’s words in Acts and their anti-Semitic content.)

Pastoral Reflections

At this moment in John’s gospel, as Jesus calls himself the good shepherd, he has just restored sight to a blind man. This healing sparks an intense conflict with the religious leaders, who are so enraged that Jesus has healed this man on the Sabbath that they run the formerly blind man out of town.

3. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, 45.

Jesus seeks the man out and offers him comfort. He will not allow one of his flock to be chased away and forgotten. The good shepherd stands up to those whose words and actions hurt the vulnerable.

When we think about Jesus laying down his life for us, we think first of the cross. While his sacrificial death is central to our faith, we sometimes forget the ways Jesus laid down his life for people in all the years before he was nailed to the cross. In the story of the man born blind, Jesus does more than heal the man. He also resists the prejudice that attempts to separate the man from his community. Think of all the times Jesus risks himself to connect with those who most need him. He has that long conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. He helps Nicodemus wrestle with difficult questions in the dark of night. He puts himself between the woman caught in adultery and the people who want to stone her to death as punishment. Again and again, Jesus finds ways to build relationships with those who need his transforming presence, even when those relationships put his reputation and his safety at risk.

Each time we are faced with the horror of another mass shooting, we hear stories about those who died saving others. On February 14 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, three teachers died because they put their own bodies between the gunman and their students. It is a sacrifice that we should not demand of teachers—or concert-goers or movie patrons or worshippers at church. But it's a sacrifice that far too many people have made.

We can and should honor those who give their lives to save others. But we can also ask ourselves what it means to follow the good shepherd's example and lay down our own lives. How do we love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action?

That kind of shepherd love means putting our own bodies on the line. It means raising our voices in defiance of those who say that nothing can be done. It means allowing our hearts to be broken because a broken heart is better than an indifferent one. It means walking through the darkest valleys with those who grieve, trusting that God walks with us. It means our hands and feet are busy praying and protesting, marching and making a case for a better world. It means we give our whole bodies to the work of the kingdom, not because we can save ourselves, but because we have already been saved by a shepherd who always puts himself between us and the wolves.

There are plenty of hired hands out there eager to tell us what we can and can't believe, what we should and shouldn't do. We need to remember that the primary loyalty of the hired hand is to a paycheck. We listen instead for the voice of the shepherd, calling us together as one flock and leading us forward in paths of righteousness.

Christa Compton

Fifth Sunday of Easter April 29, 2018

Acts 8:26–40

Psalm 57

2 Timothy 4:6–11, 18

John 15:1–8

Engaging the Texts

In the poignant Acts story where the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip capture the reader's attention, God is actually the primary actor. God has sent an angel to nudge Philip on his way toward Gaza—a nudge that forced Philip “down” from the heights of Jerusalem, and down a “wilderness road.” God's Spirit has compelled the Ethiopian eunuch to worship in Jerusalem, even though eunuchs were not “allowed” to worship at the temple. God's Spirit compels Philip, too—“Go over to this chariot and join it” (v. 29). The Ethiopian eunuch sits in his chariot struggling to decipher a passage from Isaiah 53. Philip helped him interpret God's plan of restoration for suffering servants. Philip testifies to the good news of Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian eunuch discerns a Spirited call to baptism and is baptized. God's Spirit snatches Philip away to Azotus, where he continues to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

This Acts passage has a chiasmic structure, at the heart of which the Ethiopian eunuch asks, “About whom is the prophet talking?” The most common interpretation of the day would have been that the text is talking about the Israelites as the ones who are saved. A second interpretation is that Isaiah is talking about himself as the eschatological prophet. The Ethiopian eunuch raises a third interpretation—could the prophet be talking about someone with whom outsiders might identify?

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch study Isaiah 53. Three chapters later, Isaiah records another prophecy:

³ Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;
and do not let the eunuch say,

‘I am just a dry tree.’

⁴ For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name

that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:3–8).

Luke, the author of Acts, would have been familiar with Isaiah's prophecy of inclusion of outsiders and eunuchs in God's covenant. Luke presents the Ethiopian eunuch as one for whom God's promise is realized.

Second Timothy presents what is sometimes referred to as Paul's last testimony. He is isolated by imprisonment and by departures—some departures Paul interprets as abandonment, others as the work of the gospel. Paul portrays his life as a priestly sacrifice when he refers to his suffering as “being poured out as a libation” (2 Tim 4:6). In Paul's vulnerability, he acknowledges God's presence through trials: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me” (2 Tim 4:18).

John 15 presents the final of seven Johannine “I AM” sayings: “I AM the true vine” (John 15:1). In an image of Christian community, the vine metaphor presents Jesus as the vine, God the Father as the gardener, and believers as the branches. Scholars have debated: Does *kathairo* mean to prune or to cleanse or did John intend to evoke both? “You have already been *cleansed/pruned* by the word that I have spoken to you” (15:3). I suspect John knew he was generating flexibility and ambiguity, leaving each generation to wonder, what has the word already cleansed/pruned among the assembly?

Pastoral Reflections

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch pushes some conventions and invites preachers to consider which conventions people are tacitly supporting that are actually contrary to God's mission. The Ethiopian eunuch was not allowed to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, but he did. He did not look on paper like the type of person the church baptized, but he thirsted to know more about God and discerned God's call to baptism. He was exactly the unexpected saint to whom the church needed to be open.

The Ethiopian eunuch has quite the call story. He engaged Hebrew scripture, which was based in a worldview quite different from the one with which he was raised, and he went so far as to get help understanding it. His behavior is so very different from the echo chambers in which many people in the U.S. access information. At the heart of this Acts passage, the Ethiopian eunuch asks, “About whom is the prophet talking?” His question illustrates what Judith Okely calls a “crack of resistance”—a place where one refuses to accept the narrative another imposes upon him. When he takes a shot at answering his own question, he does not even offer the most popular interpretation of his day—that the Israelites were those saved. He suggests it could be Isaiah or someone else. His question and his insight that there could be another, holds open the possibility of one who identifies with the outsider. Jesus Christ consistently identifies with the outsider, the marginalized, the oppressed. In what ways does the assembly you serve identify and fail to identify with the outsider?

Philip's openness and intuition are exemplary. Philip is willing to go down that road—the one that descends, the one that is wilderness. He met a ranking officer who served the Ethiopian queen, in charge of her treasury. Philip did not shy away from influencing this government official. The Bible and its justice belonged in this treasury secretary's life. Philip began where the man was (middle of Isaiah) and progressed from there. Philip went to one who would have been excluded from full participation by ecclesial law (Deut 23:1 and Lev 21:17–21). Who are ecclesial bodies excluding today, and how might a sermon welcome people to challenge unjust ecclesial exclusions? Perhaps Christian practices of welcome and engagement of the outsider are the conversion needed today.

Jesus' image of the vine and branches calls people to be free of what is fruitless in their lives. Instead, the image suggests that people can be positioned for springtime by being oriented toward that which is fruitful. Being positioned for spring means tapping into the living vine of Jesus Christ. I have a hunch that many yearn to be tapped into that which is life giving. After all, most of us have had enough of being thrown away, of withering, of being burned—the images of life outside the vine. However, since there is a promise flowing through the vine, being in the vine offers the opposite:

- be honored, not discarded;
- become resplendent, not withered; and
- to put on fresh new life, not to be burned.
- People's honored, resplendent, fresh new life is grounded in God and glorifies God.

Jan Rippentrop

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 6, 2018

Acts 10:44–48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1–6

John 15:9–17

Engaging the Texts

In Acts 10, Peter testifies about Jesus Christ to Cornelius and his relatives and friends. The fact that Cornelius is a Gentile centurion of the Italian Cohort has not prevented Cornelius from:

- being devout, generously giving money, praying continually to God (v. 2);
- having a vision of an angel (v. 3ff);
- seeking Peter and learning from him (v. 5ff);
- receiving the Holy Spirit (v. 44ff); and

- becoming baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (v. 48).

Peter is likewise undeterred by the fact that Cornelius and his household and friends are Gentiles, for Peter has had a vision that clarified that God is non-partial. Peter has learned that he “should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Therefore, Peter

- provided hospitality to the men from Joppa (v. 23ff);
- had no objection to traveling to visit with Cornelius et al. (v. 23b ff);
- shared his own change of perspective due to a vision (v. 28ff);
- encouraged Cornelius’ questions (v. 29);
- believed the authenticity of Cornelius’ vision (Peter’s response to 30ff);
- testified to Gentiles about Jesus’ death, resurrection, and mission (v. 34ff);
- witnessed God pouring out God’s Spirit on Gentiles (v. 44ff);
- reasoned that withholding water baptism from those whom God has given the Spirit makes no sense (v. 47);
- baptized Cornelius et al. (v. 48); and
- stayed with them a few days more (v. 48).

This week in Peter’s life (vision from God and trip to Joppa) left him changed. His worldview, theology, and mission all shifted when he recognized God’s mission alive among those he formerly would have considered outside the faith.

First John 5 offers a logical progression: believing in Jesus makes one the child of God → everyone who loves God also loves the children of God → love for children of God is evidenced by doing God’s commandments → God’s commandments allow people to overcome this world (or the suffering in this world that comes from separation from God).

The Gospel text continues to talk about the commandments and love for others. Jesus loves people in the same way that God loves Jesus, and Jesus invites people to live in that love. The commandments’ purpose is to help people love one another well—“I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another” (John 15:17). Professor of Theology, Francis Moloney, S.D.B, argues in his book *Love in the Gospel of John* that both Jesus’ words and Jesus’ actions make the command to love central to the Gospel of John. The command to love is more than an ideal; it is a daily life practice.

Pastoral Reflections

Peter notices what God is doing even though God’s welcome is beyond what he had conceived as possible. Peter had had no access to a worldview in which Gentiles could be baptized Christians. But God changed that with a vision, a visit, and a new vocation. The vision taught Peter that no one is to be called profane or unclean—God’s salvation history is open to all. The visit introduced Peter to an extended family

of believers—Gentiles who enacted faith in God. They sat at his table; he sat at theirs. The new vocation compelled Peter to keep opening up others’ worldviews so that they might experience the transformation that he had known. Peter had to fight for his new vocation; there is a hint of his uphill battle in this text as Peter begins an apology to those who would soon criticize him for baptizing Gentiles. He argued that he only added baptism with water to what the Spirit had already done by coming upon Cornelius’ household.

Peter was on a roll, proclaiming Christ crucified, when the Spirit interrupted his most eloquent message. The Spirit’s interruption affirms what Peter was saying about God’s salvation history showing no partiality. Now, instead of Peter saying it, God is doing it. God performs an open welcome of Cornelius’ group when the Spirit alights upon them. God’s Spirit undoubtedly also descends upon your worshipping community. What is God’s Spirit doing in your place?

John’s gospel tells us what abiding in Jesus’ love looks like. It looks like loving God, blessing God’s holy name, resting in God’s presence, honoring others, and helping people honor their health, belongings, reputation, and relationships. In other words, abiding in Jesus’ love looks a lot like doing the Ten Commandments! The result of living in Jesus’ love and commandments is joy—both Jesus’ joy in you and your complete joy. You don’t receive love, joy, or friendship because you got something right or figured something out. Rather Jesus finds you and brings goodness into the sphere of your living. Go show off what happens when you live in love, joy, friendship that is as lavish as Jesus’ love —“go and bear fruit, fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

The Revised Common Lectionary presents this passage from John’s Farewell Discourse in the springtime in the United States. What might it mean for the assembly to hear a farewell in the springtime of life?

Jan Rippentrop

Ascension of Our Lord May 10, 2018

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Engaging the Texts

There is a religious tendency to speculate on questions such as “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” We long for exact dates and times and many of us expect answers. Jesus resisted providing such timetables when he was alive, including the last time his disciples saw him before he ascended into heaven. What Jesus did do, immediately before being lifted into heaven, was promise that we will receive power from the Holy Spirit to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”

Jesus’ followers stood gazing upward. Who wouldn’t stare into the sky if Jesus ascended before our very eyes? Where else would we look—down? Who wouldn’t end up being queried by the two men in white robes, “Why do you stand looking into heaven?”

So much of our life together in Christ’s name can be spent staring into heaven and speculating: when will Christ come again, who will be saved, what is heaven like? How often have we forfeited the power given us to be Christ’s witnesses in the world, opting instead for sheer speculation? Too often, as we stand gazing into heaven, the world wonders what all the fuss is about! We argue incessantly over theological minutiae that mostly only insiders worry about.

Against our every impulse at heaven-gazing, the risen and ascended Christ invites us to discover God here, now, in bread and wine, and water and word, in the mutual consolation of brothers and sisters, in our passion for God’s creation, in our striving for justice for all. Our duty and delight is to discover heavenly beauty here on earth amid the everydayness of life—“stay in the city!”

Pastoral Reflections

When I was a pastor in Philadelphia’s Center City Lutheran Parish in the 1970s, the Rev. Robert Neumeyer was the director of that urban coalition. I remember him attending a party at our home with pastors and their families only months before he died. He entered our house with his Samsonite attaché case in hand with a decidedly 1960s decaled peace sign affixed to the front. While this was a party, it was also an opportunity to say goodbye. Far from speculat-

ing about where our beloved leader would soon go, we were granted the gift of hearing his farewell speech. Surprisingly and seemingly out of the blue, he began to dole out future assignments. At least as I remember it, he was saying to us urban pastors and families, “Stay in the city.”

Robert Jenson, in his book, *Can These Bones Live*, asks, “Where is heaven?” He writes a simple answer, “Wherever God is.”⁴ Is it possible for us, in our ministries, to locate heaven in the city in a manner beyond our wildest dreams?

The story is told of Prince Vladimir of Kiev who was uncertain which faith to adopt for himself and his people. He sent envoys out and they returned, reporting about the liturgies they had witnessed in Constantinople: “We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth for on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among the people.”

Worship is a glorious occasion to glimpse into heaven. We do not have to stare upward however. Jesus has promised that heaven comes to us in the stuff of bread and wine, water and words. Would people say they glimpse heaven in our worship life? Do they even expect to do so? Do worship planners and preachers prepare with the expectation that those who gather will glimpse God’s will being done on earth as in heaven? One bishop—who will remain unnamed—told me of his congregational visitations. He related, with no small amount of sadness, that some pastors seem as though they are more comfortable on the golf course than in the sanctuary. Are we spending so much time staring into space that we forget to be enthralled by heaven coming into our midst?

Annie Dillard, in *Holy the Firm*, writes of purchasing communion wine for her little country church: “How can I buy the communion wine? Who am I to buy the communion wine?” Once she has purchased the wine, she notes: “I’m on the road again walking, and toting a backload of God. Here is a bottle of wine with a label, Christ with a cork. I bear holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God...”⁵

How good if we enable people to realize they bear holiness splintered into a vessel, very God of very God. How good if, when the bread is placed into our hands and we hear again the simple words, “Take and eat, this is my body given for you,” we are moved to tears by heaven coming very near as we “stay in the city” wherever that city or small town or rural lane may be.

Wilk Miller

4. Robert W. Jenson, *A Theology in Outline: Can These Bones Live?* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2016), 37.

5. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1977), 63–64.

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 13, 2018

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26 (Acts 1:15–26)

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9–13

John 17:6–19

Engaging the Texts

At synod assemblies, there is often a conscious decision made to pray before every vote. We would probably all agree that this is an appropriate thing to do. But I sometimes wonder if the presumption is that we have not prayed in our other deliberations, as we have considered important matters in our home congregations in advance of the assembly, as we have sat at the bar the night before conversing with other voting members, as we have stood to speak with knees knocking.

In the first reading from Acts, after Judas had fallen headlong and burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out (i.e., he died!), it became necessary to choose an apostle to replace him so that the fulfillment of the twelve tribes of Israel might be realized. It was essential that Judas' replacement knew the story of Jesus firsthand—this chosen apostle must have accompanied Jesus since his baptism until his resurrection.

The two candidates were Joseph called Barsabbas, surnamed Justus, and Matthias. The choice was apparently made, not by a long-range evaluation process, not through the aegis of a head-hunting firm, or even by means of an exhaustive dog and pony show. Instead, lots were cast. Most of us are clueless who the two candidates were. According to Luke-Acts, knowing that they had been with Jesus was enough. A straw was drawn or a ball chosen and that was that! Matthias was the new twelfth apostle.

Pastoral Reflections

I remember the election of a bishop when a motion was made that, if there was a fifth and final ballot, straws should be drawn to select the next bishop. Apparently, the thought was, if it was good enough for the apostles, it was good enough for our synod. The motion failed resoundingly but it did cause us to ponder, at least a bit, the nature of the Spirit's promptings and to trust a tad less in our brilliant ecclesiastical schemes. The motion caused us to consider more carefully the choosing of Judas' successor: what was essential was not charisma, educational degrees, or how the candidate answered the questions; what was critical was whoever was chosen—whether by straw or ballot, hook or crook—should be able to tell the story of Jesus and his love firsthand, including that he had risen from the dead!

Part of the story of Jesus and his love is revealed in John's gospel. In the closing moments of his life, only hours before all hell breaks loose, the disciples are offered the rare privilege of hearing a breathtaking conversation between Jesus and his heavenly Father. This is the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus' farewell speech. The disciples—and we—hear what matters most. This inevitably occurs in intimate conversations, especially final ones.

Think back to a final precious moment with a parent, spouse, or dear friend. I remember the last conversation I had with my father. We chose our words carefully and lovingly. We said what weighed deepest on our hearts. I remember my father asking me to take care of my mother: "She is a very good woman," he said.

In Jesus' prayer, we hear: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." Never would Jesus ask that his brothers and sisters be removed from the fray of life—that is not what the cross is about! What Jesus did ask was that we be protected from the evil one. As in Acts, what is most important is that we have heard of Jesus' love for us as we go out into the world in his name.

When our two boys were young, every night at bedtime, we prayed Luther's evening prayer: "Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me." We knew that as our boys grew older, we would be unable to spare them all that they would face. What we could do, however, was pray that the holy angels would accompany them and that they would know that wherever they went later in life, God was with them.

Whenever we carry the gospel into the world, we will inevitably be hated precisely because we do not belong to the world. The good news we bear—caring for the suffering, longing for peace, standing for the downtrodden, embracing the dying—will cause the world to hate our peculiar way of love that threatens fear, hate, and greed.

As these days of Easter draw to a close, we have made holy fools of ourselves by shouting Alleluia! whenever and wherever we could. Deeply woven into our triumphant cry is the knowledge that we will be sent from the Lord's Table into the world where the evil one is crafting his dirty work. Having engaged in sacred eavesdropping, listening to Jesus pray on his final night, we will be strengthened to go out into the world, confident that, with God at our side, we will be triumphant against all manner of wickedness. Yes, as the early church would have it, "Even at the grave we sing, Alleluia." The cemetery is the supreme testing ground for Christian faith. If Christ's victory over death resounds with joy at the graveside, albeit mixed with tears, dirt, and broken hearts, then indeed it will resound anywhere we go. Yes, indeed, Alleluia! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Wilk Miller

Day of Pentecost May 20, 2018

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Acts 2:1–21

John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

Engaging the Texts

As we approach Pentecost Sunday there are still echoes of Holy Week ringing in our ears fifty days later—life, death, and life beyond death. The closing words of Psalm 22 resound, “God has done it” or “God has acted.” These words come to life with Pentecost as we hear the metaphor of God who raises the people of Israel from the bones of the desert and as we encounter the Holy Spirit coming alive in the context of the early followers of Jesus. From the witness of the Hebrew people to the early disciples, God has acted.

Yet, the power expressed in this day is not just that God has acted in the life of an ancient community or in the cross, but that God acts in a resurrected people. The primary means of action today comes through in testimony. In the gospel reading from John, Jesus lifts up the testimony of the Spirit and engages the disciples in being those who will testify to his ministry and God’s actions across the ages. Peter and the other disciples become voices who witness to people of all backgrounds and ethnicities. These become examples to embolden us in our speaking and testimony.

Beyond the cliché of Pentecost being the “birthday of the Church,” how do we turn this into a celebration of resurrection people who are willing to step out boldly to tell how God has acted—then and now? We acknowledge that this is not a comfortable thing (maybe introverts find it more challenging than extroverts; or personal pietists more uneasy than evangelicals), but the message this Sunday should push all outside of our sanctuary doors and comfortable living rooms. Imagine the prophet being given the message that his people and nation are as good as dead, or Jesus telling followers that they will be banished from synagogues and community, or even Peter going into the street and being called a drunkard. Today is a day to challenge, equip, and empower us to live and tell the resurrection of Jesus and our own resurrection.

We often talk of the resurrection of Jesus. Are we comfortable talking about our own resurrection? Pentecost becomes a pivot point in the church year from our encounters with Jesus the Christ in faith and Scripture to the way it forms, transforms, and resurrects a people.

Pastoral Reflections

Several years ago, Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in South Minneapolis told the story of Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones in a wonderful way in their Easter vigil. A number of congregational members who play brass instruments walked into the sanctuary with their instruments in pieces and clanging together like dry bones. As the vision from Ezekiel was read they assembled their instruments and began making “musical” sounds until at the end, with the instruments assembled, they were able to join together in playing a hymn. This was a visual and audial demonstration that drew people into the larger narrative.

Today, as we arrive at Pentecost, we hear several familiar scripture readings and strive to engage in the narrative. Most people in worship have come to expect the readings from Ezekiel and Acts year after year. Some individuals have grown accustomed to donning their red shirts or ties. Others anticipate congregational banners or images of doves and flames. Still others come prepared to read or listen to the Acts text in various languages—Norwegian, German, Korean, Swahili, Spanish, Finnish, Xhosa, Mandarin.

This festival Sunday is a day that holds traditions. Yet, it is a day that should embody creativity and moving from what we expect to what is possible. When we think of God acting among the people of Israel or of the Spirit engaging the disciples in moving them outside of their gathering into the streets, the question is how we might both encounter and live this witness. What would it mean to empower congregational members to share their own testimonies in worship around how God has done a new thing in their lives? Are there possibilities for the worship to be moved into an outdoor or community space to be a visible presence in the community? Or, if the Sunday continues in much the same fashion as previous years, are there ways to create an illustration such as the instruments in worship or invite the congregation into dreaming about the future?

Recently the congregation I serve has been having people share aspects of their personal stories and how they are embodied in our life together. These personal witnesses have been extremely well-received by others. Dry souls have been nurtured by people who have been willing to prophesy (to be a voice that goes before). Those less inclined to justice work have been inspired by those who are constantly doing this work; hearts have burst open as others have been authentic in their witness of how God has shown up in their lives through the Holy Spirit. There is a speaking, a rattling, a coming together.

Pentecost is a great day to invite people to share, to engage, to step outside of comfort zones.

Brad Froslee

Holy Trinity

May 27, 2018

Isaiah 6:1–8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12–17

John 3:1–17

Engaging the Texts

In recent years videos have circulated online highlighting analogies and metaphors for the interconnectedness of the three persons of the Trinity. At the end of each analogy there is an explanation of how it breaks down into a heresy of one kind or another. As we come to this Holy Trinity Sunday there may be an internal or external drive to delve into the three persons of the Trinity. It likely makes more sense, however, to go deeply into the Scripture passages and see where they might lead in contemplating the divine nature of God. How is God the One enthroned above Creation at work around us and in us? How is the Spirit renewing? How is Jesus calling us to healing and life? We come with our questions.

Perhaps there is no better example of coming with our theological questions and faithful contemplation than Nicodemus in today's gospel. We encounter someone who is faithful, learned, and longing to find out even more. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. This is likely to escape the notice of other Pharisees and the attention it may attract during the day. However, it may also be that there are nagging questions from Jesus' "community lecture" that afternoon, or that Nicodemus is experiencing a dark night of the soul moment. Whatever the reason, Nicodemus shows up reflecting on God's presence, being born again, and Jesus' role in God's work.

We can likely name people of faith and learning in our own congregations who hold out such questions, "How do we really see God among us today?" "What difference does baptism—water, spirit, vows, living—really make?" "Does this faith thing really make sense?" Jesus engages Nicodemus' questions. He pushes and challenges Nicodemus. Maybe we become uneasy as Jesus seems to be chastising this learned teacher. In the final two verses of this lectionary text Jesus pushes to a new level of understanding.

The Greek word "cosmos" means both world and system or order of things. The Greeks understood the world as having a system or order that made everything beautiful and meaningful. In John 3:16–17, Jesus states that God enters into the system/order/world in giving God's very self (the Son) because of God's enduring love. In this way God comes not to bring condemnation to the system/order/world, but that it might be saved (derived from the same root in Greek as for cure,

heal, make well, repair). Just as Moses lifting up the snake was to bring healing and cure, so now the Son enters to bring healing and cure to an order or system that has gone askew.

In the lectionary texts for today it is worthwhile to note how the prophet, the psalmist, Paul, and Jesus all see the earthly and heavenly being drawn together—in promise, praise, relationship, and healing.

Pastoral Reflections

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah exclaims he is lost—a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips. Nicodemus in the gospel is one who seemingly doesn't get Jesus' words. When reading these stories, it is easy to hear judgment. There is more to the story, though. The prophet is made clean and offers himself to be a vessel of God's words. Nicodemus shows up two more times in the Gospel of John to speak in front of the Sanhedrin and then to assist with Jesus' burial after the crucifixion. The narrative is one of life and possibility beyond what we can initially comprehend. The power is that God enters into our world/order/systems/lives to bring renewal and healing. I think of so many people in congregations I have served who have experienced this promise of life. I'd like to share two examples.

One is a man named Roy. Roy was a Vietnam vet who had struggled for years with addiction and mental health issues. By the time I was getting to know Roy he was clean and sober and entering into a relationship with a wonderful woman. Because of Roy's experiences in the war he carried scars both visible and invisible, and in many ways he felt unclean or unworthy because of his past and all he had done. However, Roy was a faithful parishioner showing up with his questions and struggles. He volunteered at the local meal ministry, helped those in need, served as an AA sponsor, and gave rides when needed. There were times when it was clear that Roy was touched to be a messenger to others; there were times he came in the "dark of his nights" with questions and longings to hear again a word of hope.

Another individual is Pearl. Pearl had a less than ideal upbringing and married young. This marriage ended up being abusive and painful. Carrying the weight of her young years and her broken marriage Pearl showed up in church every week. She assisted with altar preparation, reached out to the African immigrant community, and constantly thought about art and creation as divine gifts to be shared. In learning, growing, and reaching out, Pearl carried a sense of her own struggles and places in need of healing...and she became a gift to others. She embodied a living witness looking to God as Creator, as Christ, as Spirit, all moving within and around us to take our pains and brokenness, to touch us, and send us to gift others.

As preachers on this Holy Trinity, we have an opportu-

nity to meet the Roys and Pearls in our pews. We have the chance to proclaim a God who has created us and gifted us, a Spirit that empowers us, and a beloved Son who enters into the whole of the cosmos for the sake of healing and repair. Then with our questions and experiences we, in turn, are sent in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Creator, the Christ, the Holy Breath—to become instruments of God’s word and promise among a people and in a world longing to know repair and healing.

Brad Froslee

2 Pentecost/Lectionary 9 June 3, 2018

Deuteronomy 5:12–15

Psalm 81:1–10

2 Corinthians 4:5–12

Mark 2:23–3:6

Engaging the Texts

In the ancient world, rest was a divine prerogative. Only the gods were able to rest and enjoy leisure. In some nations, this rest was enjoyed also by the wealthy and elite. Most people, however, worked hard every day to ensure their survival. Ancient Israel understood that the Lord invited all into this divine rest. In Genesis, the Sabbath is a part of the order of creation. In Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath is also a justice issue, connected to God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. No one, including slaves and animals, is to work on the Sabbath. This version of the Sabbath law challenges social distinctions and stratifications between the wealthy and poor. Implicit is an understanding that God’s abundance will provide enough, so that people may rest. The Hebrew word, often translated as “observe” is *shamar*. Besides meaning to observe or keep, it contains a sense of guard and protect. The holiness (set apartness) of the Sabbath is a gift to be treasured and protected. The keeping of the Sabbath became a key identity marker for Jews as they faced assimilation into other cultures.

Mark 2:23–3:6 presents two Sabbath controversy stories. The first refers to 1 Sam 21:1–6 where David has become a fugitive from King Saul. David assures the priest Ahimelech (Mark mentions his son Abiathar) that the men who will eat the bread of presence have met the requirements of holiness. In 1 Samuel their hunger is not mentioned, nor are they breaking any laws. In Mark, the disciples may be breaking two Sabbath laws, plucking grain and traveling. Again, hunger is not mentioned. The key claim “The sabbath was made for

humankind and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mark 2:27–28) reminds hearers of the reason for the Sabbath and identifies Jesus as the Son of Man.

The second Sabbath controversy involves healing a man’s withered hand. The stakes are higher. People seek to accuse Jesus; at the end of the story the Pharisees and Herodians plot to destroy Jesus. Jesus’ strong emotions of anger and grief at the people’s hard-heartedness shows there is little hope for future reconciliation between opponents. Jesus’ question about doing good and saving lives on the Sabbath points back to the Sabbath’s original gift—joining the divine prerogative of rest to experience wholeness and abundant life.

Second Corinthians 4:5–12 repeats a constant Pauline theme—the preaching of Christ crucified as Lord of all. Human weakness shows God’s power and glory. Clay vessels are easily broken and thrown away. Yet Paul’s (and the Christian’s) perseverance through all sorts of afflictions and hardship reveal the death and life of Jesus.

Pastoral Reflections

The Sabbath is a sign and assurance of God’s abundance. God provides enough so people are free to enjoy their rest and experience wholeness. Stewardship themes of abundance versus scarcity can be developed. A scarcity mindset operates out of fear and anxiety about what you do not have. There is not enough to go around and so one must look out for one’s self and one’s family. An abundance mindset calls us to trust in God’s generosity and love. There is confidence there will be enough. Freedom from greed and self-centeredness is developed so that one can engage in creative risk-taking and generously giving of one’s self. The abundance mindset is the one that the Sabbath creation and observance intends.

Another way to think about the Sabbath is in terms of justification and justice. Today many do not attempt to justify themselves through works of keeping the commandments. Rather the self-justification of our lives is about giving our lives value, meaning and worth and the new works righteousness is busyness. “I must be an important person, look how many meetings I must attend and messages I receive.” “I am a good mother, I attend all my children’s sporting and school events.” This busyness is pernicious. The Sabbath invitation to rest, given as a free gift of God, reminds us that our value, worth, and identity are given to us freely in baptism. We are God’s beloved children. Our identity and worth are not earned through works or busyness.

Deuteronomy’s emphasis on the connection between the Sabbath for all and Israel’s experience as slaves remind us that justification and justice lie together at the heart of the gospel message. Freed from our own struggles to be important, worthy people, how are we called forth to work for justice so that

all may know the wholeness, peace, and abundant life that God wills for all creation?

The wholeness and peace of the Sabbath is to be experienced here and now. Jesus is unwilling to wait one day for the man with a withered hand to experience it.

One should be careful about how one preaches about the Pharisees. This negative, hyperbolic portrayal of the Pharisees may represent early conflicts among the Jews about the identity of Jesus. The Pharisees should be seen, not as legalistic purists but as people trying to protect Jews from too much cultural assimilation. Indeed, many Christian blue laws in the United States attempted a similar action.

It is important to preach the Sabbath as grace, not law. It is a gift, not a burden. As Paul reminds us, our proclamation is about Jesus, not ourselves; Jesus who truly is our Sabbath rest.

Ann Fritschel

3 Pentecost/Lectionary 10 June 10, 2018

Genesis 3:8–15

Psalms 130

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

Mark 3:20–35

Engaging the Texts

Gen 3:8–15 picks up the story of “Adam and Eve” after eating the fruit. Afraid, Adam and Eve hide from God. Then the blame game begins. Adam accuses both God and the woman, even though Gen 3:6 makes it clear that Adam was with Eve during the encounter with the serpent and offered no argument. The woman blames the serpent and the serpent, who is not questioned, is cursed.

In the Hebrew Bible the serpent is a crafty animal but not yet Satan. The story is not so much about the Fall or original sin, but human choices and consequences. The serpent encourages the woman (and man) to think and choose for themselves. The consequence of their choice to eat the fruit is that the relationships between God and humans, humans and creation, and humans themselves have been changed.

It is in the post-Hebrew Bible time that the serpent has become the devil and Gen 3:14 takes on messianic overtones. It is this combat between Satan and the messiah that leads to this text being paired with Mark 3:20–35.

The conflict between Jesus and others continues to grow. We see Mark’s literary style of combining two stories. Jesus’ family wants to take him away by force. This theme is then linked to scribal accusations of demon possession. The one who will conquer evil is accused of being evil. Jesus uses the parable of the house divided to show the ridiculous nature

of the charge of demon possession. Jesus casting out demons threatens Satan’s dominion. Ironically, in Mark’s gospel it is the exorcised demons who often recognize who Jesus is, while his human opponents do not.

The unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit suggests this sin is saying that the Holy Spirit is demonic. It hints at people who cut themselves off from the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. The saying sharpens the divide between those who believe in Jesus and those who do not.

Mark returns to the theme of family in 3:31–35 as a contrast between those who belong to Jesus and those who do not. We know that Mary and James, Jesus’ brother, will become key leaders in the early church. Family is redefined and the family’s claim upon a person cannot overcome the call to God’s mission.

Second Cor 4:13–5:1 continues the reading of this letter from previous weeks. Verses 13 and 14 summarize Paul’s understanding of the gospel. Faith here is trust in who God is, rather than belief in creedal statements. Because of God’s grace, Paul does not despair or grow weary. His outer being is experiencing hardship, while his inner self is being renewed daily. The contrast between the inner and outer is continued with a contrast between the temporary and eternal bodies of believers.

Pastoral Reflections

I had parishioners who wondered if they had committed the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Responding with, “If you are concerned about this, you haven’t committed it,” seemed trite. Asking them to talk about who Jesus is for them and what he means for them, allows them to begin to see that the sin against the Holy Spirit is assuming God’s power is demonic and evil, or that Jesus came to do evil. Then the discussion could continue to God’s grace as seen on the cross.

Mark’s gospel strongly divides groups into insiders and outsiders. Even family is redefined. Much of this division comes about because of early conflict between Jews and Jewish Christians. In today’s heavily divided society we should ask if this dividing and separating is something that we should continue. A colleague of mine always said, “If you draw a line between the insiders and the outsiders, Jesus will always be across the line with the outsiders.” While sinners and tax collectors were the outsiders at the time of Jesus, we have now made Pharisees and scribes into the new outsiders. How might we welcome modern scribes and Pharisees?

The division between inner and outer continues in a different way in 2 Corinthians. The temporary, visible external nature is contrasted with the eternal, unseen inner nature. We are called to live by faith, trusting in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. What are the everyday ordinary practices that

might build up such a trust that “We do not lose heart”?

Both Genesis 3 and Mark 3 suggest there is a subtlety to discerning evil and pondering choices and their consequences. We sometimes do not wish to acknowledge the consequences of our choices. It is easier to be a victim, than a victimizer, oppressed rather than oppressor or to blame others for our situation. Relationships cannot be restored until choices and consequences are acknowledged.

Jesus’ ministry is so powerful it threatens the status quo and family and religious structures. Threatened by Jesus, the reflex action is to denounce him. God has the freedom to always work in new and unexpected ways, whether walking in the garden or becoming incarnate among humanity. How can we be open to God’s freedom and unexpected work? When does tradition become traditionalism in our congregations? I have no idea what the church will look like in twenty or twenty-five years. Will we be able to welcome new visions or become entrenched in protecting the status quo? As Paul continues to remind us, it is not about forms, or organizations but the grace of God seen in Jesus’ death and resurrection for us and for the world.

Ann Fritschel

4 Pentecost/Lectionary 11 June 17, 2018

Ezekiel 17:22–24

Psalms 92:1–4, 12–15

2 Corinthians 5:6–10, (11–13), 14–17

Mark 4:26–34

Engaging the Texts

We are a people searching for a home. The texts for this week remind me that we understand that the physical place in which we find ourselves is not as God would have it for us. The writers of the texts from Ezekiel, 2 Corinthians, and Mark write from different historical contexts, but sound a similar refrain: what is will be different one day.

Paul states it most clearly when he writes, “So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight.” Using the imagery of home/away, Paul assures the Corinthians that our present world is not the world that God intends for us. Despite this reality, the love of God compels Paul to continue to proclaim the new creation present in Jesus Christ despite the lack of hard evidence.

The authors of Ezekiel and Mark use floral imagery to communicate a similar theme. A sprig will be clipped from a great cedar tree and re-planted on a high mountain. A mustard

seed will grow into a great bush and a farmer will grow and harvest grain. While Paul’s style of writing allows for more direct communication, these images from Ezekiel and Mark prove more confusing to understand. As is commonly pointed out, the bush that grows from a mustard seed is not the great bush Mark asserts and could not house all the birds of the air. Further, a “high and lofty mountain,” even in the fairly low mountains of the Mediterranean region, tests the extreme of a cedar tree’s growing altitude. The new creation that God creates, in the imagery of Ezekiel and Mark, seems contrary to the reality we witness. In extrapolating a vision of God’s kingdom, we “walk by faith, not by sight,” as Paul tells us.

But, as Paul reminds us, “we regard no one from a human point of view.” Our words and tactile evidence cannot show us the kingdom of God, our home outside our body. Instead, we are left with images that don’t always make sense to our experience. However, I would argue that these contradictions prove the point of each author. The passage from Ezekiel ends with a series of reversals: the low tree lifted up, the high tree brought low, the green tree made dry, and the dry tree made green. Mark ends by reminding the reader that Jesus spoke in parables and only explained everything in private. The new creation, where all is made new, that Paul imagines asks us to view things differently than from our human view, which requires walking by faith in communities of Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

As a pastor living and working in the twenty-first century, I never have any difficulty relating to the idea that the world is not as God intends it to be. As I read the newspaper and scroll through my social media feeds, I see the pain that our current world inflicts on so many people. Violence inflicted on people because of their race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and immigration status is disturbingly pervasive in our society. Looking at our world, I have little issue feeling completely convicted of my and society’s sinful ways.

I could be tempted in two ways with these texts in my preaching. I may be tempted to focus solely on the ways in which the reality of the world convicts me and my congregation. I also may be tempted to spiritualize the vision of God’s peaceable kingdom, putting our hope only in a day when God will come again and right all wrongs. However, I am convinced that both of these ways fall short of the proclamation I am called to make. To only preach judgment that our world fails to look like the kingdom of God misunderstands the hope present in Jesus Christ and to only preach the eschatological fullness of God’s kingdom fails to understand God’s concern for our lives here and now.

I am drawn to the last line in the passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians as a frame for preaching. Paul places his hope in Christ and the new creation in the here and now.

Paul does not write that there will be a new creation, but that there is a new creation. I am also drawn to the first parable from the gospel reading. The kingdom of God is compared to the person who scatters seeds, marvels at the mystery of growth, and then harvests the ripened plant. It is an image of new creation that we see in our lives any time we drive by a field of wheat.

In each of the images we have in our lessons today, there is unexpected creation, providing sustenance and comfort. The mustard seed grows into a bush larger than it should, the cedar sprig flourishes on a high mountain when it might not, and the seed mysteriously becomes wheat providing sustenance to us in the harvest. Proclamation on this day moves between the reality that the systems we create do not fully provide sustenance and comfort to all and that we are called to proclaim, through faith, that the new creation in Christ is present here and now. The question for the preacher becomes how it is that we see that new creation in the midst of the violence and sin in our world.

Peter Carlson Schattauer

John the Baptist June 24, 2018

Malachi 3:1–4

Psalm 141

Acts 13:13–26

Luke 1:57–67

Engaging the Texts

The texts for feast days can present a challenge to the preacher since the readings may only briefly mention the person who is the focus of the feast day and tying the readings together can be difficult. The assigned texts for the Feast of John the Baptist present something of this challenge. Malachi speaks of the coming of the messenger of the Lord—obviously chosen because John the Baptist is understood as the messenger who proclaimed the coming of Jesus. Historically, however, Malachi would not have been thinking of John as the messenger. The reading from Acts doesn't mention John the Baptist until the very end of Paul's speech, where he is proclaimed as the one who came before Jesus and is placed within the history of God's work with Israel. The Luke passage comes from the narrative surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and concerns how he received the name John instead of Zechariah. Initially, it doesn't seem that there is much to work with in preaching these texts.

However, on second glance, I am drawn to the ways in which they interact with each other to communicate the prophecy, hope, and witness surrounding the proclamation of

John the Baptist. The Malachi reading focuses on the prophecy surrounding the coming of a "messenger of the Lord." It is important to note that the writer of Malachi argues that the Lord comes to purify the temple. This action is a purification of the religious elite, to which the messenger points.⁶ As Christians, we hear in this reading a prophecy of the coming of John the Baptist to proclaim the coming of Jesus, whose purpose is to re-orient us back to God.

The reading from Luke focuses on the hope present in the birth of John the Baptist. As is so often the case with God, John's name gives an indication of this child's relation with God and purpose in the world. The reading functionally ends with a question: "What then will this child become?" There is great hope surrounding the role that John the Baptist will play in God's work in the world.

The reading from Acts serves as a witness to the work of John the Baptist. Paul includes John in a line of important figures in Israel's history, arguing that they all point to God's work in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, he emphasizes John's baptism for the repentance of sins. This emphasis may recall for the reader Malachi's focus on the religious purification that the messenger and the Lord will bring.

Pastoral Reflections

Many of us will read these stories of John the Baptist as our congregants, our communities, and we ourselves, prepare to march in annual Pride parades. Some people within the LGBTQ+ community may feel an affinity to John the Baptist because of some of his fashion choices, but we don't read about John's clothes in today's gospel! Instead, I am drawn to the way that prophecy, hope, and witness work in the story and memory of John the Baptist and within the LGBTQ+ community.

As a young gay man, someone who came of age in a much more accepting world than many of my LGBTQ+ siblings, I am particularly drawn to the ways in which people have served as witnesses to me. At one of the first Pride celebrations I attended in Minneapolis, I went to a gay bar with some friends. I started talking to a group of men older than myself. As I was about to leave with my friends, one of the men mentioned to me that he was glad I faced less persecution than he had as a young gay man. I have thought about this man many times over the years as a witness for me, as someone who fought to purify our culture of its homophobia and now celebrated my ability to have pride in my identity.

I also think of all the witnesses in my life who have fought for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church. As I faced challenges in my candidacy and call process because of my identity I often remembered the cloud of witnesses surrounding me—people

6. John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 419.

I know and people I've only heard of who fought against great challenges and found a way forward. Each time I faced an obstacle, I told myself that if these witnesses could face the challenges they faced, I could face my own.

In the lessons for the feast day of John the Baptist, falling on Pride weekend, we hear stories of the way that prophecy, hope, and witness work in the memory of John the Baptist. As a gay man, I am drawn to examining how this memory around John the Baptist can help us understand the prophecy, hope, and witness around messengers in the LGBTQ+ community. I think it is particularly important to remember that John the Baptist proclaimed a message of repentance within our religious institutions. What are the ways in which our religious institutions still need to hear the prophecy, hope, and witness present in LGBTQ+ people's stories as a call to repentance for the homophobia still present in our institutions?

Peter Carlson Schattauer