

Preaching Helps

**Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7 —
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 30, 2019**

The Rhythm of Holy Week

This issue of “Preaching Helps” begins on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, the story of Mary anointing Jesus at Bethany. Today and during the services of Holy Week, consider changing the traditional “Words of Institution” to remember this story: “Not long after Mary anointed Jesus at Bethany, Jesus gathered with his closest friends. He took bread...” Then continue with the words of bread and cup shared at the table.

But how shall Holy Week begin? In recent years Passion Sunday has become the primary focus to begin the week. The Palm Sunday text is heard as a prelude to the service, but seldom the preaching text for the day. There are good reasons to consider giving Palm Sunday fuller attention, even as there are good reasons for reading the Passion account as Holy Week begins.

Some possible considerations...

Why Palm Sunday? (Luke 19:28–40)

- The Palm Sunday story is an invitation into the drama of Holy Week. The story unfolds from the entry into Jerusalem to Jesus’ last supper with his friends, to the agony of Good Friday, to the life-changing good news of Easter. Some will also stop to light the first fire of Easter at the Vigil. How can we encourage people to go with Jesus on his final journey?
- If people hear the synoptic passion account on this Sunday, then John will be heard on Good Friday every year (and John’s account is the most anti-Jewish).
- Luke’s Palm Sunday story longs for preaching, especially Jesus’ prophecy that the stones will cry out, a text found in no other gospel.
- The argument that people will go from the “high” of Palm Sunday to the “high” of Easter without stopping at the cross is real, but can we encourage people to “stay awake with Jesus” all week?

Why Passion Sunday? (Luke 22:14–23:56)

- The Palm Sunday text (Luke 19:28–40) isn’t forgotten but is heard at the beginning of worship. Palms are blessed and everyone enters singing a hymn such as “All Glory, Laud

and Honor” or “Ride on, King Jesus.” Then the service proceeds, focusing on the passion reading from Luke 22:14–23:56.

- We need to hear the passion story read as one piece to set the stage for Holy Week and Easter.
- If people don’t come to services on Maundy Thursday and/or Good Friday, they’ll go from one festive parade to the victory of Easter without the cross.
- More people will hear the synoptic gospel reading on this Sunday than will hear John on Good Friday.
- This is now the norm in many congregations and some people will wonder why the minister has dropped the passion reading on this Sunday if you focus only on the Palm Sunday text.

Whatever path is chosen, those who preach and plan worship can find ways to help the congregation come along. We know people are busy. Unlike the clergy, it’s not part of their job to be at all the services of Holy Week! But we can do more to encourage people to set aside this holiest of weeks that comes only once a year. This is our great high holiday, akin to the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. No one should feel guilty for choosing either path; no one should be afraid to move outside the book.

Some congregations will mark the **Easter Vigil** on the Saturday night before Easter. This dramatic service includes the lighting of the first fire of Easter, readings from the Hebrew scriptures (4–12 readings); Baptism and/or the Affirmation of Baptism; the Easter acclamation “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!” and Holy Communion. Again, it is possible to move outside the book and the assigned readings: how can you include more stories about women in the readings from Hebrew scriptures? In the Holy Communion portion of the Vigil, Luke 24 or John 20 will be the Gospel reading and probably the preaching text (for a short sermon!) If Luke is read at the Vigil, then John will be read on Easter Sunday (or vice versa). There is reason to read John 20 at the Vigil because Mary Magdalene comes “while it is still dark.” Over time it is important to hear all four gospel resurrection accounts, rather than just one.

Don’t miss the chance to encourage people to experience the whole drama of Holy Week. The good news of resurrection will touch people in more profound ways if they take time for the whole journey with Jesus.

We welcome two new writers to this issue of “Preaching Helps,” and welcome back several old friends. I am grateful to each of them for guiding us on the journey from the Fifth Sunday in Lent to Pentecost and the first Sundays of Ordinary Time. **Joel Bergeland** is a pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church of Plymouth, in Plymouth, Minnesota, where his

work currently involves figuring out with his congregation how they can be better neighbors to their surrounding community. He lives in Minneapolis with his husband and their two cats and one dog. **Sarah Trone Garriott**, an ELCA pastor, is the Coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council. Formerly a parish pastor in rural Virginia and suburban Des Moines, she now works with faith communities across the religious spectrum to support the DMARC Food Pantry network. In addition to interfaith work, she regularly preaches in Christian congregations that welcome women in their pulpits, and presides at the table of ecumenical partners. **Ron Luckey** is a Lutheran pastor living in Lexington, Kentucky. He served three parishes in his forty-year ministry including ten years as campus pastor at Clemson University. After twenty-five years at Faith Lutheran Church in Lexington, he retired in 2012. **Erik Strand** is a recently retired ELCA pastor having served thirty-eight years in active ordained ministry, most recently for twenty-eight years as co-pastor at Edina Community Lutheran in Minnesota. He is a graduate of Pacific Lutheran University and Yale Divinity School. He is still exploring what his next life adventures will be with his wife, Deborah, but being “Papa and Nana” to their grandchildren is high on the list. **Susan Plocher Thomas** is an ELCA pastor who lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire. She has served in campus and congregational ministries in North Minneapolis; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Hanover, New Hampshire; and with ELCA Global Mission in Vienna and Jerusalem. **Kimberly Wagner** serves as the Axel Jacob and Gerda Maria (Swanson) Carlson Assistant Professor of Homiletics at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Kimberly received her M.Div. and Ph.D. from Emory University. When not preaching, teaching, or writing, Kimberly enjoys seeing live theater and exploring Chicago with her dog, Toby. **Michael Wilker** is the lead pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Before coming to Reformation, he served as president of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. A graduate of St. Olaf College and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, he served bilingual congregations in New York and California. He grew up on a hog farm in southern Minnesota (and was the state 4-H reserve swine showman!). Inspired by Micah 6:8, Mike is passionate to do justice in the world, practice loving-kindness and humbly walk with God each day. As a marathon runner, he’s in the journey toward justice and peace for the long-run.

God bless each of you as you listen to texts you’ve heard hundreds of times. Hear them again as though you’ve never heard them before.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, “Preaching Helps”

Fifth Sunday in Lent Sunday, April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16–21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b–14

John 12:1–8

Engaging the Texts

In the context of the second portion of Isaiah, the Persian Emperor Cyrus has just conquered—or is about to—the Babylonians and free the Jewish exiles. Today’s reading compares this new liberation to the Exodus when God parted the Sea of Reeds and the ancient Israelites walked across dry land. The Egyptian chariots and warriors were drowned by the rushing waters (See Miriam’s Song, Exod 15:21). The second part of the reading flips the water metaphor. Instead of waters parting to make a dry path, God will make a waterway in the wilderness.

Psalm 126 sings of the return from Babylonian exile. Dreams can be both divine revelation and fleeting visions. The psalm remembers the joy of the liberation vision and makes room to petition God to continue to restore the livelihood of people. “*Watercourses*” in the psalm echoes the Isaiah reading. The Negev is an arid, but productive, southern part of ancient Judah. Its cities were especially hard hit by the Babylonian conquest and exile.

The excerpt from Paul’s letter to the Philippian community extends his vehement opposition to circumcision for Gentile-Christians. Paul’s adversaries may have been Jewish-Christians or Gentile-Christians pushing a certain interpretation of scriptures about circumcision. According to Paul’s self-evaluation, his sacred religious, national, tribal, educational, and partisan membership exceeds any and all opponents. Yet all that sacred status is a dung heap compared to knowing Christ Jesus, and the power of his resurrection and his suffering.

The anointing of Jesus by a woman is included in all four gospels (cf. Matt 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–11; Luke 7:36–50). The person who anoints Jesus is unnamed in the synoptic texts. While Matthew and Mark tell a similar story and place it at Bethany, Luke is different and sets the story in Galilee. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus says the anointing is preparation for his burial. In Luke, Jesus interprets the anointing as an act of thankful devotion by a forgiven sinner. Luke then mentions three women healed by Jesus who provided for him and the other disciples from their wealth: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (Luke 8:1–3).

John says the person who anointed Jesus is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from

the dead. Many who had come with Mary and witnessed the raising of Lazarus believed in Jesus. John says that when the council heard of this, “from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death” (John 11:53). After Mary anoints Jesus, a great crowd gathers to see him and Lazarus. The next day, this is the crowd that hails Jesus with palm branches as he enters Jerusalem.

Pastoral Reflections

The story of a woman anointing Jesus is heard sporadically in the church. It is not read at all during the Year of Matthew (Year A). The Year of Mark (Year B) includes the anointing in the Passion Sunday reading. In the Year of Luke, (Year C), the church hears John’s story of Mary anointing Jesus on this Fifth Sunday in Lent. Later in June, Luke’s story is appointed to be read (Lectionary 11 C) if it falls after Holy Trinity Sunday. In 2019, Holy Trinity is June 16, so the anointing of Jesus by the forgiven woman will not be heard in regular worship for three more years.

Whatever the year, preachers should be clear about the differences and similarities between the stories. Mary of Bethany’s anointing is boldly intimate and strategically prophetic. Mary and Jesus had a deep relationship with one another before her brother’s death. They have listened and talked to one another. When her brother was dead in the tomb, Mary knelt at Jesus’ feet and agitated him: “Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died.” After Jesus raised her brother from the dead, Mary knew Jesus was a marked man. She knows what will happen. She intentionally crafts and enacts a public action, a ritual overflowing with meaning. She claims agency to be the ritual leader to anoint Jesus prophet, priest, and king. Her ritual prepares Jesus—and the rest of the disciples—for Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Mary of Bethany’s story is full of sensuality—oil and fragrance, feet and hair, a woman touching a man in bold intimacy. The lavish sensuality is one way this story is similar to the anointing of Jesus by the forgiven woman. Those gestures are also why women who anoint Jesus are slandered as being too sexually expressive. *Jesus Christ: Superstar* goes further and conflates the woman who anoints Jesus with Mary Magdalene and a prostitute. When Judas questions how Mary Magdalene was able to afford such expensive perfume, he implies she gained the money through prostitution.

A sermon that honors Mary of Bethany’s anointing of Jesus might explore the ways she embodies her devotion and gratitude so fully and intimately. Preachers could encourage hearers to follow Mary’s example to be boldly intimate with Jesus Christ.

Mary’s prodigious devotion could be an interesting parallel to the lavishness of the father in Jesus’ parable of the father and two sons read the previous week. Could our gratitude to

Jesus be as lavish as the father’s embrace?

Finally, could the community of disciples lavish Mary’s care and respect upon people who are poor in their midst? What would that look and smell and feel like?

Mike Wilker

Palm/Passion Sunday April 14, 2019

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29 (Psalm for Palm Sunday)

Philippians 2:5–11

Luke 19:28–40 [See Good Friday for Luke’s passion account]

Engaging the Texts

As noted in the introductory essay, there are reasons to reclaim Palm Sunday for the beginning of Holy Week. You may choose to end today’s Gospel with verse 41 where Jesus weeps over the city. Even though there is a joyful procession from the Mount of Olives, there is also a sense of dread under the praising. As the arc of worship moves from opening praise to a more somber ending, a hymn such as “My Song Is Love Unknown” (ELW 343) or “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty” (ELW 346) can carry us into Holy Week.

There are no palms in Luke’s story, not even branches—only cloaks spread on the road. As in Mark and Matthew, the colt is where it’s supposed to be, but some aspects of Luke’s story are unique. The procession is large and joyful: “the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God...” We don’t know who was in the multitude, but we do know that several women came from Galilee along with the disciples. “Hosanna” (*save us*) is missing in Luke, but we hear political overtones in praising “the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” Praising a king would trouble Roman soldiers on Passover duty. Even as Jesus rides toward death, we hear echoes of the angels’ song that announced his birth: “Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” (19:38, 2:14) The religious leaders’ warning and Jesus’ response to them is found only in Luke: “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” This isn’t the first time stones coming to life is promised (or threatened) in Luke. At the Jordan John challenged those who boasted of their ancestry, saying, “I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” (3:8b) Now Jesus says these city stones may refuse to keep silence.

Pastoral Reflections

Was this all planned? Each synoptic gospel includes the story of the colt tied where Jesus predicted. Does this mean

everything about this week was preordained? Did God plan it all out, including Jesus' death? Theologian Elizabeth Johnson challenges this belief:

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

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

Were the Pharisees to blame? Luke's story ends with Pharisees in the crowd warning Jesus: “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” We are so accustomed to seeing Pharisees as Jesus' enemies that we have a hard time hearing their warning as genuine concern for Jesus. They were probably worried about the uneasy truce with Rome that allowed Jews certain privileges, including their positions. Extra Roman troops were always sent to Jerusalem during Passover. Not only did hundreds of Jews crowd into the city, but the Passover story celebrated Israel's emancipation from slavery. Rome didn't encourage freedom talk and surely not freedom marches! Hailing Jesus as king was downright dangerous. At the beginning of Holy Week, it is important to remind people that the Jews did not kill Jesus. They had no legal authority to put someone to death. The dangerous belief that Jews killed Jesus cannot be allowed to stand, especially during Holy Week. It is better to deal with the awful legacy of that interpretation today rather than on Good Friday.

What stones are crying out now? “I tell you,” said Jesus, “if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” What stones are crying out now? Millions of refugees longing for home, Black people hoping against the evidence that their lives matter, transgender people praying for safety, immigrants seeking asylum only to be turned away after walking thousands of

miles. Ray Makeever's song “Even the Stones Will Cry Out”¹ captures the impact of Jesus' words. Soloists or the choir might sing the verses with everyone joining on the refrain:

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

Barbara Lundblad

Maundy Thursday April 18, 2019

Exodus 12:1–4 [5–10] 11–14

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

Luke 22:1–34

[Note: In this issue of Preaching Helps we are following Luke through Holy Week. If your worship includes a foot washing you will probably want to read the Maundy Thursday text from John 13. For commentary on that text see *Currents in Theology and Mission* (Archives, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2018), 77–78.]

Reflecting on Luke 22:1–34

Luke's passion story is framed by meals: the Passover meal shared with all the disciples and the meals shared at Emmaus and in Jerusalem after resurrection (Luke 24:13–49). Of course Luke's gospel is filled with meals, often with unpredictable eating companions: Levi and other tax collectors (5:29–31); dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house (7:36–50); feeding five thousand in a deserted place (9:10–17); dinner at the home of another Pharisee (14:1ff); and a meal with Zacchaeus (19:5–10), a tax collector whose life was turned around by Jesus. Meals are important in Luke's gospel, and often, very controversial.

But before this Passover meal begins, the background music has become ominous. Judas goes off to confer with the religious leaders in order to betray Jesus. According to Luke this was set in motion by Satan. Did Judas feel betrayed by the rabbi he had followed? In Luke's temptation story, the last temptation takes place on the pinnacle of the temple. There, on the height of religious symbolism, the devil tells Jesus to throw himself down to prove he trusts God. Jesus refuses. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” The devil said no more and “departed from him until an opportune time.”

1. Ray Makeever, *Dancing at the Harvest* (Augsburg Fortress Press:11-10738, Accompaniment edition, 11-10739).

(4:9–13) Now that opportune time has come.

There are echoes of the Palm Sunday story as Jesus instructs Peter and John to find a room for their meal: look for a man carrying a water jar. (Evidently this man would be easy to spot because women usually carried water jars!) Like the donkey tied where it was supposed to be on Palm Sunday, all this happens just as Jesus predicted. In an intriguing twist, the Greek word translated “guest room” is the same word as “inn” in the story of Jesus’ birth (2:7). That inn wasn’t a motel with a “No Vacancy” sign, but an upper room in someone’s home which was already filled. “This time there would be room at the ‘inn.’”² Birth and death seem to sit together at this meal.

But why are they all sitting on one side of the table? Our pictures of the last supper have been shaped by Leonardo DaVinci’s painting with Jesus in the center with six disciples on each side. We need to paint a different picture. When the evangelists wrote about Jesus’ last supper, Luke and other early believers borrowed a structure already known in the larger society. Hal Taussig’s book *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation & Early Christian Identity* provides a wealth of information on those Greco-Roman meals. Those meals included: reclining around a low table (forget DaVinci’s picture!); the supper (*deipnon*), and the *symposion*, an extended time of drinking and conversation. A ceremonial cup was raised to mark the transition from supper to *symposion*.

We can hear traces of these meals in Luke’s story—and an explanation for why there are two cups in Luke’s story! The first cup (vs. 17) may have marked the transition from the supper to the *symposion*. Jesus does not drink from this cup—“divide it among yourselves,” he says. Jesus is fasting “until the kingdom of God comes.” Then Jesus took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples. This description echoes words and actions of Jesus feeding five thousand in Chapter 9; the description is also a foretaste of the meal at Emmaus after resurrection (24:30). At this last supper Jesus passes the bread to them saying, “This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” After the bread, the second cup: “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” For Luke this is a meal of remembrance and covenant.³ There is no mention of sacrifice or atonement.

How hard it is to remember and how hard to trust the covenant! After the cup is passed, Jesus shares tragic news: “the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table.” We know this is Judas because we have heard the earlier part of the story. In Luke Judas shares the covenant meal with Jesus and the other disciples. “He fulfills Psalm 41:9, ‘Even

my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.’”⁴ What right does the church have to exclude anyone from the table?

The last supper is a meal of Jesus and a meal of the church. “Luke gives the entire meal a double interpretation appropriate to its situation on the boundary, where Jesus’ own ministry is ending and the life of the church is already being called into being.”⁵ Now we share this meal with Jesus and the disciples, a meal of remembrance and covenant.

Barbara Lundblad

Good Friday April 19, 2019

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16–26

Luke 22:39–23:56

Engaging the Texts

[If Luke’s account of the passion was read on Palm/Passion Sunday, then John’s gospel will probably be read today. For comments on John’s passion, see *Currents in Theology and Mission* (Archives, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2018; “Good Friday,” pages 78–79).]

Luke’s Passion Story

Often, there is no sermon on Good Friday. The passion story will be the center, perhaps read by different voices. If there is a sermon, poetry is better than prose or brief reflections after each portion of the biblical story. One possible way to structure the service is to follow the time line of Luke’s account, picking up where the story of the supper left off.

Night: Luke 22:39–65

It is dark. The supper has ended, and Judas has gone out into the night to betray the one who had just shared bread with him at the table. It is dark on the Mount of Olives. There is no joyful procession. No multitude praising God as on the Sunday before. The disciples fall asleep—it is night, after all, and even fear cannot keep them awake. At the supper Jesus had told them, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials...” (22:28) but now they are sleeping, and Jesus is utterly alone. It is dark but Judas knows where to find his friend. Jesus refuses the betrayer’s kiss. He refuses the violence of the sword. “This is the hour,” he says, “and the power of darkness.” It is dark in the courtyard outside the high priest’s

2. Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 259.

3. Ringe, 261.

4. Ringe, 262.

5. Ringe, 261.

house, dark except for the fire someone has kindled. The fire light flickers on Peter's face, enough light for people to insist, "This man also was with him." Peter shouts into the darkness, "I do not know what you're talking about." A rooster crows in the darkness. Strange, isn't it, for a cock to crow at night? Fire light flickers on Peter's face as Jesus turns to look at him. It is night and Peter is sobbing.

Early Morning: Luke 22:66–23:25

"When day came..." the trials begin. Jesus hasn't slept at all. In the morning he is questioned by the religious authorities, then Pilate, then Herod, then back to Pilate. The charges against him are all political: perverting our nation, forbidding payment of taxes to the emperor, and claiming to be a king. (23:1) Finally, Pilate leaves the verdict up to the people: "Jesus or Barabbas?" *Barabbas*. *Bar*—meaning "Son." *abbas*—meaning "Father/Papa." Barabbas: Son of the Father. We remember the words Jesus heard from heaven at his baptism: "You are my Son, the beloved." Jesus, Son of the Father. Barabbas, Son of the Father. Which "Son of the Father" will they choose?

Late Morning, Crucifixion: Luke 23:26–43

Two criminals are crucified with Jesus, one on his right and one on his left. In Matthew and Mark, two disciples asked for places at Jesus' right and left hand. Surely this wasn't what they had in mind. The criminals are part of the story; they are remembered. Kosuke Koyama says their presence matters: "They were remembered through the centuries with Jesus Christ. They were introduced when Christ was being crucified. The biblical God is the creator of relationship among people. He introduces us at all cost...what the thieves did was incorporated in the story of salvation." (Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God*, p. 34) Jesus is taunted with words that echo the devil's temptation in the wilderness. "Jump down from there!" Then he speaks words found only in Luke: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." One of the criminals asks to be remembered. Jesus assures him saying, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." As in life, so in death, Jesus spends his last hours with outcasts.

Noon, Death: Luke 23:44–49

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

Late Afternoon, Burial: Luke 23:50–56

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

We commend to almighty God our brother Jesus,
and we commit his body to its resting place:
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
The Lord bless him and keep him,
The Lord's face shine on him with grace and mercy,
The Lord look upon him with favor and grant him
peace. Amen.⁶

Barbara Lundblad

Easter Sunday April 21, 2019

Acts 10:34–43

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

Luke 24:1–12

Engaging the Texts

Acts 10:34–43

Peter's "kernel of the gospel message" sermon is set in the coastal city of Caesarea Maritima, where God has summoned him to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Peter had received a vision—which he resisted three times—of God calling unclean food clean. This life-changing vision of God's redemptive intentions inform his resurrection message to Cornelius. It's a turning point in Peter's understanding of the breadth of God's work. The author places remarkable statements in Peter's mouth: "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean," and "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

A psalm of thanksgiving, with a plea for entry to the temple: "Open to me the gates of righteousness..." Once inside, the supplicant states, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is

6. From the funeral service, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 284.

marvelous in our eyes.” Jesus quotes this cornerstone passage in the synoptics (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; and Luke 20:17) and the author of 1 Pet 2:7 uses it to bolster his argument, indicating an early interpretation of Jesus’ rejection and resurrection opening the way for those deemed “unrighteous.”

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

Part of Paul’s famous resurrection chapter, in which, with holy, puzzled wonder, he holds up what Christ’s resurrection means for him and members of the church in Corinth, who seem to be all over the map about this. What Paul knows for certain: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (v. 19).

Luke 24:1–12

The theme of who is acceptable rises once again with the disciples’ rejection of the angels’ resurrection announcement to Mary Magdalene and other women, an all-too-familiar example of not believing the women. Peter, however, decides to go to the tomb to check out their story, and comes back amazed.

Pastoral Reflections

A New Orleans Mardi Gras tradition began in 1912, in which African American prostitutes defied proscriptions against women participating in the masquerade parades. Dressed as Baby Dolls, these prostitutes carried walking sticks to dance with *and* defend themselves.

Kim Marie Vaz, author of *The ‘Baby Dolls’: Breaking the Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition*, notes that “at the time...residential segregation was practiced, job discrimination was practiced [and] women didn’t have the right to vote. The one way that they could make a statement was through their dance and their dress and their song. It’s when you’ve exhausted all your legal remedies that you have to use the culture to make a statement and express yourself.”

The “Baby Doll” masking was a protest *masquerading* under the guise of Mardi Gras entertainment—a double masquerade. It said, “Wait a minute. You call us ‘Baby’? You call us ‘Doll’? Just watch us turn that around and claim it.” And they turned the idea and the power relationship on its head, dressing in short satin skirts and bloomers, while smoking cigars and flinging money at the men as they danced past them.

The tradition faded in the 1950s, as desegregation and new highways through poor neighborhoods changed the New Orleans landscape. It was “resurrected” by Milissia White and her brother after Hurricane Katrina. People weary from hurricane recovery welcomed the sight of the “Baby Dolls”

dancing again in the Mardi Gras parade—a sign of hope, and resistance to despair.

This may be an unusual place to go for an Easter message, but wresting hope out of despair and life out a death-dealing situation speaks of resurrection to me. And the Baby Doll story also speaks of women who are normally discounted. “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told [the news of Jesus’ resurrection] to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:10–11).

In a 2013 NPR interview, Milissia White was asked why the present-day Baby Dolls didn’t dress and act exactly like their earlier counterparts. She said, “When something is resurrected, it doesn’t come back the same. We’re not a replica.”

Resurrection is not replication. Just as resurrection is not resuscitation. Resurrection is not about coming back the same. It’s about being changed. Resurrection, like death, changes everything.

After his resurrection, Jesus isn’t recognized by those who knew him—at least not immediately. Something he does, some action, clues them in. He speaks a beloved name—“Mary.” He enters a room his disciples have locked in fear. He breaks bread at table with disciples who are fleeing Jerusalem. He prepares breakfast on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and his disciples realize Jesus arisen was the one who called from the shore to advise them after a fruitless night of fishing.

Even Jesus, it seems, is changed by his resurrection. So are we and his disciples, who—post-resurrection—are commissioned to go out and turn the world on its head, living in a dancing hope that has been to the grave and will not die, a resurrection hope that will not finally be overcome.

Susan P. Thomas

Second Sunday of Easter April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27–32

Psalm 118:14–29

Revelation 1:4–8

John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

Acts 5:27–32

An example of bold witnessing by the apostles to their town, the Jews in Jerusalem. The context is their arrest and imprisonment. During the night, an angel brings them out to preach in the temple. When the high priest sends temple police to the prison, they report, “We found the prison se-

curely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” Here are echoes of the secured—but nonetheless empty—tomb, and connections to the risen Christ moving in and out of fearfully locked spaces, as in today’s Gospel. This story illustrates the disciples’ shift from fear to boldness.

Psalm 118:14–29 [or Psalm 150]

See my Easter Sunday comments on many of these repeated verses. The alternate Psalm 150 offers God’s people a spurt of unabashed joy and praise in the freshness of this resurrection season.

Revelation 1:4–8

An intriguing use of threefold divine names occurs in this passage. “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come...” The HarperCollins Study Bible notes an allusion to a widely used Hellenistic Jewish name for God based on Exod 3:14—“The one who is,” as well as a “popular Greek formula” describing God as “the one who is and who was and who will be.” The author’s usage differs slightly but significantly from each of these, concluding with a formulation that also incorporates the more frequent Alpha and Omega naming: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John 20:19–31

The wounds of Christ are an identifying feature following his resurrection. They are not incidental. They, too, must be carried into resurrection, carried and healed and loved into beauty by God’s creating, redeeming hands, so that they might witness to what has been overcome. Bludgeoned, discarded bodies the world over demand this.

Pastoral Reflections

After a very long wait for our first child, a full fifteen years into our marriage, I literally couldn’t believe it. Even after the pregnancy, labor and birth (all of which I personally experienced), I had to keep checking. I lay in my hospital bed, holding onto this mystery, touching that soft head, unfolding those tiny fingers again and again, making sure he was really there. Seeing him wasn’t sufficient. I needed to touch him.

If I needed to do this to confirm the common universal mystery of life, I have no difficulty at all understanding Thomas’ need not only to see but to touch the *uncommon* mystery of resurrected life.

I’ve never encountered anyone who “just couldn’t understand Thomas.” I’ve never had to explain why Thomas doubted or why he wanted proof. We all know why. We’ve

faced the same doubts and the same desire for proof. On the other hand, I *have* found myself trying to explain why others *believed*.

“Have you believed because you have seen me?” Jesus asks Thomas. Then he says—directly to us, it would seem, who are *Thomas-es-come-lately*—“Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe!”

In the context of the story of Thomas, we must understand that the opposite of faith is not *doubt*. The opposite of faith is *certainty*—beyond a shadow of a doubt. We should remember this when we experience doubts about the faith we proclaim, doubts about the resurrection, about Christ being truly human *and* truly divine, about what actually happens when we receive the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, about whether we really can be or are loved and forgiven, about whether it’s true that God is finally for us and all of creation—all of these blessed mysteries. If we have certainty, is faith required at all? It would seem not.

Faith asks something of us—a relationship of trust. It’s a living, breathing thing that calls for our engagement, rather than a static thing we can ignore. Faith is living and breathing, like Christ arisen out of the static certainty of death, breathing upon his disciples, giving and calling for hope and love.

Once it was well-established that my newborn was there, what I needed next was more important. I needed faith to go forward in my uncertainty about what the future would hold for this child, to trust in God’s promises for him and for me and the world in which we lived, those promises renewed each day with each breath, as well as those promises that are eternal. Could I believe *those*? Could I really trust them?

This is the greater challenge, the challenge we each face, this challenge of trusting in God’s promises, even with the evidence of everyday wonders like birth. It might even have been a challenge for those disciples to whom Jesus appeared after his resurrection, when the vision of life pulled through death faded, when they began to think maybe it had all been a dream.

There comes a time in normal labor where the mother has to release control and trust that her body will do what it needs to do to deliver that new life. In a similar way, I see my need to release control over every detail of my own and others’ salvation and trust the body, the Body of Christ gathered and regathered following Christ’s resurrection, the Body of Christ received as sacrament at the table, the risen Body of Christ appearing to Thomas and the others.

My faith is not in getting all of the doctrinal details right. My faith is in that promise of love that is eternally life-giving, which has been handed on to me through others who saw—or didn’t see—and came to believe.

Susan P. Thomas

Third Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2019

Acts 9:1–6 (7–20)

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11–14

John 21:1–19

Engaging the Texts

While Jesus was on earth, some things were easier for his disciples. Since Jesus had a human body that could be touched and seen, they knew where he was, what he looked like, and how to recognize him. All that changed after the Resurrection. Believers were left with questions we still wrestle with today: How do we know when we've encountered Jesus? How do we recognize him without his physical body? And what happens to us once we know that we've met him?

For Saul, Jesus is first made known in the dramatic events of a blinding flash of light and a voice out of thin air (Acts 9:3–6). But the heavenly voice of Jesus plunges Saul deeper into his earthly body and into human community. His fellow travelers must guide him by hand while he is blind; his sight is restored not with a transcendent flash of light but with the human hands of Ananias, and water pours over his body as he is baptized.

Encountering Christ in the fleshy bodies of others should not be surprising given the content of what Jesus' voice says to Saul—"Why do you persecute *me*?" The risen Christ is to be found among ordinary Christians, called people of the Way (v.2) because of their embodiment of the pattern of life Jesus lived while he walked the earth: sharing food and possessions, welcoming strangers, granting forgiveness, and praying. Jesus is as present in this Way as he is in logic-defying displays of light and sound.

But the risen Jesus is made known to us even when we fail to take this Way with faith and courage. The disciples in the Gospel reading (John 21:1–19) have already seen Jesus twice since God raised him from the dead, and Jesus has given them the Holy Spirit and sent them into the world (John 20:21–22). Yet they have not gone on to proclaim this good news to anyone. They have instead returned to their previous occupation of fishing, as though the whole Jesus thing never happened. Unsurprisingly, they are coming up short.

What happens next recalls events that occurred while Jesus was living. John 6 also tells a story of bread and fish becoming surprisingly abundant on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius. And Peter's threefold confession of love for Jesus by a charcoal fire stands in contrast to his denials by the fire in chapter 18. This resurrection story has all the hallmarks of stories from Jesus' life, and that's how the disciples know it's

the risen Jesus calling to them from the beach. As it was in his life, so it is in his resurrection: Abundance appears in an unexpected place, hunger is fed, old rifts are healed, and a call goes forth to follow in the way of love.

Pastoral Reflections

One thing that kept me from going to seminary even though I was pretty sure I wanted to be a pastor was that I didn't think my call story was good enough. It wasn't even really a story, just a series of decisions, hunches, and the gradual elimination of other career options. There was no dramatic moment, no voice of Jesus speaking in my ear, no emotional conversion. When I shared this perceived shortcoming with a mentor, she disputed my thinking. "Why are you putting limits on how the Holy Spirit can work? The Holy Spirit is just as present in our thoughts and wisdom as she is in powerful rapturous experiences." Were it not for hearing these words and believing them, I'm not sure I would be a pastor today.

How many of our congregants are missing where God is showing up in their lives and our world because they have preconceived notions for what an encounter with God should feel like? How many of them have met the risen Jesus and reacted not with joy and praise but with self-doubt, talking themselves out of the idea that God would appear to them? Who in your congregation is facing a situation like mine before seminary, just waiting to hear and believe words that let them say yes to a call God has given them?

Your sermon on these texts could embolden people to notice and name where God is active in their lives. It could give them permission to let go of lifeless images of what a faith life ought to look like so that they recognize Jesus where he's actually appearing to them.

These texts contain a delightful abundance of images of what it looks like for God to be made known among us, often in direct contrast with each other. God's call might stun us into stupefied reliance on others, as with Saul's blindness, or it might send us with determined precision to someone we wish to avoid, as it does to Ananias. God may show up as we find success in the very thing we've trained for, like the disciples hauling in 153 large fish, or God may be revealed as we retrace our steps in spots of shame and regret, like Peter does. These texts show a God who is uncontained, refusing a one-size-fits-all approach in favor of surprising us with versatility.

Does your preaching testify to that God? What are your tried and true images of God—the ones that always make your sermons? Perhaps these texts hold an invitation for you to explore a previously unexamined way that the living Jesus appears among us.

Joel Bergeland

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36–43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9–17

John 10:22–30

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is commonly known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In Year C, however, the word ‘shepherd’ does not appear in the Gospel passage at all. One still could write a sermon on Jesus as the good shepherd with this set of texts, but there are other patterns present. Here are some possibilities—one in depth, the others brief.

Works. The people come to Jesus with an earnest desire—“Just tell us who you are.” In his frustrating and characteristic way, Jesus does not give us the direct answer we crave. Instead, he points to the works he has done in his Father’s name. Look what I have done, he seems to say, and you will know who I am. This is a different way into understanding Jesus’ identity.

When I took an astronomy course in college, the professor told us how to spot dim stars in the sky. If you look directly at the star, its light eludes you. But if you focus your sight on a blank space of sky near the star’s location, the star will appear in the corner of your eye.

Perhaps knowing Jesus is like that. If we press him for a direct definition of who he is, one that will fit nicely into a pristine systematic theology, he will elude us. But if we fix our eyes on the works he’s done and listen to the ones he’s done them to, he will appear in the corner of our eyes. How does our understanding of Jesus deepen when our guiding star isn’t the second article of the creed, but mystery of water turned to wine, the multiplication of loaves and fishes, or the living water offered to the woman at the well?

Similarly, if we look at the works Tabitha has done, we get an idea what kind of person she was. It is possible to do good deeds while filled with resentment and bitterness. But Tabitha’s death reveals that the good works she devoted herself to flowed over from the abundant love she knew and shared with the world, for that same tenderness is returned to her after she dies. Her body is treated with dignity, being washed and placed in repose. Then, the community she loved in her life gathers around her in her death. These are widows, women who know the pain of loss and the fear of economic hardship, but who are also strong and resilient. Tabitha didn’t seek out the company of rich and influential people when she lived; her love led her to befriend these widowed women. No longer able to embrace Tabitha, they clutch the tunics she has

made. Every stitch was an act of love and an expression of who she was.

Think of the praise you hear at funerals—“No one could make meatballs like Mom.” It seems like grief-induced hyperbole, but it’s true! The deceased person made meatballs, shoveled the walk, sang, caressed, and prayed like no other. John Updike speaks of death as “the ceasing of your own brand of magic” in his poem “Perfection Wasted.” Our works reveal something of who we are in our created uniqueness: a person who can never be replaced or duplicated. So it was for Tabitha.

But these works will never save us, for we live in the inescapable presence of death and sin. Salvation belongs to God, and these readings testify that God will accomplish this work. What does God’s work of salvation look like? In Acts, it looks like Tabitha standing up to rejoin her friends. In Psalm 23, a feast from God in the midst of our enemies. In Revelation, the Lamb wiping away tears while sheltering us from harm. And in John’s Gospel, the promise that nothing ever will be able to snatch us out of Jesus’ hands.

Clothing. Tabitha makes her tunics for those who have none, and the saints gather around the throne wearing robes of white in the reading from Revelation. We learn that these robes have been washed white in the blood of the Lamb as the saints have come through the great ordeal (v.14). Their clothing bears witness to a great joining: God’s suffering has joined our own at the cross of Christ. Similarly, Tabitha’s tunics connect her to the needy in her community, and after her death they tether her friends to her memory.

We do not often think of clothing as something that links us together, but it proves to be a rich symbol. One could easily segue into being clothed in Christ in our baptism, or explore a refrain from Martin Luther King Jr. “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” What does it look like to wear these garments?

Voices. Revelation gives us a chorus of voices singing with praise and thanksgiving to the Lamb. Many Lutheran congregations already know the words to their song in verse 12. Jesus also speaks of voices, telling us in the Gospel that his sheep hear his voice and follow him. We might think that Jesus will lead us straight to that glorious place of praise from Revelation. But Acts suggests otherwise. Peter hears a divine invitation in the voices of the disciples at Joppa, who lead him to a place of suffering and death. How might we learn to listen for God’s voice speaking through suffering people in our midst? Whose voices, specifically, is God calling your congregation to listen to?

Joel Bergeland

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 19, 2019

Acts 11:1–18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1–6

John 13:31–35

I like to say that I am a professional stranger. Each week my preaching takes me to a new congregation and often a different denomination than the week prior. For this reason, I like to focus on what we all have in common: Jesus. The congregations I visit respond enthusiastically to spending time with Jesus—his words, his actions. Ten years into ordained ministry, I am not tired of the gospels of the lectionary cycle. I have not run out of things to discover in them. Therefore, I will focus on the Gospel reading in this commentary. For me, one scripture is plenty to engage in a sermon.

Keep in mind the context of this passage from John, otherwise these words risk becoming saccharine. Jesus and the disciples are gathered at the last supper. The disciples' feet may still be damp from Jesus' washing. There will be a long slow moment as we listen to Jesus speak (almost) uninterrupted for chapters 14 to 17 before the rapid succession of events propelling Jesus to his death.

The call to love is smack dab between Judas leaving to betray Jesus and Jesus foretelling Peter's denial. The commandment comes despite everything that has happened, and before all that is about to happen. If we take one more step back, the call to love is spoken between Jesus demonstrating what love looks like in the washing of the feet, and a much longer time of teaching on the topic of love. And because Jesus knows that all this showing, telling, and repeating is still not enough, Jesus prays on their behalf in chapter 17. Jesus closes his prayer with the words "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." And with this final benediction, they are off to the garden.

The preacher must not assume that the congregation is aware of any of this. Far too many Christians have been brought up looking at the Bible as page after page of proverbs. That is, they are not used to thinking about each book with its own integrity. Popular Christian culture presents scripture verses as interchangeable pieces, pretty beads one can string together in any order. Few have a notion that the verses are rooted in a larger narrative. Many others just won't realize where the lesson falls in the chain of events—unless they have taken it upon themselves to read through the entire gospel of John. But more likely, the scripture the assembly hears in worship is the only scripture they've heard all week.

Also, the timing is strange. Easter was weeks ago. Your

congregation has moved on. This Sunday as they walked into church they were not prepared to go back to Holy Week and the Last Supper. Part of your task in preaching is to help them hear the lesson as part of the story of John, and specifically of the most difficult parts of the gospel. Yes, it is a downer, to bring up betrayal, failure, fear, suffering, and loss when speaking of love. But awareness of the whole story grounds Jesus' call to love, gives it an appropriate weight, some gravity. This love is down-to-earth and Jesus does not want us thinking otherwise.

This is a passage brimming with emotion. Imagine for a moment that you are Jesus. Think about what you have just done and said. Think about what will happen soon. What would it be like to speak these lines? If you had one last opportunity to talk to the ones you love most, to tell them what was coming, your deepest hope for them—could you even get the words out? Would your voice quiver or break? Would you even be able to translate all that was inside you into language?

While Jesus' monologues in John can be a little complicated, his speech seems to get more convoluted and confusing in this moment at the table. The deep emotion of this passage struck me in the middle of proclaiming the scripture one Maundy Thursday several years ago. I was planning to announce that I was resigning from my call, a call to a community I deeply loved. The congregation would not know for a few more weeks. I hit the words, "I am with you only a little longer," and could barely keep it together. Because it is my practice to proclaim the scripture from memory, I had to struggle through the rest of the passage in a halting, scattered way. It would be powerful for the congregation to hear these words with the appropriate emotion and tenor, a heart-breaking declaration spoken amongst a closely gathered group of loved ones.

In this day and age, we could all benefit from a deep and intentional exploration of love. It is not helpful to speak to the climate of bitterness and conflict with superficial words about love. We must not equate love with being nice. Love is not an excuse for facing up to the hard things, protecting ourselves or others from discomfort or accountability. As the passage today demonstrates, love is difficult, painful, and powerful. Love can transform anyone and transcend anything. And even as love asks so much of us, it also gives beyond measure of anything we could ever deserve. The disciples could not ever hear enough about love like this.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9–15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22–22:5

John 14:23–29 [or John 5:1–9]

For thoughts on the wider context of this passage, please see the commentary on John 13:31–35 for the Fifth Sunday of Easter. Think of chapters 13–17 as one scene. After all, there is only one set: room, table, not much else. Every moment in this scene seems to build on what came before and foreshadow what will come after. As you prepare to preach, consider reading the whole portion from start to finish and listen for what resonates with the pericope at hand. But if you will take the time to keep reading right through the end, the rest of John offers some important perspective on this brief passage.

On the Sixth Sunday of Easter, here we are again, still at the table of the Last Supper. I often wonder at the choices of those who created the lectionary. Why return to Holy Week so soon after the festival of Easter? Perhaps someone anticipated complaints, and therefore we have been offered John 5:1–9 as an alternative. But if the preacher were to stick with John 14 and this question, there may be some interesting opportunities for preaching.

John is the most cinematic of all gospels—interesting characters, substantial scenes with captivating dialogue, dramatic plot points, camera-worthy settings. Imagine a film maker telling John’s story through a series of flashbacks. In the days after the resurrection, the disciples are remembering those moments at the table. In the locked room or in a boat out on the Sea of Tiberius, the memories come to them in little pieces, much like our pericope. As the disciples try to make sense of the present, they are returning to the past. Then, it was too much to take in. Now, they can start to make sense of it in a way that just wasn’t possible before.

Maybe this is our task with the Last Supper flashbacks. On this side of Easter, we are being given the opportunity to connect with Jesus’ pre-resurrection teaching in a new way. After all we have come through, things may look different. But also, things may not look all that different. Jesus was trying to give his disciples a way forward without him. Present day Christians are living in a post-resurrection world, and we are still waiting on the resurrection. He is with us, and yet he is not. And so, this Sunday the preacher and the assembly are here, in this “both/and” moment, meditating on the Last Supper as we celebrate the season of Easter.

This passage is Jesus’ response to a question from Judas (not Iscariot—clarified in case you missed his exit in chapter 13): *Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?* There are a number of verses in this chapter that have been used to argue an exclusive God—only allowing access (14:6), truth (4:15), love, revelation (4:21), presence (4:23) for some. It’s interesting that this question comes from the lips of a man named Judas. We are told he is not *that* Judas, but it seems a funny time to throw this confusing detail into the story. Following that climactic parting of ways, it is unsettling to realize that we still have another Judas in the room. The one sharing a name with the ultimate outsider is asking a question framed in terms of “us versus them.” We cannot know what was intended by this detail, if anything. But just when we think we know who is in and who is out, here is another Judas asking why they as insiders are to receive special revelation.

The answer Jesus gives seems straight forward, at first glance. For those looking to determine who’s in and who’s out, the “keeping” of Jesus’ word might seem a suitable litmus test. But things aren’t so clear if we consider these words in light of everything that will happen from this point on. Jesus has told his disciples what to expect. And yet, when it all does occur, exactly as he told them, they act like they haven’t remembered a single word of it. Most of them were nowhere to be found while Jesus hung on the cross. None helped to lay him in the tomb. When Mary brought the news, they doubted. When evening came on that resurrection day they were hiding behind locked doors. A week later they still hadn’t moved beyond that same house. After all of it, they still try to go back to their old lives as fishermen. How was any of that loving Jesus and keeping his word? If Jesus’ answer to Judas is meant to be taken as an if/then proposition, why then does he reveal his post-resurrection self to the disciples? If they failed on this account, why then does Jesus show up not just once, but repeatedly?

Even the disciples, these privileged insiders, don’t seem to be very good at keeping Jesus’ word. They don’t seem to be so great at loving him or one another. But still, Jesus comes to them. And when he appears to the disciples in that locked room, his first words are not: *I told you so*. Instead, Jesus brings peace and an opportunity to try again. This is an important reminder, for those who struggle with all the ways they have not have kept Jesus’ word and for anyone feeling smug in the afterglow of Easter. This is a word to keep as we prepare for Pentecost, for disciples who are always in the process of becoming apostles, for the beginning of a church that is always beginning again.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Ascension of the Lord

Thursday, May 30, 2019

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47 or Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Our texts from Luke and Acts host an ascension bridge between these two narratives. Though Luke's Gospel ending has the ascension occurring on Easter Day and Acts testifies to the 40th day, what seems most important is that the ascension narratives are each Easter proclamations—testimonies that the Resurrection invasion continues on into the whole cosmos.

Both would have us imagine a time of waiting that occurs before the followers are “clothed from on high.” This waiting might lead a preacher to reflect on what it means to be dependent upon God—becoming a community that will respond to God's initiative. (See Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, p. 7–8). A preacher may want to reflect on the use of the image of 40 days or the image of clouds in Acts by probing their metaphoric force and the echoes of so many biblical narratives.

Of course, for many it is the image of the three-tiered universe that is the elephant in the room. How do we work with such an image in the twenty-first century when we “know so much”? Unless one flattens the text in a literalist embrace it seems best to argue that it is our imaginations that have been flattened. (see Marilynne Robinson's numerous nonfiction essays where she constantly reminds us of our narrowed imaginations: *When I was a Child I Read Books* or *What are We Doing Here? Essays*.)

So, let us turn to poetry.

And have the bright immensities
 Received our risen Lord
 Where light-years frame the Pleiades
 And point Orion's sword?
 Do flaming suns his footsteps trace
 Through corridors sublime,
 The Lord of interstellar space
 And conqueror of time?

The heav'n that hides him from our sight
 Knows neither near nor far;
 An altar candle sheds its light
 As surely as a star.
 And where his loving people meet
 To share the gift divine,
 There stands he with unhurrying feet

There heav'nly splendors shine”

Howard Robbins (LBW 391)

In his reflection on the Ascension, John Rollefson points us to this hymn as a way into the ascension narrative (*Postils for Preaching Year A*, Resource Publications, 2016, pp. 102–103). It is a hymn that ought to inspire us to participate in the imaginative work needed in order to faithfully attend to the texts and the feast day before us. So often stuck with reified images of a three-tiered universe, we either mumble our credal affirmation “ascended into heaven” or we focus our reflection on the absence of Jesus instead of his universal presence—a presence now as real in the bright immensities as it is in the bread offered at the holy table.

The mythic imagery of the ascension texts is certainly engaging as evidenced by stained glass window art and the ongoing sense of believers and unbelievers alike that God is “up” there. But the Good News of these texts does not “require a three-tiered universe or a naïve sense of ‘up’ as the direction to God” (Gordon Lathrop, *Proclamation 6A* p. 57, 1996). Rather the poetic affirmation of the narrative is that the incarnate, crucified, risen one is now also the ascended one. The newness that is Resurrection is now present throughout the cosmos. (see the appointed Prayer of the Day [ELW] “that he might fill all things.”) Jesus is not removed from the universe but rather now pervades it. Gail Ramshaw aptly paraphrases Pope Leo with the confession that “Jesus ascends to the sacraments.” (*Christian Century*: April 14, 2016). Thus, we testify now that wherever God is, Jesus is. To this confession a community of followers became witnesses as the body/ the presence of this beloved of God. They left the Mount of Olives to go home to offer praise and prayer; they wait breaking bread together and then the Spirit descends, and they go out as the sent ones.

See also Barbara Rossing (*Christian Century*: May 1, 2013) for a reflection on Augusta Victoria Hospital and its Church of the Ascension located on that same Mount of Olives. She offers a reminder of what it might mean to turn from looking up and instead see the ascended one present in all the hurts and needs of this world. She writes “that if Jesus' ascension is to have meaning, it must be by way of underscoring Jesus' presence still on earth. And that is through us. The ascension unexpectedly turns our gaze earthward—to the medical care on this holy site at Augusta Victoria Hospital, and beyond, to every place on earth where God's people work as agents of hope and healing in the midst of struggle.”

Another imaginative move can be found in an ascension sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor: “It was almost as if Jesus had not ascended but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth” (*Gospel Medicine*, p. 78).

So quick we are to make the ascension a spatial claim of distance and separation when even in our scriptures we have the testimony of heaven coming to us as God makes a home with us (Revelation 21 and 22). The feast of the Ascension authorizes our confession and trust in Jesus' promise that wherever two or three of us gather, he is there; when bread and wine are shared in his name, Jesus is there; when a beloved is washed with water and word, Jesus is present; whenever justice and mercy and welcome are enacted, Jesus is present.

Erik Strand

Seventh Sunday of Easter June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16–34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21

John 17:20–26

Three short days after the Feast of the Ascension we will gather on the Seventh Sunday of Easter to look backward. There we encounter words that Jesus speaks before Ascension, before Resurrection, and before Crucifixion.

The setting is the meal at the beginning of the many signs of disunity and exclusion when Jesus prays this Word. He prays just before the broken events of betrayal in the garden, the arrest, the denial and the loss of followers. It is here in the midst of the world's ways of separation and division that Jesus offers a prayer that seeks unity and oneness. Here he prays for his followers. And notice that he not only prays for his disciples at that meal but extends his prayer—breaking it wide open until it stretches beyond the room, city, region, and even beyond time and history. “I ask not only on behalf of these,” Jesus prays, “but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” Jesus prays for us as well as them.

How is it for you to know that Jesus prays for you! Here in this relational discourse within the Trinity is a Word concerning you and those around you, even those with whom you have disagreements or even deep divisions.

I remember my mother once said to me, “I suppose you and your sisters talk about your dad and me?” She asked with a discomfort that comes with uncertainty. I responded to her by asking, “Would you rather we didn't talk about you or that we care enough to talk about you?”

This prayer reveals the radical unity that is offered in the event of this Jesus. Geography, history, culture, and time are transcended seeking a unity that is so unlike our worldly

versions of narrow unities that animate so much of our economic, social, and political efforts at identity. With this prayer we see that Jesus is not seeking unity grounded in the various forms of tribalism evident in our society. Instead of a oneness that is rooted in like-mindedness, politics, economics, or national interests, Jesus would ground our unity and oneness not in our similarities (not even the good ones) but in a unity willed by God. A unity grounded in the Triune relationship that is offered to us. Instead of common self-interest, here he prays for a unity that comes to us outside of ourselves.

This prayer reflects the Trinity's ongoing love for us. A love that is incarnate and patterned in the life and word of Jesus: “This is my body given for you”; “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”; “Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden.” This prayer is in the pattern of the prayer that is the Passion of suffering and death; the prayer that is the Resurrection as it reveals the love that will bring life out of death; and the prayer that is the Ascension that reveals the holy embrace of every time and place.

This unity is a counterpoint to the unity promoted in the marketplace and in a variety of ideologies on the political spectrum. Market algorithms group us into discreet but very divided targets for advertising or even political allegiances. There are ideologies that unite some but then divide us from each other. Along with the standard groups of conservatives, liberals, libertarians, and leftists, we also have generational stereotyping of boomers, gen'ers, and millennials supported by a whole series of analysis and studies. Claiming to offer this analysis as a tool for understanding, it often morphs into siloed identities. We seem driven to find our unity and connections with the few as a way of noticing who we are not. We also live in a time of dividing cells of identity groups based on gender, class, race, status, sexuality, culture, age, and more. The gift of identity groups often celebrates the diversity of God's creation, but the shadows of exclusion and wall-building lurk nearby.

Many of us have sung from the book *With One Voice* (Augsburg Fortress, 1995). Singing in “one voice” to God doesn't mean we all sound alike or even sing the same notes! What it means is that the mercy and grace of our God is what we share in common. I read or heard somewhere that Karl Barth once asserted that “on earth our singing together might sound out of key but to God it's in perfect harmony.”

Thus, we are invited into a unity where differences such as gender, sexuality, age, and race are not removed but are celebrated and brought together into the body of Christ where all are welcomed. Welcomed home into God's grace where in the ending words of the book of Revelation we hear the invitation “all who are thirsty are invited to drink of the waters of life.” As creatures of God we share together a thirst for love, for mercy, for justice and hope.

Jesus prays for our unity so that the world might know of God's passion for reconciliation. So that the world might know that the creator of this cosmos seeks the unity of the whole creation. It is this constant prayer of Jesus on our behalf that secures our unity. Jesus prays so that the unity we share in word, water, bread and wine might shape and pattern our activity for the sake of the world. We practice the unity given when we proclaim that all are welcome without exception and when our life in community issues forth in love and service on behalf of the world.

Erik Strand

Day of Pentecost June 9, 2019

Acts 2:1–21

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Romans 8:14–17

John 14:8–17 (25–27)

The holy day of Pentecost, often called the “birthday of the church,” marks the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, promised to the followers of Jesus in John’s Gospel as well as in Acts 1. The momentous story of the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 offers much to preach: the experiential, ineffable, or uncontrollable nature of the Spirit; the celebration of the gift of inspired (in-breathed) proclamation; or an affirmation of diversity celebrated in the litany of the nations. However, in light of the myriad divisions and tensions that threaten to consume our lives and our world in this present moment, I wonder if this text—especially as it intersects the other lectionary texts for the week—invites us to recall the communal nature and work of the Holy Spirit.

The gifting of the Spirit in Acts 2 is not an individualized event or a private party only for the twelve disciples (including the newly selected Matthias). Instead, it is a public, communal event that not only includes those already present, but also draws others in. In Acts 2:1, it is unclear who is included in “they were all together in one place.” Some commentators suggest it is the twelve, others believe it could be the one hundred and twenty believers named in Acts 1:15, and still others suggest it could be any number of early followers. No matter, *all* of them hear the sound like a violent wind, *all* of them experience something like a tongue of fire over their heads, and *all* of them begin to speak in other languages as inspired by the Spirit. There is no division or discrimination—some gifted with the Spirit and others left on the margins to merely witness the event. The gifting of the Spirit is a corporate event, one that includes everyone present. Once gifted, the Holy Spirit also draws others into commu-

nity as the “devout Jews from every nation under heaven” (v. 5) gather around, hearing the good news of God spoken in their language by people who do not look or normally speak like them. Though proclaimed in many languages, the good news of God’s powerful works unites them.

The communal nature of the Spirit continues to be explored in Romans 8. Paul insists that the gift of the Spirit leads not to personal success, but to divine adoption as children of God. God’s “very Spirit bear[s] witness with our spirit,” making us children and heirs with Christ, part of the household and family of God. The gift of the Spirit does not, in Paul’s view, set us apart or create barriers between us; on the contrary, the Spirit is what allows us to “put to death the deeds of the body” in order that we may be in fuller communion with God and, it may be assumed, with our siblings in Christ.

Yet, this unifying work of the Spirit is more than a simple gathering of a community in the biblical past or in the present time; it is an eschatological drawing together of believers from every time and place who, through the Spirit, are invited to cry “Abba! Father!” We are reminded in Psalm 104 of the spirit of God breathed upon creation: “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (v. 30). In Romans 8 we are invited to be “led by the Spirit” as the Israelites were led by the Spirit of God in the wilderness, not “to receive a spirit of slavery” as in Egypt, but to receive a spirit of adoption into the family of God. We are connected with the first disciples as they listen to Jesus’ final discourse in John 14 and are promised that they will be forever drawn together as community in Christ through the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, given as communal gift, that draws together the communities of the faithful across the ages and is still at work to draw us together now.

We don’t need professional polling data to prove to us that our nation, churches, and communities suffer from deep divisions. We see difference and, instead of learning from one another and recognizing the *imago dei* in one another, too often we fall prey to a spirit of competition and fear. Believing the lie that life is a zero-sum game, we hunker down with our “side” and hoard resources. In this polarized condition we confess we often find it difficult to communicate with one another without turning to hateful rhetoric or demonization that seeks not to honor, but to silence the other. Yet, into this world rushes the Holy Spirit, the Advocate and Helper, the Spirit of truth. This Spirit is not given to one group or political party or race or gender—it is given to all. Uncontrollable as the theophanic rush of wind and dancing of flame, the Spirit unites us and gifts us with the ability to proclaim the good news of God’s power and love across boundaries of language and race and culture. The Spirit is not gifted to a select group of us as a sign of favor. Instead, it is gifted widely in order that we may recognize our adoption as children of

God and invite others to recognize that they, too, are a part of God's beloved family.

Kimberly Wagner

Trinity Sunday June 16, 2019

Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31

Psalm 8

Romans 5:1–5

John 16:12–15

Engaging the Texts

Trinity Sunday can feel like a theologically complex day—one that requires the preacher to explain the perichoretic three-in-oneness of the Trinity without falling prey to heresy or resorting to the ever-inadequate model of the three-leaf clover. To all those preachers facing down yet another Trinity Sunday, these lectionary texts offer good news. Taken together, they do not require the preacher to choreograph a difficult dance of theological abstraction. Instead, they invite the preacher to recognize how each person of the Trinity and God as three-in-one meets us where we are.

Psalm 8 begins this theme as a hymn of praise that not only celebrates God's "majestic name," but also reflects on God's relationship with human beings (v. 4). Though the Lord is "Sovereign" and "majestic," the psalmist speaks to God in the second person throughout—unique among praise psalms. God, as the primary actor in the psalm, chooses to care for and be in relationship with human beings from the beginning of creation.

If Psalm 8 establishes God's deep concern for and relation to humans, Proverbs 8 places God's guiding presence in the center of real life. Lady Wisdom, who declares that she was "brought forth" before the beginning of the creation, who was present with God during creation, who was a delight to the Lord and delighted in the human race (vv. 22–31), reminds us that God's guiding wisdom meets us in our everyday interactions. Lady Wisdom prompts us to listen for her ever-present voice that rings simultaneously from the heights to the low entrances of the city gates. She calls out not in a place set apart, but in the midst of the nitty-gritty of human living. The city and its gates were "places of encounter, where life's basic transactions and transitions occur."⁷ It was there where

legal arguments were settled, politics were debated, familial arrangements were made, and business was conducted. It is there that Wisdom speaks, allowing her voice to infiltrate the chatter of politics, business, and family. It is in the heart of human living that God's delight, Lady Wisdom, meets us to guide us yet again, if we turn aside to listen.

The Romans and John texts place us squarely in an encounter with the Holy Three-In-One. John 16:12–15 drops us in the center of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. He promises the presence of the Paraclete who will continue to be attendant to the disciples, speaking the truth of Christ and linking the faithful with the Father and the Son. Romans 5 reminds us of God's justifying claim on us through the work of Jesus Christ and God's outpouring of love into our hearts through the Spirit. This justifying grace and ever-flowing love meet us even in our sufferings, allowing us to "boast" that, through the Trinitarian God, suffering can be turned to a hope "that does not disappoint us" (v.5).

Pastoral Reflections

As noted earlier, these texts drive us less toward the internal relations within the Trinity and more toward a consideration of where the Trinitarian God meets us—in our sufferings, our politics, our business, our conversations, our daily comings and goings. For many in our congregations these texts may be words of *invitation*. Whether preached in combination or separately, each of these texts *invites* us to be awake to how God chooses to encounter us in our everyday lives. The Trinitarian God is "mindful of us" (Psalm 8:4) whether it is the Holy Three-In-One meeting us and transforming our sufferings to hope as proclaimed with assurance in Romans 5; or Christ's truth still being proclaimed by the guidance of the Spirit as promised in John 16; or Lady Wisdom crying out in the center of our daily transactions and interactions as declared in Proverbs 8. These texts invite us to be awakened to God's care and constant presence in the daily, mundane, sometimes difficult, sometimes painful, ordinary ebbs and flows of our lives.

When I was in seminary, I had the opportunity to serve as a chaplain intern at a maximum security women's prison. During my last week of work at the prison, I lingered outside looking at the buildings that housed thousands of inmates, grieving the idea of leaving after being there for the past year. I watched the movement of inmates and guards across the drab cement compound and my eyes began to fill with tears. An inmate I had come to know well saw me standing there. After greeting me, she noticed the tears in my eyes and asked if I was alright. "Yeah," I responded, "it's just...I'm leaving here in a few days... I mean, there is so much need. I just feel like I'm abandoning you all." Not at all phased or moved by my confession, the woman smiled wryly. "Well," she responded

7. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "The Book of Proverbs," in *Introduction to Wisdom Literature, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Book of Wisdom, Sirach*, Volume V, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, edited by Leander Keck et al, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 89.

matter-of-factly, “Chaplains come and go. It’s just how it is. But all I know is God was here long before you got here and God’s gonna be here well after you go.” At first, I felt offended, but then I realized this place was more than concrete walls overflowing with hurt and need. It was a space saturated with the very presence of God. I heard the Spirit of truth inspiring conversations between inmates as they comforted and supported one another. I remembered the ways I had seen suffering turned to hope, by the love of God, the power of Christ, and the working of the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard her—Lady Wisdom—crying out from the top of the watchtower to the multiple levels of entry and exit gates on the compound. May these texts open to us the ways God is already at work and calling out at the crossroads of our lives.

Kimberly Wagner

Second Sunday after Pentecost June 23, 2019

Isaiah 65:1–9

Psalms 22:19–28

Galatians 3:23–29

Luke 8:26–39

The gospel reading for this Sunday provides a “legion” of homiletical landing points, any of which provide grist for a significant sermon: the indifference of Jesus to cultural and religious boundaries when ministry is needed (an embodiment of the Galatians passage in which we are reminded that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”); Jesus’ restoration to health of someone who is a victim of multiple oppressive social realities; the misplaced concerns of the townspeople, placing porcine profit and loss over the relief of human suffering; and the notion that sometimes Jesus’ call to “follow me” means staying where you are.

This story can rightly be seen as yet another dramatization in Luke’s gospel of Jesus’ inaugural sermon in the Nazareth synagogue (chapter 4) in which he announces that his mission is to liberate the captives and let the oppressed go free.

When the writer of Luke’s gospel indicates that this drama takes place “opposite Galilee,” it should be noted that he is referring to more than geography. First, the writer is making a Christological statement about who Jesus is, a messiah for whom boundaries are irrelevant. And second, the writer is alerting the reader that we are being ushered into a situation in which Jesus confronts the very opposite of life and existential possibility. As soon as Jesus steps from the boat, he

is met by a man who is, in a real sense, no longer human. In fact, one could say that he is no longer alive. He has lost his dignity, living naked and exposed. He has no freedom, bound in chains and under guard. His mind is controlled by forces outside of himself. He is separated from his community, consigned to live among the dead. This naked man, in bondage, unable to free himself is the picture of the human predicament reflected in the lines of the Confession and Forgiveness portion of the Sunday liturgy. The physical description of this man provides rich metaphors for the human condition.

Some scholars who have considered this text from the perspective of the oppressed find this man a witness to the disastrous effects upon those living under the iron-fisted tyranny of Roman domination. When Jesus asks the man’s name, the name he gives himself is, in reality, a self-diagnosis of his brutal circumstances. He tells Jesus that his name is “Legion,” a term for a Roman military unit composed of about five thousand soldiers. It is provocative to consider that this man may be powerfully illustrating the findings of numerous psychological studies in recent years that have shown the tragic emotional and physical effects in children and adults living under tyrannical totalitarian regimes. A sermon built, at least in part, around this perspective may assist congregations in viewing the human cost of oppressive rule in Syria, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Central African Republic, just to name a few. Are we as a nation supporting these oppressive regimes? Closer to home, is our congregation doing enough to welcome and support veterans who have served in the “Legions” of our military forces? At the very least, the man’s self-identification as “Legion” points to the fact that his sanity has been lost amid a multitude of societal pressures, voices, and expectations that have reduced him to his present state.

As the preacher considers her or his listeners, it is not difficult to see modern analogs to this man’s circumstances. Regardless of how the preacher chooses to characterize the causes of the man’s torment, the overriding good news in any sermon should be Jesus’ restoration of the man to his former self. As David Lose points out, “The story is not only—perhaps not even primarily—about physical healing...but about the restoration of one man’s identity.” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 3, p. 167*)

The result of this man’s encounter with Jesus is nothing short of a rebirth. Where previously he was mentally in chains, now he is free; where before he was physically restless and emotionally agitated, now he sits calmly at Jesus’ feet. When people from the area arrive on the scene, they find the formerly naked man clothed. As an aside, some might wonder “How did he get the clothes he is wearing?” The narrator doesn’t tell us, but it is undoubtedly Jesus who is responsible. A preacher could build a powerful sermon around this

metaphor of clothing (which, of course is more than clothing) graciously provided.

The people's reaction to Jesus' intervention is sadly predictable. One might hope they'd react with awe at this extraordinary turn of events. Instead they are afraid and ask Jesus to leave their area. This "outside agitator" has disrupted the local economy by destroying a herd of pigs; furthermore, he has upended their social arrangements and taken it upon himself to handle one of their untouchables.

The preacher might well ask in a sermon: Who is the truly shackled in this story? Is it the man chained in the tombs or these townspeople chained to their misplaced values? What would healing and liberation look like in the lives of these people and, by extension, in us?

Ron Luckey

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 30, 2019

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Luke 9:51–62

Engaging the Texts

One could argue that the gospel reading for this day is so filled with sobering expectations for Jesus' followers that the reader might be forgiven for concluding the public reading of it with, "The Gospel of the Lord?"

This text marks the mid-point of Jesus ministry in Luke's gospel and the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem and the cross that waits for him there. On the way, Jesus and his disciples enter a Samaritan village, and the people throw them out on their ears. According to James and John the way to handle this rebuff is not to "shake it off" and move on as Jesus has instructed the disciples just a few verses previously. They have a better idea. "Let's make 'em pay and make an example of them so others will think twice before rejecting what Jesus has to say." This vengeful reaction draws a forceful rebuke from Jesus that makes clear he is on a mission characterized by peace, not violence; persuasion, not coercion; the power of the open hand, not the power of the closed fist.

The rest of the text involves individuals who are prospective disciples. To the eager-beaver who wants to sign up for discipleship on the spot, no questions asked, Jesus wants to be sure he knows what he's getting into. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but..." Jesus presents this word of caution to all who think that following Jesus is all about believing the right things, saying the right things, and staying

out of trouble. There is a price to be paid. Warren Carter, in his commentary *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* raises the provocative point that Jesus may be purposely choosing the images of foxes to illustrate how he and his disciples are choosing to live lives in opposition to the established political, social, and economic order. After all, Carter says, Jesus will call Herod a fox in Luke 13:32. In reading the text this way, "Jesus compares his alternative, marginal, itinerant existence of life-giving service with the security of the settled elite." (p. 207–208) This is a far cry from the message of the so-called "prosperity gospel" that equates following Jesus with material gain and social acceptance. Jesus is telling this would-be disciple to expect, not a life of comfort, privilege, and security, but one of sacrifice and suffering.

Along the way, Jesus invites two others to join him, but they have extenuating circumstances. One must plan his father's funeral. "As soon as the smoke clears, I'll follow you." The other individual wants to put her affairs in order first. "Let me go home to say my goodbyes and leave my forwarding address with my family. I'll catch up with you later." To both these people, who are, it must be admitted, making entirely reasonable requests of him, Jesus says: "There is no time for any of that. There's work to do."

Pastoral Reflections

So, how does the preacher preach this text as a proclamation of the buoyant good news rather than a declaration of the burdensome law with its "ought's" and "should's"? The key to doing justice both to Jesus' demands and his mercy lies in the very first words of the text: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." This is a signal that this text is first and foremost about Jesus and his commitment to us. Any commitment we make to Jesus is a response to the overriding commitment he has made to us.

The second consideration in preaching this text is the need to alert listeners not to be distracted by the practicalities in the text by asking questions like, "Do you mean to tell me that Jesus is saying I have to sell my home and live off the kindness of strangers in order to serve him?" or "Is Jesus saying family is unimportant and that, if it comes down to it, I should be a no-show at my parent's funeral?" To get hung up on the situations surfaced by the potential disciples in this text is to miss the point. Instead of getting distracted by the seemingly heartless "don't say goodbye to the folks back home," and "let the dead take care of themselves," a sermon should focus on the general principle expounded in this text—that every decision we make, every action we take should be seen through the lens of our primary commitment to Jesus. Our schedules, spending habits, interpersonal behavior, and attitudes are to be governed by our baptismal covenant. Jesus

means what he is saying in this text. There is a very real cost to discipleship. That needs to be clearly stated and powerfully illustrated in a sermon on this text.

But equally clearly and equally powerfully the good news must be spoken. Jesus is headed to Jerusalem when he makes these demands, on his way to die for those of us who do not ever come close to perfectly fulfilling his demands. The “Law” is inarguable in this text. The preacher’s challenge is to balance it with “Gospel.”

Ron Luckey



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