Preaching Helps

January–March 2021: Second Sunday of Christmas to Palm/Passion Sunday

Can Preachers Help Heal the Rural-Urban Divide?

In the introduction to this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission,* the editors write:

> If there is anything that 2020 has driven "home," it is the reminder that the boundaries that separate various peoples are permeable, no matter what our politics. How we navigate and negotiate these boundaries in the most lifegiving ways possible is both challenge and gift.

The issue of negotiating boundaries is explored in a wide-ranging series of essays. How do these boundaries and differences relate to preaching and to preachers? This issue of Preaching Helps begins with Sunday, January 3, two days before the run-off election in Georgia that will determine which party has control of the U.S. Senate. That Sunday is seventeen days before the inauguration of Joseph Biden as president. His chosen vice-president, Kamala Harris, is the first woman of color and South Asian descent to serve in that position. Both of them have expressed their commitment to bring this divided country together, to heal divisions.

But the divisions between people in this country seem too deep to heal—it doesn't seem that "the boundaries that separate various peoples are permeable." Where is the church in this call for healing divisions? Many people consider churches to be sources of division rather than healing. Church goers are labeled progressive, Bible-believing, conservative, liberal, right-wing evangelical, and more. That word "evangelical" is part of the name of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, but the ELCA isn't considered "evangelical" by most evangelicals (or by those who use the word in public media).

You've no doubt seen the 2020 electoral map—large parts of the country in red with coastal blue states and blue metropolitan areas within red states. I know many people beyond the ELCA read *Currents,* including Preaching Helps. But since I know the ELCA better than other denominations, I'd like to imagine how this church might help heal the rural-urban divide. Of course, there are also divisions within congregations in red and blue states. There are also other ways of analyzing the politics of division, but this essay will focus on the rural-urban divide.

When I was a youth director in Minnesota in the late sixties, the whole state was one synod—except for the northwest corner which was part of the Red River Valley Synod with North Dakota. Because the Minnesota Synod went from the Iowa border north to Canada, it included congregations in the countryside, in small and medium-sized towns, and in large metropolitan areas such as Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth. When we gathered in what we then called "conventions," people from Minneapolis sat with people from the Iron Range. Farmers from Worthington talked with 3M executives from the Twin Cities. People from rural areas served on committees and councils with people from the largest cities.

When the ELCA was formed in 1988, Minnesota was divided into six synods—lots of Lutherans here! Minneapolis Area Synod and St. Paul Area Synod are largely urban. The other four synods are more rural—including many farmers, miners, resort workers, school teachers, small town merchants, etc. Now the urban Lutherans seldom meet with the rural Lutherans, except perhaps, on vacation.

But there are still Lutheran congregations in cities and small towns. Pastors of those congregations often went to seminary together. How could conversations be encouraged across the rural-urban split? Last November, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* included an intriguing opinion page after the election. There were two side-by-side columns about learning across rural-urban divides. One column was written by Hans Lee, pastor of Calvary Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. That congregation is one block from the corner of 38th and Chicago where George Floyd was killed last Memorial Day. Calvary Church has been providing food and other needed services since Floyd's murder and the protests that followed. I would have expected Pastor Lee to urge rural people to learn from city people after hearing so much news about violence in the city. But he wrote the column titled, "City folk have much to learn about country folk." (Minneapolis *Star Tribune,* November 18, 2020).

Pastor Lee admitted he probably fits the description of an "urban elitist" since he and his family have made their home in three different cities for thirty years, including Minneapolis since 1997. But his wife grew up in Mitchell County, Iowa, and their family has always had one foot in that Iowa soil. A few years ago, his wife founded a summer theater company in Mitchell County that seeks to bridge the rural-urban divide. A talented and diverse cast of college theater artists spends the summer in that Iowa county. Pastor Lee has learned a lot from being involved in those rural summers. Here's part of what he learned from folks in Mitchell County:

> These people actively listen by welcoming and opening their homes to theater artists they have never met. Cross-cultural connections are being made and these people are leading the way.

> The proof is in the relationships they maintain with the dozens of artists who spend each summer with them. After a summer in St. Ansgar, Iowa, it will be impossible for a theater artist who grew up in New York City to have a shallow, uninformed view of rural life.
>
> Likewise, the Osage, Iowa, family who hosted a student of color from Houston for the summer will be the first to promote the value of listening for understanding.

I'm quite certain that Pastor Lee's preaching has been changed by what he has learned from people in Mitchell County. How can the church be as proactive as the theater company?

Text Study: Pastors who serve rural congregations have friends serving in the city. Urban pastors have seminary classmates serving in rural areas. Consider forming a partnership across those divides, two pastors from different places learning from each other. Call or email perhaps once a month: What's going on where you live? What are people worried about? How will people in your congregation hear these Lenten texts? Are people hopeful about the new vaccines? How can farmers help city people see the image of a seed falling into the ground? You might agree to share sermons that use images from your particular location.

Live or Virtual Visits: People from urban and rural congregations can plan to spend time together, hosting visitors in their homes and worshipping together (when that becomes possible). One weekend could be a beginning to allow people with fulltime jobs to participate. If in-person visits can't yet happen, Zoom meetings can be a start. Six members of an urban congregation could "meet" with six members of a rural or small town congregation. (Larger meetings won't allow each person to participate. Additional meetings can be added.) The purpose is not to debate the outcome of the 2020 election, but to listen and learn. What do you love about the place where you live? What is hard about living there? How do you imagine living in the city or small town when you listen to the news? How do images of the city or the farm effect how you hear biblical texts? What scares you about living in the city? What scares you about living in a small town? While there are programs that bring city children to a farm for a week, there aren't many programs that provide exchange visits for a range of ages. Perhaps 3M executives from St. Paul could once more get to know farmers from southeast Minnesota to begin to bridge the rural-urban divide.

Pastor Lee ends his essay with these words: "We would do well to begin with something that lowers the temperature. It may not end polarization, but it might help us envision a more unified future. Thanks, rural America—I've been trying to listen."

As editor of Preaching Helps, I'm aware that most of our writers are pastors in urban areas. I'm eager to include more rural voices in the future. Wherever they live, our writers bring wonderful insights from their own lives and the communities they serve and I'm grateful to each of them: **Martha Schwehn Bardwell** serves as the associate pastor of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. In her free time, she is learning to grow food and native plants in her front yard. She lives with her husband, Sam, and their two young children. **Erik Christensen** is Pastor to the Community and Director of Worship at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. His professional interests include the relationship of worship to social action and the role of testimony in strengthening the church's public witness. Erik is a frequent contributor to *Sundays and Seasons* and has written for *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (2012) and *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (2015). He lives in Chicago with his husband, Kerry. **Jim Davis,** an ELCA pastor, is a graduate of Wartburg College and Wartburg Seminary. He currently serves Zion Lutheran Church, Gowrie, Iowa, and Fulton Lutheran Church, Roelyn, Iowa. He also provides pastoral support for the Church of the Damascus Road, two congregations in correctional facilities in Rockwell City and Fort Dodge. He is passionate about rural ministry and working with congregations to provide the best quality ministry possible in rural areas. He has also served Presbyterian Church USA and United Church of Christ congregations as part of a multi-denominational shared ministry. Davis is married and has five adult children. He enjoys reading, his dogs, and caring for others. **Abby Ferjak** began her first call to Word and Sacrament ministry at Grace Lutheran Church in Scarsdale, New York, in December 2020. Before her first ordained call, she served five years as a deacon in her call to hospital chaplaincy. She graduated from Augsburg College and Yale Divinity School and was supported in her Lutheran formation by Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. **Elaine Hewes,** a retired ELCA pastor, now serves St. Brendan Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine. She is particularly interested in finding new images, metaphors, and stories to break open the deeper meaning of biblical texts and Christian traditions. Poetry, music, and the natural world are her primary sources of inspiration**. Jeff R. Johnson** has been a pastor at University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley for twenty years. He serves on the national boards of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, the ELCA's LuMin network for Campus Ministry, and SHARE El Salvador. With his husband he shares a home in Oakland, California. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London.

John's trilogy *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Years A, B and C* is a wonderful resource for preachers. John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Becca Seely** is an ELCA pastor serving an ecumenical, multi-site campus ministry in New York City. She is also the Candidacy Coordinator for the ELCA's Metropolitan New York Synod. She lives with her wife, Pastor Abby Ferjak, and their rambunctious toddler in Scarsdale, New York.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Second Sunday of Christmas
January 3, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7–14 [or Sirach 24:1–12]
Psalm 147:12–20 [or Wisdom 10:15–21]
Ephesians 1:3–14
John 1:[1–9] 10–18

Engaging the Texts

Those preaching on these texts have already proven themselves to be explorers of the road less traveled. The Second Sunday of Christmas only occurs in the liturgical calendar roughly half the time, depending on which day of the week Christmas falls. Add to that the reality that most congregations will transfer the readings for Epiphany to this date and then observe the Baptism of Our Lord on January 10 (rather than observing Epiphany midweek on Wednesday, January 6). This may be especially understandable since the gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Christmas was already heard on Christmas Day.

Therefore, rather than argue for the use of these texts on this day, I will assume that those who have chosen to preach these texts have demonstrated an openness to atypical selections and will encourage them to continue in that vein. The assigned lessons contain two alternatives for the first reading and the psalmody, from Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon respectively. These books are considered canonical scripture by the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, but not by Protestants. When Luther translated the Bible into German roughly 500 years ago, he was the first to move these books out of the Old Testament and into a section which he titled "Apocrypha," along with the subscript, "these books are not held equal to the scriptures, but are useful and good to read." I would argue that they are especially useful and good to read on this day.

Just as the lessons from Ephesians and John are threaded through with mutually reinforcing images (the relationship of Father to Son, the Word's co-eternal presence with God at the dawn of creation, the believers' inheritance as children of God), Sirach and Wisdom also feature overlapping images (Wisdom personified as the feminine divine, the relationship to the nations, activity in salvation history). In the Hebrew tradition, Wisdom is often personified as a female voice and imagined as having been present with God at the creation of the world. The hymns that sing Wisdom's praise are so similar to the one that we hear in the first chapter of John's gospel that the figures of Lady Wisdom and the Cosmic Christ are sometimes interpreted as being aspects of the same second person of the Trinity. The selection of these alternate texts allows the assembly to experience expanded imagery for God's saving presence in history, balancing the familiar and patriarchal images of the Father and the Son with that of Lady Wisdom as that same Word through which all things came into being (John 1:3).

Pastoral Reflections

Long before *The Crown*, audiences around the world (re) discovered their affection for the British Royal Family in *The King's Speech*, with Colin Firth and Geoffrey Rush playing Albert ("Bertie"), Duke of York, and his speech therapist, Lionel Logue. The second son of King George V, Bertie is a man of solid character and guts who suffers from a speech impediment that we come to understand is the product of a childhood filled with bullying and abuse by his father, his nanny, and his brothers.

Called upon to take the throne when his dilettante younger brother, David, lays down the crown in order to chase after a divorcee from Baltimore, Bertie is brought face-to-face with his own deepest insecurities. As a king living in the new age of radio, he is called upon to speak to the nation in a voice that communicates confidence and inspires trust as the Western world was being drawn into World War II.

In a pivotal scene, just before Bertie is to assume the name King George VI, his speech therapist, Lionel, provokingly takes his seat in Canterbury Cathedral during a rehearsal for the coronation. Insulted, Bertie demands that Lionel vacate the chair.

> "Listen to me!" Bertie commands.
>
> "Why should I waste my time listening to you?" Lionel asks.
>
> "Because I have a voice!" King George VI replies.
>
> "Yes, you do."

"In the presence of the Most High she opens her mouth," says Sirach, to which the Wisdom of Solomon replies, "for wisdom opened the mouths of those who were mute, and made the tongues of infants speak clearly." We then learn

that this Wisdom has been a living part of creation from the beginning, eternally begotten of the Creator, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Creator, through whom all things were made—including you and me.

What's more, we learn that in being born, in taking on flesh, God has come in the person of Jesus Christ not simply to be an elder brother to us all, assuming all the difficult duties and making all the sacrifices, but so that we who believe in his name might become like him, children of God, adopted into a family and heirs to a throne.

This second Sunday of Christmas we learn from overlooked texts and alternate readings that Wisdom has come to dwell not only among us, but in us. Wisdom has taken on flesh in you and me. We are given a voice so that we might tell the truth and declare the good news that God's divinity is in each of us, for all of us.

Erik Christensen

Epiphany of Our Lord
Wednesday, January 6, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

The liturgical arc from Advent through Christmas to Epiphany has been filled with oppositional images of light and dark. That tension fills the texts for this day, from the opening verses of the Isaiah reading to the star that guides the sages in the Matthew reading. That is not, however, the only or even the most important line through these readings. Instead, these texts are using the naturally occurring cycles of light and dark, each seeming eternally set against the other, to describe the power relations between Israel and the surrounding nations (Isaiah), and between the power of the king and the vulnerability of the people (Matthew). In fact, the psalm and the reading from Ephesians make no mention of the light/dark dualism, but are insistent that God's wisdom and righteousness are revealed to the "rulers and authorities" (Eph 3:10) for the sake of ethnic inclusion (the Gentiles in Ephesians) and deliverance for the needy and oppressed (Ps 72:12–14).

The Isaiah reading begins, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isa 60:1*)*. Reading on we hear the prophet imagine a day when "Nations shall come to your light, and rulers to the brightness of your dawn … They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord" (Isa 60:3, 6).

Because we stop reading there and pair these verses with the story of the magi coming to witness the birth of Jesus, we reduce the power of the prophet's voice to mere prediction. If we were to read on, past the end of the assigned verses, we would hear promises of gifts far better than gold and frankincense, the kind of gifts many across this nation have been praying for following a year in which George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery are the best known but hardly the only Black lives stolen by state-sanctioned violence in support of White supremacy.

> "The descendants of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel … I will appoint Peace as your overseer and Righteousness as your taskmaster. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Paradise" *(*Isa 60:14, 17b–18).

Can you help the assembly to imagine a world where Peace patrols at night, and Righteousness governs by day? Can you help them to imagine a nation where violence is unheard of, one not polarized by political parties, but united by a common salvation, whose cities are a living paradise?

Pastoral Reflections

In an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* on Christmas Eve 2015 titled "Dear White America," George Yancey, a professor of philosophy at Emory University in Atlanta, wrote about the urgency of love as a response to the rising tide of racism in the United States today. It is a beautiful and challenging essay that he describes as a gift, though reminding us that "some gifts can be heavy to bear." This is how his letter to White America ends:

> "If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child's face. Smell your child's hair. Count the fingers on your child's hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black."

The word epiphany is connected to the concept of revelation. Over time we have come to use it to signify an experience of insight, that moment when the lights turn

on and things sensed in the dark are finally perceived in a new way. Reality has not changed, but our experience of it is entirely new.

That is what is happening in this story from the gospel of Matthew in which the rich and powerful prove their wisdom by bringing all they hold precious, gladly giving it away in the presence of the infant Jesus. Epiphany is God's love letter to a violent world, a heavy gift to bear, in which God declares solidarity with all who are oppressed. On the day of Jesus' birth God declared, "I want you to imagine that I am small, and poor, and Jewish." Read in the light of today's political realities we might also hear, "I want you to imagine that I am Palestinian. I am a refugee. I am a target of state-sanctioned violence."

Others will take this story and make it their own. Members of your worshipping assemblies may claim the freedom to draw the circle wider: "Imagine I am a woman. I am a survivor. I am undocumented." The epiphany is that our story is God's story too—most especially when our story has been marginalized or erased by the dominant narratives of power, control, exploitation, and violence. Preaching on this day should not reinforce our fears of the dark, both natural and conditioned. Instead, we are reminded that God has come as an infant among the poor so that we might finally believe that God has come for us, as small and frail and insignificant as we sometimes, or always, feel.

Erik Christensen

Baptism of Our Lord
January 10, 2021

Genesis 1:1–5
Psalm 29
Act 19:1–7
Mark 1:4–11

Reflections on the Gospel Text

Mark is in a hurry. No shepherds, no stable, no magi, not a word about Mary and Joseph. No baby. Mark seems in too much of a hurry to give us the details we would like. Jesus went under the water of the Jordan as the others had. But when he came up out of the water, Jesus looked up and saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. TORN APART. Not "opened" as in Matthew or Luke, but TORN APART. The Greek word is a form of the verb *schitzo.* As in schism. Or schizophrenia. It is not an easy word, not the same as the word "open." I open the door. I close the door. The door still looks the same. But something torn apart is not easily closed again. The ragged edges never go back together like they were.

Then, the words spoken directly to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Even those words had to be torn apart within Jesus. So it was that the same Spirit that descended on Jesus drove him into the wilderness–not led him, but drove him. We will hear Mark's temptation story on the First Sunday in Lent. Mark's account is only two verses long, so the lectionary repeats the baptism story to make it more complete. This wilderness journey was not a return to Eden nor was it on any map of the Empire. This was a place patrolled by Satan, filled with wild beasts.

But that was not all. Throughout those forty days "angels waited on Jesus." They didn't wait until the end of the story as in Matthew. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; <u>and</u> he was with the wild beasts; <u>and</u> the angels waited on him. All of this was happening simultaneously. Jesus didn't walk that lonesome valley by himself. He was with Satan, <u>and</u> the wild beasts, <u>and</u> the angels waited on him.

When I read these verses, I remembered a story shared by a student in a preaching class. Hopefully people in the congregation remember Matthew Shepherd, the young gay man who was beaten, tied to a fence and left to die on a cold Wyoming night. At Matthew's funeral, the Rev. Fred Phelps brought protestors from Kansas bearing signs condemning Matthew to the hell. For weeks their website had included a picture of Matthew surrounded by flames. The protesters weren't allowed into the church and had to stand at a certain distance from the gravesite. But Matthew's friends had anticipated the hateful protest. They came to the cemetery wearing angels' wings. Then they encircled the protestors, blocking their hateful signs from Matthew's family and friends. It was as though they had caught a glimpse of the wilderness story: "<u>and</u> he was with the wild beasts, <u>and</u> angels waited on him."

In Mark's gospel Jesus moves from the Jordan to the wilderness to Galilee without a break. "The time is fulfilled," Jesus said, "and the realm of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." The realm of God has come near. That is, the heavens have been torn apart. Jesus was intent on proclaiming this good news wherever he went…

- tearing apart the social fabric that separated clean from unclean;
- tearing apart the chains that bound people in the demons' power;
- tearing apart the very notion of what it means to be God's beloved Son.

Nothing remains the same after the heavens have been torn apart. For us, this can be both assuring and terrifying. But the torn place is where God comes through, the place that never

closes as neatly as before. The place where Satan tempts us always to give in to safer or more rational answers. The place where wild beasts overwhelm us with violence and despair and angels seem hidden from view.

At the end of his life, Jesus hung on a cross between heaven and earth. And when he breathed his last, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." Torn apart as the heavens had been torn apart. There was no voice from the darkened heavens that day. God was silent. Not even a whisper. But there was a voice–not far off, but close. Not up, but down. A Roman soldier stood at the foot of the cross, keeping order, waiting to pronounce death. When he saw that Jesus had breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" Who gave the Roman centurion that word? He somehow knew the words whispered to Jesus alone at the Jordan. The word came through the torn place in the sky, through the torn curtain. Nothing can be the same when the heavens are torn apart.

Where tragedy has broken us and we cannot put everything back together again, in that torn place, God comes.

Where childhood certainty has given way to questions and doubts, in that torn place, God comes.

Where our country is so divided that we fear nothing can bridge our differences, in that torn place, God comes. And nothing will ever be the same. That is not a threat; that is a promise.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 17, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1–10 [11–20]
Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18
1 Corinthians 6:12–20
John 1: 43–51

Reflections on the Gospel and Martin Luther King Jr.

The holiday commemorating Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth always comes during Epiphany. This year Dr. King's birthday and the presidential inauguration take place in the same week. Will there be any connection between the two? Any connection with today's Epiphany gospel? John's prologue dares to proclaim that the eternal Word "became flesh and lived among us." Several verses after that prologue, John finally reveals the name of this Word-made-flesh. His name is Jesus (1:29). At last, Jesus speaks: "What are you looking for?" he asked John's disciples. They said to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Jesus said to them, "Come and see" (1:38-39a).

"Come and see." The gospel writer plays with this phrase over and over. In today's text Jesus calls Philip to follow him. Philip tells his brother Nathaniel that he has found the one promised by Moses and the prophets–Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathaniel asked dismissively.

Philip said to him, "*Come and see.*"

But seeing is not so simple.

What did I see when I was growing up on a farm near Gowrie, Iowa? There were no Black students in my school. No Black people in our church or in our town. The Black people I saw were elevator operators in Ft. Dodge department stores. At the Iowa State Fair, I saw Black men carrying bushel baskets and rakes. They scooped up manure after the cows in the show ring. We didn't talk about race. But we knew the N word. I won't write or say it but you know the word I mean. We said that word in a counting rhyme:

Eeny, meeny, miny mo, catch a n________ by the toe,

If he hollers, let him go. Eeny, meeny, miny, mo.

What did we think we were saying? We never talked about race in our family or in school, but I was being shaped as a White racist. As far as I know, my Swedish ancestors never owned slaves, never raised cotton, never witnessed a lynching, never burned a cross on anyone's yard. But I grew up in a country shaped by racism from its slave-owning founding fathers down the centuries to the murder of George Floyd in my current hometown.

Dr. King has been gone for fifty-two years. His work remains undone. Our country is still shaped by racism and White privilege. The minute someone says that, we often argue, "I didn't grow up privileged and I'm not privileged now!" A therapist who spoke at our church uses the term "white conditioning." This may be a helpful term, naming reality without blaming or judging. I have been conditioned by the racist society I grew up in. It is an accident of birth, but also a structure that has been built and continues to be maintained. It has been structured through laws and real estate practices, maintained through bank loans and "red lining" which kept people of color out of certain neighborhoods in Minneapolis and many other cities. White conditioning teaches little farm children racist rhymes and causes grown-ups to get defensive when we hear "Black Lives Matter." Racism believes that some people's flesh is better than others.

Dr. King believed that the Word became *flesh*–and that made all the difference. If the Word became *flesh*, then flesh isn't bad. Black flesh is as good and godly as White flesh. Dr. King wanted us to <u>see</u> each other fully *in the flesh* and <u>love</u> each other even when we couldn't like each other. Dr. King's message came not only from his experience as a Black man, but from his grounding in the word of God. The gospel of Jesus shaped him even as the color of his skin shaped him.

When white people demeaned him–whether with fire hoses or FBI files–he heard the voice of Jesus saying, "Martin, I see you. I know who you are." When he marched in Chicago against segregationist real estate offices, Dr. King preached these words:

> Yes, I'm tired of going to jail; I'm willing to stop marching. I don't march because I like it; I march because I must. And because I'm a man. And because I'm a child of God.

For Christians, speaking out against racism is not an option: it is required. Standing up for racial justice is not politically correct: it is a call from God. As a White person, I will spend my lifetime struggling to be a recovering racist. As a Christian, I pray to have even a small measure of Dr. King's courage and hope. He knew full well the foolishness of the Gospel.

"Come and see," Jesus said to Philip, Nathaniel, and other followers. What they saw changed their lives–they discovered that something good did come out of Nazareth! But other people were afraid of change, afraid of Samaritans, disgusted by the untouchables who gathered around Jesus, and so angry that they had to crucify the Word-made-flesh.

Many of us are still afraid of change, afraid of immigrants, disgusted by those we consider "untouchables" because of sexuality, gender, or race. What can calm our fear of change and our fear of immigrants? What can overcome our feelings of disgust at those who are different?

"Come and see," said Jesus.

"Come and see," said Martin.

"Come and see."

Barbara K. Lundblad

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 24, 2021

Jonah 3:1–5, 10
Psalm 62:5–12
1 Corinthians 7:29–31
Mark 1:14–20

Engaging the Texts

The story of Jonah is such a familiar and engaging story that it's easy to get caught up in the drama and lose track of the thread that runs through all the texts appointed for today. That common thread is good news–the good news that we have a God who is with us (Mark 1:15), who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing (Jonah 4: 2b).

The story of Jonah is a story about God's amazing grace and mercy. God was not only gracious and merciful to the people of Nineveh—evil foreigners to Jonah's mindset—God was also gracious and merciful to the captain and crew of the ship where Jonah spent a brief period of time. And God was especially gracious and merciful to Jonah, who deserved condemnation for not trusting God, for being disobedient to God's call, and being resentful toward God.

Psalm 62 is a powerful expression of the psalmist's trust in God's grace and mercy, the grace and mercy we read about in Jonah. The psalmist trusts God above all: "God alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken" (Ps 62:6).

Mark's gospel is the earliest of the gospels included in the New Testament. Today's text includes the very first words we hear from Jesus, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) The "good news" Jesus proclaims and calls others to believe is that "…the kingdom of God has come near." This is "good news" because the kingdom of God is defined by God's presence, grace, and mercy. The Greek word *pisteuo*, which is translated "believe" would be better translated as "trust." While belief is primarily a matter of the head, trust is a matter of the head <u>and</u> heart. Trust involves not only what we think, but how we think, feel, and act toward ourselves and others: trust <u>changes</u> how we think, feel, and act. Jesus commands us to trust the good news that God's kingdom is near. Jesus calls us to repent, to turn from our fear, anxiety, and self-concern; trust that God's kingdom is near, that God is present, and is showering us with grace and mercy.

Paul reminds us that when we let go of our anxiety and trust that the kingdom of God is near, God abundantly provides for all our needs. "The present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31b) and the kingdom of God breaks forth, a kingdom filled with the greatest of God's gifts: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13).

All these texts call us to see the kingdom of God in our midst, to trust God's graciousness and mercy, and to live lives filled with faith, hope, and love.

Pastoral Reflections

The appointed texts remind us of God's abundant grace and mercy for all God's people.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which "evil foreigners" are given a chance to repent and change their ways, where terrified sailors have their fears calmed, and where a reluctant prophet experiences God's presence and mercy even when he's anxious and resentful toward God.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which a psalmist experiences God's grace and mercy and responds with trust and hope.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which the hungry are fed, thirsty are sated, strangers are welcomed, naked are clothed, sick are cared for, and prisoners are visited (Matt 25:35-36). The kingdom of God is a kingdom in which all God's people are blessed with what they need for joyful, abundant lives (John 10:10).

The best part of this good news is that the kingdom of God is not far off in time or space. That's the good news Jesus announces in his first words in Mark's gospel: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

This is the message at the very heart of scripture: God is with us and will never let us go. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing (Jonah 4:2b).

My basic message as a preacher is simple: God is with us; always has been and always will be. God blesses all of us with all we need for joyful, abundant lives. Trust God and live with faith, hope, and love.

Our response to this good news is simple: Turn from your fear, anxiety, and self-concern, and trust that the kingdom of God is near. That's what it means to "repent, and believe in the good news."

When we trust that the kingdom of God is near, our minds and hearts are changed. The world is also changed as we strive to build trusting, caring relationships with all God's people.

We live in a time filled with fear and anxiety. We are confronted with a multitude of issues that often seem unsolvable. We are in conflict with each other and within ourselves. Now as much as ever, we need to hear the good news that God is with us and God blesses us with all we need for abundant, joy-filled lives. We also need to clearly hear Jesus' call to turn from our fear, anxiety, and self-concern, and turn instead to trust in God, building relationships with each other based on trust and care.

Jim Davis

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15–20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1–13
Mark 1:21–28

Engaging the Texts

Throughout the biblical story, God calls prophets to remind God's people of God's faithfulness to them and calls them to faithfully follow where God leads. While the words of the prophets are important, the ways in which they embody those words by their faithfulness to God and their compassion for God's people are also important expressions of what God is calling God's people to be and do.

Moses is preparing God's people for life without him and announces, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet" (Deut 18:15). Throughout the Old Testament, God raised prophets from among God's people, called them to speak God's word, and expected God's people to faithfully follow where God's prophets led.

Psalm 111 is a psalm of praise for God's faithfulness. It is a celebration of the greatness of God's work, especially God's grace, compassion, faithfulness, and justice. Psalm 111 recalls the exodus of God's people from Egypt and God's faithfulness to them in their wilderness journey. This psalm is an excellent example of the responsibility of prophets to recall the many ways God is present with God's people, providing for their daily needs and creating a future filled with hope.

The passage from 1 Corinthians 8 is an excellent example of the responsibility of prophets to hold God's people accountable to faithfulness, love, and care for each other. Paul encourages the Christians at Corinth to be more concerned about the impact their actions have on other members of the church than with whether something is right or wrong. Paul also reminds the believers in Corinth to take care that their "liberty," or freedom in Christ, does not become a "stumbling block" to others.

Jesus' public ministry begins when he enters the synagogue at Capernaum and teaches. Teaching and healing will become the most important aspects of Jesus' ministry. While Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus taught, he does tell us that those who heard him teach were "amazed" at how he taught, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes" (Mark 1:22). The word Mark uses that is translated as "amazed" is *ekplesso*, which means to strike or pound; it's a strong word. It could be translated, "They were blown away by Jesus' teaching."

Jesus is also referred to as one who taught with authority. Authority can be translated as power and refers not only to personal power, but can also refer to divine power. People recognized that the power with which Jesus taught and healed was not only his, but came from a power greater than him. It was Jesus' message of God's love for all God's people, and the way he embodied that message by his compassion for others, that amazed those who met and heard him. The power of God's love that was expressed though his message, and also his compassion for all God's people, amazed those who witnessed it, even his enemies.

Pastoral Reflections

When I read the gospel, especially the responses to Jesus' teaching: "…he taught them as one having authority…" (Mark 1:22), I was reminded of how insecure I felt about my teaching and preaching as a young pastor. While I possessed the authority of my office as pastor and a fine theological education, I didn't feel powerful at all. I spent a lot of time reading theology and commentaries as I tried to develop a personal sense of power and authority; however, none of that compensated for my insecurity.

One of the most affirming passages in scripture for me became 1 Corinthians 2:3 where Paul writes, "I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." I could easily relate to Paul's fear and trembling. Paul had decided to know only "…Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

Jesus' message was simple, "God is with you. Turn from your self-concern. Trust God. Seek God's will. Love others, even your enemies." Jesus embodied that simple message in all he said and did. It was the message for which he would be crucified. Jesus taught and lived this message with power and authority.

Paul devoted himself to the same message, "God is with you. Turn from your self-concern. Trust God. Seek God's will. Love others, even your enemies." It was a message he also taught and lived with power and authority. It was a message for which he would also be executed.

We, as preachers, are called to be part of a long line of prophets who proclaim a simple message, "God is with you. Turn from your self-concern. Trust God. Seek God's will. Love others, even your enemies." Is it that simple? That message is difficult to preach in our culture, a culture that exalts indulging our self-concern. Trusting that God is with us and dying to our self-concern is always difficult; yet that's what we're called to do and proclaim. We belong to that long line of prophets who have been called to do so.

I've come to know Jesus Christ and him crucified and, as long as I stay focused on that simple message, I'm no longer insecure, but preach and teach with the power and authority we're granted as those called by God to speak God's word to God's people. May you be blessed to do the same.

Jim Davis

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 7, 2021

Isaiah 40:21–31
Psalm 147:1–11, 20c
1 Corinthians 9:16–23
Mark 1:29–39

Engaging the Texts

"Have you not known? Have you not heard?" If we missed the question in Isaiah 40:21, we hear it again in verse 28. Those two repeated questions could surely be the focus for today's sermon. These verses come at the end of Isaiah 40, the chapter that begins with words we usually hear in Advent, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

In 1 Corinthians Paul writes, "…and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!" Some might chastise Paul for assimilation in these verses because he claims to become "all things to all people" so that he might save some. Paul's urgency echoes the questions in Isaiah: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" My dear Corinthians, how I long for you to hear and know the good news of Jesus Christ!

Jesus, too, is eager for everyone to hear and know God's good news. Today's gospel text is a summary of Jesus' mission: healing, casting out demons, praying in the early morning, going through all the nearby towns to proclaim the message he came to bring. "Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

But let's not move too quickly past the healing at the beginning of this section. Simon's mother-in-law was sick–which gives evidence that Simon, later called Peter, was married! So if Peter is revered as the first pope, well, arguments for celibacy seem difficult to maintain.

"Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up (*egeiren*)." New Testament scholar Brigitte Kahl often tells her students to be on the lookout for *egeiro*– to raise up. That same word comes at the end of Mark's gospel when a young man startles the women who came to anoint Jesus' dead body. "Do not be alarmed," he said, "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised (*egeiro).*" Jesus was constantly raising people up–starting with Simon's mother-in-law. Theologian Dorothee Soelle insisted on linking resurrection and liberation. "We link resurrection with liberation because our deepest need is not personal immortality but a life before death for everyone." (*Choosing*

Life, 88) Simon's mother-in-law was the first person to be raised up to new life in the Gospel of Mark.

But was it only to wait on everybody in the house? "Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them (*diekonei autois*)." That word *diekonei* means far more than putting on your apron and heading for the kitchen! That verb can mean many things–waiting on tables, serving others, or giving one's life. New Testament scholar Joan Mitchell says, "A feminist reading of the word *diekonei*…transforms the narrative from a miracle story to the call of Jesus' first woman disciple." (*Beyond Fear and Silence,* 62) The story of Simon's unnamed mother-in-law places women among Jesus' disciples. She was raised up to follow Jesus in a life of servanthood, the same calling extended to Simon and Andrew, James and John.

Pastoral Reflections

What have you been raised up to do? Where have you seen resurrection before death in your own life or the lives of others? Years ago, I went to Dallas to speak at a pastors' conference. In my lecture I included one small section about racism. It was not very radical or very courageous. That evening a pastor asked if we could talk for a while. His name was Walt, a small, wiry man, about my age, I think. We sat down in two overstuffed chairs in the hotel lobby. He began: "When I graduated from Luther Seminary, I asked the church, 'Please don't send me to a conflicted place; I hate conflict.'" The year was 1960 and he was sent to Meridian, Mississippi. "At least it will be warmer than Minnesota," he said to his wife. The Klan was 250 strong in that small city. The day he arrived at the church, the leading elder (who was also the leading contributor) told the new pastor: "This is not a black church and it will never be a black church"–though he didn't say "black" but a different word. "I was naïve," Walt told me, "and when I was invited to a meeting at the Black Baptist church, I went. Later that night, a rock came through our living room window with a note that said, 'We know where you were.'" He joined that Baptist minister and others to take a stand against the Klan. That was bad enough, but when he invited members of the African Methodist Episcopal church to meet at the Lutheran church, the leading elder left and never came back. "Not for seven years." That's what Walt said. "Not for seven years, until the gospel had worked on his heart." I looked at him as we sat talking late into the night–this pastor who still hates conflict. He looked so small sitting in that over-stuffed chair, but he was like that young man who appeared at the tomb in Mark's gospel. He was telling me a story of resurrection. "Nothing could have changed the people of that church except the gospel of Jesus Christ." That's what he told me just around midnight. The gospel of Jesus exorcised the demons of hatred and silenced at least some of the fear.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Transfiguration of Our Lord February 14, 2021

2 Kings 2:1–12
Psalm 50:1–6
2 Corinthians 4:3–6
Mark 9:2–9

Reflections on Transfiguration

When Peter, James, and John went up the mountain with Jesus that day, it's possible it happened this way as Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all took up their musical instruments and began to play….

> Moses kept the beat on the big bass drum
> Prrrum, thrrrum, thrumming God's Law in measured time.
> While Elijah, with prophet's pitch all plumb
> Played a Concert A, his oboe assigned
> The true-blue tone of Eden's first pure sound.
> And Jesus, breathing in that harmony
> Reached inside himself for notes no sax had ever found,
> Mixing in the heat of such alchemy
> A music raw as grief and deep as night
> (A point of light so rich in love it turned to flame).
> He, letting loose into the death-bound dark
> a spark ablaze with improvisation
> opening the way for transfiguration.

When it comes to the story of the Transfiguration, it's helpful to know that Mark tells the story the way he does and places it in his Gospel where he does, not to dazzle his readers with unbelievable events, but to make clear who Jesus is as he prepares to begin his journey to Jerusalem where he will come up against the powers that be—powers intent on maintaining the "death-bound dark" of injustice, violence, hatred, and fear. (Already Jesus had predicted his suffering and death, much to the dismay of his disciples).

And what Mark would have his readers know about Jesus in the story of the Transfiguration is this… He would have them know that as Jesus played in the "Mountain-top trio" with Moses on drums and Elijah on oboe, he took into his heart the gifts they had received eons before from God, the music that rang with the measured beauty of the Law and the prophetic ache for justice…

Then, in the fire of Love's alchemy, he, Jesus, reached inside himself for notes no sax (or cello or horn or voice) had ever found… Notes not bound by the strictures and structures of the world, but brought/played/wailed/willed to a point of light so rich in Love it turned to flame… Notes

not bound by the limited two-word choice of **resignation** or **retaliation** (the choice most often offered by the world in every death-bound dark), but notes ablaze with the light of **improvisation**, opening the way for **transfiguration**. A music that revealed to Peter, James, and John on the mountain that day the very essence and presence of God, making it impossible for them to see any "between" between Jesus and the music that focused within him to a point so rich in love it turned to flame…

And then, what Mark would have his readers know is that when Jesus went down the mountain that day with his face set toward Jerusalem, he carried within himself this alternative to the "resignation/retaliation" way of the world, offering instead the "third way of Jesus," a way ablaze with the possibility of improvisation in the key of love, in the key of justice, in the key of grace… (A way ablaze on the day of Jesus' baptism as well, as Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain only confirmed the music already living and moving and burning and singing within him… the music Jesus ***was*** from the beginning… the music we sometimes call "God").

Look at the way Jesus responded to Satan in the wilderness and you will hear and see it… Look at the way he responded to the disciples' anxious questions about who was greatest, and to the Pharisees' antagonistic questions meant to trap him… Look at the way Jesus responded to sinners, lepers, and those who plotted against him… Look at the way Jesus responded to Peter, who denied him, and to Judas, who betrayed him… Look at the way he responded to those who crucified him, and you will see it and hear it… He, Jesus, letting loose into all those "death-bound darks"/ a spark ablaze with improvisation/ opening the way for transfiguration….

What Mark would have his readers know in the story of the Transfiguration is that to follow Jesus is to bring into every "death-bound dark" the spark ablaze with improvisation… Rejecting any notion that the only choice is between resignation and retaliation… And recognizing instead the possibility of improvisation in the key of love, in the key of justice, in the key of grace… The "third way of Jesus"… The only way of being in the world that has the power to transfigure and transform the death-bound dark…

A way of being in the world that improvises on the deadly and deadening "musac" of the world until it becomes **music** raw as grief and deep as night… A way of being in the world that turns dividing walls on their sides, making of those walls "tables of welcome" instead… A way of being in the world that meets violence with nonviolence, political power with poetic power, fear with forbearance, vulnerability with–vulnerability, hatred with accompanying, suffering love… **Not resignation. Not retaliation. But improvisation in the key of love and justice and grace.**

The same spirit of improvisation with which Jesus enters the death-bound dark of each of our lives, reaching for notes no sax (or cello or horn or voice) has ever found… He, letting loose in the death-bound dark/ a spark ablaze with improvisation,/ opening the way for our transfiguration, and inviting us, too, to shine.

Elaine Hewes

Ash Wednesday February 17, 2021

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

Engaging and Reflecting on the Texts

Annually, I'm surprised by how deeply familiar are the phrases from the Ash Wednesday texts, thanks in no small part to how central the practice of worship has become in my life. And these texts are embedded in the language of the liturgy. We say them and sing them daily and weekly in worship often without knowing about their ancient scriptural origin. Through repetition, they find a way into our hearts and become an integral part of the language of faith we learn for the grace we experience.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God…," has long stirred memories of Freylinghausen's melody from Setting One in the old red *Service Book and Hymnal*, from which we sang this Offertory every Sunday growing up.

"Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful…," evokes yet another liturgical refrain. This one from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, which we sing during Lent in place of the seasonally omitted "A——," normally introducing the Gospel but suppressed during the forty days prior to the Pascal feast.

"O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise." Each day with the dawn in morning prayer I utter these words. Especially during pandemic shelter-in-place, when our consistent group gathers on Zoom, these ancient words repeated every morning have been sweet succor and balm in anxious times.

"Beware of practicing your piety,…" These are not liturgical words. But who can easily forget this admonition from Matthew's finger-wagging Jesus—especially for those of us suspicious of anything we misunderstand to be "works righteousness." Mid-twentieth century Lutherans have often taken these words literally and have heard Jesus speaking against *spiritual practice* and we have stifled the impulse

toward regular, internal, and contemplative disciplines.

But Jesus' warning is not against adopting spiritual disciplines. In fact, with his mention of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, he clearly assumes a robust pattern of activities as integral to the practice of faith. His warning here is against posers, not practitioners. "Beware of practicing your piety *before others in order to be seen by them*." Instead, he advises, practice "in secret," (better translated "internally").

Franciscan father Richard Rohr commends the development of internal, contemplative practice as vital and necessary. We need a language of faith sturdy enough to narrate our experience of grace, especially in the most desperate of times.

> Whatever [spiritual] practice it is, it must become "our daily bread." That is the consensus of spiritual masters through the ages. The general words for these many forms of practice ("rewiring") are "meditation," "contemplation," any "prayer of quiet," "centering prayer," "chosen solitude," but it is always some form of inner silence, symbolized by the Jewish Sabbath rest. Every world religion—at the mature levels—discovers some forms of practice to free us from our addictive mind, which we take as normal. No fast-food religion, or upward-bound Christianity, ever goes there and thus provides little real nutrition to sustain people through the hard times, infatuations, trials, idolatries, darkness, and obsessions that always eventually show themselves.[1]

Growing up in a Lutheran family in Southern California, I didn't think of weekly worship as contemplative practice. As a child I learned to pray by repeating the Lord's Prayer each night with my mother sitting at the edge of my bed. At the end, I would add the coda, "God bless Mom and Dad, Jeff, Diana, and Scott" and a long list of the names of our friends and neighbors, as many as I could remember each night. Over time, my mother coached us away from this long list of individual names toward using the more general phrase "… and all those we know." I continued to pray in this way at night with my mom up until I left home for college.

A couple of years ago, shortly after my mother-in-law died in her small village in Mexico, my husband's sister gave me her Rosary. As with most Roman Catholics, Juana had a more or less regular pattern of saying the Rosary. It was an ordinary part of her practice of faith in the village where she moved after she married, raised a family, kept the farm, and attended Mass alongside her neighbors, mostly family, at the small local church across the dirt road from her house.

Juana's Rosary has a medal of Mary, a crucifix, and fifty-nine silver beads for repetitional prayer, and it has become a regular part of a more intentional, regular, contemplative practice. During pandemic, this contemplation along with the regular patterns of virtual corporate liturgy have sustained me, amid the cascading chaos that comes each day in these uncertain times.

What the ELW describes only as the "discipline of Lent,"—"self-examination, repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love," are really the "daily bread" of a well-developed and regular internal spiritual practice. Together with the words of the liturgy they have the capacity to stimulate a language of faith strong enough to articulate the grace we experience in even the most difficult and trying of circumstances. They become food for the journey and nourish our work in the world.

Jeff Johnson

First Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2021

Genesis 9:8–17
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Peter 3:18–22
Mark 1:9–15

Engaging and Reflecting on the Texts

The speed of Mark's narrative portends the difficult situation in which Jesus begins to proclaim good news. We are only nine verses into his story and Jesus shows up on the banks of the Jordan, already fully grown, to be baptized by John. His work in the world is urgent enough that Mark skips over all of Jesus' early life and focuses on the central part where he makes trouble for the powerful, the privileged, and the prosperous.

There is no pondering time as in Luke. There is no time for genealogies or aria-inspiring soliloquies. No meanderings about traveling parents or a small child born in a feeding trough. No magicians from the East, late night slaughters, or stories of a young family fleeing for the southern border, refugees seeking sanctuary sojourn in a foreign land. Mark's focus is on the transformation of the world that will come from this one who goes under the water with John.

John gets our attention with water and repentance. A heavenly voice and a feathered courier affirm divine sanction. A wilderness accuser, *Satanas,* scrutinizes competency and fitness. By verse14 Jesus is ready to proclaim "good news" in Galilee. On the ground. In the world.

1. Richard Rohr. *The Universal Christ* (The Crown Publishing Group). Kindle Edition, 209.

Not good news in a vacuum. But good news in the chaos of ancient Palestine. Good news in the crisis of every age.

Simultaneous to his taking to the streets in Galilee is the ominous mention of John's arrest. Noticing this juxtaposition is startling and it changes what we expect from the good news of Jesus.

Jesus' proclamation is not pious theological abstraction. Rather, he speaks and acts in the context of imperial domination and ubiquitous violence. His proclamation of good news is the resistance of love. It is a warning to all those hierarchically privileged with power, possibility, and prestige. It is healing balm and reassuring solidarity for everyone else living through brutal occupation, subjected to systemic injustice, and excluded from structures of support, affirmation, and care.

To be clear, Mark's good news is not an ancient form of *prosperity gospel,* centering on the interests and needs of the wealthy and the well positioned—the pretty, the prosperous, and the powerful. His focus is on the cast aside, the cast out, and the crushed. And as Jesus begins his proclamation of "good news," we can't get over John's arrest (and beheading), and its foreshadowing of the cross. Mark wants us to hold Jesus' baptism and his death together and not run from the consequences of faith active in love in a violent world. More than anything else, Mark wants us to imitate Jesus' proclamation of good news in times of chaos and crisis, and to "take up the cross, and follow."

At University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley, we have the words of our former pastor, the Rev. Gustav H. Schultz, inscribed on the window above the baptismal font. "Baptism," he said, "is intended to acquaint us with a 'brush with death' so that following baptism we know that we can live out the risk of being faithful."

The rending (*schizo)* open of the heavens at his baptism foreshadows the rending (*schizo*) of the temple curtain as Jesus takes his final breath. This rending reminds us of the ancient plea and promise recorded by Isaiah the prophet, that God would intervene to interrupt injustice and systemic oppression. "O that you would *rend* the heavens and come down…." (Isaiah 64:1) "to create new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17).

As the heavens rend open, we hear a voice, and we see a divine herald. "Dove" is the translation in English. Doves are always depicted in the valuable and precious stained-glass windows we create inside of churches and they show up often in religious texts. But "pigeon" is an equally accurate rendering for the same type of bird, and perhaps it is a more appropriate divine herald, given the intended audience of Jesus' good news in Mark.

While doves show up inside of churches and often in pious translations of religious texts, pigeons survive outside. They take shelter under the eaves of old buildings and forage on the front steps with widows and the poor. Like the ominous news of the arrest of John, the way we imagine this divine herald causes us to think differently about the "good news" proclaimed by Jesus, his audience, and the impact of his work on the world.

This divine herald descends as a voice names Jesus "beloved" (*agapetos)*, which has become a description not only of Jesus, but of the whole community of those who follow him and who take up the cross to resist with love. "Beloved" is the description Paul uses in the book of Romans to refer to "those called to be saints…*agapetos* of God." The writer of Ephesians identifies disciples as *children agapetos,* "imitators of God. The first letter of Peter labels *agapetos* as "strangers and sojourners."

"O that you would *rend open* the heavens and come down…to create new heavens and a new earth." Isaiah's words take shape in the person of Jesus and in his work in Galilee as well as in a "take up your cross" community of love that forms in resistance to the ways of imperial violence and domination. In Mark's gospel, the risk of faithfulness is as clear as God's solidarity as each of us is invited to be named *agapetos*—*beloved* saints, imitators, strangers, and sojourners in this new, in-breaking realm.

Jeff Johnson

Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2021

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16
Psalm 22:23–31
Romans 4:13–25
Mark 8:31–38

Engaging the Texts

In the verse after our Genesis pericope, we get Abraham's candid reaction to God's promise that Sarah will yet give birth to a son: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed." His laughter was likely not the playful kind. I imagine this was his body's way of expressing weary skepticism. He is now 99 years old. It has already been twenty-four years since God first spoke to him, and this promise has not come true. Abraham's faith, extolled in the Romans text, is a faith of endurance and trust amid reasonable doubt. His is a faith of persisting with the seeming absurdity of this promising God.

In our gospel text, Jesus shares openly about his suffering, death at the hands of authorities, and resurrection. For Peter–who had just confessed Jesus as Messiah–it is all too much.

Cognitive dissonance, anticipatory grief, recognition of trauma–these send Peter into "fight" mode. Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him in an attempt to stifle his troubling proclamation. Instead, his words have the opposite effect. Jesus amplifies his message, moving beyond a proclamation about himself into an invitation to discipleship. Jesus' words take us aside, too. They take us aside from the "human things" of pursuing worldly success, self-preservation, and comfort above all, and plunge us into the depths of the "divine things" of self-giving love, prophetic witness, and the promise of abundant life. Like Moses, who "turns aside" when confronted by the strangeness of the burning bush and encounters a God of liberation and new life, so we are called by Jesus to turn aside from our usual self-protecting patterns to this astonishing invitation to lose ourselves for the sake of the gospel (Exod 3:3).[2] Following Jesus will involve confrontation with the powers that rebel against God, but suffering and death at the hands of such powers are not the end. As we follow in Jesus' way, we find that the saving divine life is indeed flowing through us.

These verses from Psalm 22 may surprise those who know Psalm 22 mainly by its first line–"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In this portion of the psalm, lament has turned to praise over God's deliverance and provision for the poor. The psalmist imagines a day where God's love reigns now and in the witness of future generations. Perhaps Jesus had not only the first verse, but this whole psalm on his lips or in his heart as he suffered on the cross. This whole psalm can be seen to chart the journey of suffering, death, and resurrection life.

Pastoral Reflections

In our Genesis story, we are reminded with Abraham that God's promises and blessing take time–generations of time–to play out. Isaac does not become a multitude overnight. Many of us operate day-to-day with a much smaller, immediate, and individualistic sense of how God's blessings and promises flow through our lives. How might the preacher invite people to step into a wider sense of time, and a broader sense of blessing? As we confront our climate crisis faithfully, how might we vividly imagine our callings playing out generations beyond our lifetimes? One popular song of climate activists comes to mind with words to expand our vision to include future generations: "The people gonna rise like the water, gonna face this crisis now. I hear the voice of my great granddaughter, saying keep it in the ground."

Lent is a time when we intentionally try to "set our minds" on divine things. Through the disciplines of Lent, we seek a reorientation to the way of Jesus Christ and renewal for our lives of discipleship. Like Peter, we often get stuck in a "human" mindset, rejecting this message about the cross and traveling the easy, predictable, reasonable path through life. The preacher can be honest and vulnerable in naming this human tendency and reveal how empty and small this kind of living ultimately is.

Many stories come to mind of faithful witnesses who have answered Jesus' call to discipleship with their lives. I think of André and Magda Trocmé and the people of Le Chambon who harbored thousands of Jewish refugees in their small village in France during World War II. André Trocmé, who was pastor of the local Protestant church and a lead organizer of this effort, called faith in Jesus Christ "*la grande aventure*"–the greatest of adventures.[3] With this spirit of adventure–of radical openness and receptivity to the call of Christ in the neighbor in need come what may–Trocmé and the villagers risked their lives to save others. They chose the way of hospitality, love, and mercy even when threatened by authorities, trusting in the God of life.

Where have you glimpsed the grace and power of this call to discipleship alive in your community of Jesus followers? Perhaps in health care workers caring for others with love and compassion in the early days of the pandemic when PPE was scarce and so much was unknown. Perhaps in a member who has found new purpose in service or justice work that confronts oppressive systems. Perhaps in a youth attending a "Black Lives Matter" protest for the first time. Perhaps… you can fill in the rest with stories from your community.

Martha Schwehn Bardwell

Third Sunday in Lent
March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1–17
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 1:18–25
John 2:13–22

Engaging the Texts

The Decalogue begins not with a "command," but with God declaring who God is. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." What follows is a teaching on how an emancipated people are to live together if this liberating God is at the cen-

2. Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Lanham, Maryland: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 45-47.

3. Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The story of the village of Le Chambon and how goodness happened there* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 69.

ter of their lives. Some who were urged to memorize the Ten Commandments in Sunday school days have internalized a simplified version of this passage. Perhaps in the spirit of the God of this text, the preacher can liberate our imaginations and even help us to claim with the psalmist that these teachings are an astonishing gift. In our non-stop capitalist economy, where some don't have the luxury–the dignity!–of a day off, how might we receive this Sabbath command as a welcome challenge to the status quo, an invitation to truly rest and trust in God, and a nudge to work toward an economy where all people and creatures truly get to share in holy rest?

In his first letter to the community in Corinth, Paul claims emphatically that the proclamation about the crucified and risen Christ—and nothing else—is to center the lives of those freed by the good news. The community that Paul addresses here was struggling with divisions and in-fighting. The foolishness and wisdom of Christ crucified and raised beckons us to seek unity and healing in our communities with humility and persevering love.

The synoptic gospels place the story of Jesus' cleansing of the temple at the end of Jesus' ministry. But John's gospel places it right at the beginning. It is a stark juxtaposition to go from the wedding at Cana—a scene of surprising abundance and celebration—to Jesus' prophetic overturning of the tables. Although, perhaps we glimpse in this juxtaposition the divine Yes and No reflected in much of Scripture. One instance that comes to mind is Isaiah 25, where we get a vision of the eschatological feast of rich wines alongside God's commitment to 'destroy…the shroud that is cast over all peoples' (Isa 25:7). Jesus came to confront the powers that keep people separate from the living God. This confrontation leads to the cross. But the divine No to these powers ultimately ends with the divine Yes of resurrection life.

This passage also ends with Jesus' claim about the locus of God's presence. It is not in the temple, but in Jesus' own body and life where the divine is present on earth. Worship of God is not about a physical location or particular sacred space. We are to worship "in spirit and truth" in the name and presence of Jesus, the crucified and risen one, wherever we gather (John 4:21-25).

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus came to dismantle idolatries and to clear away everything that would separate us from God. What would Jesus topple over today in our sanctuaries, in our communities, in our hearts? What is Jesus even now turning over and clearing away? How might we welcome Jesus' prophetic confrontation and disruption in our lives and participate in it ourselves?

Every baptismal liturgy includes a yes and a no. The "yes" to the Triune God of life is expressed as we say the creed together, and the "no" is expressed in the threefold renunciations. Some congregations may have people who are preparing for baptism in this season. Exploring how we embody the prophetic "no" to sin and the forces that defy God in real, contextual ways could be a direction to go in a sermon on this gospel text and the first commandment.

Our congregation has been on a journey of dismantling white supremacy in our midst. Over the last couple years, we have recognized the need to disrupt any symbolic associations of "whiteness" with theological concepts of goodness, glory, and purity. Last year, we commissioned new Easter paraments that no longer present "white" as the color of the season. Now, white, brown, black, and shades in between mix with gold to symbolize how the glory of the resurrection is reflected in the diversity of peoples who are all called to share new life in Christ. This is one small way we are participating in Jesus' disruptive cleansing of our worship space. Surely there is much more work to be done. Jesus' persistent disruptions continue! Perhaps you have examples like this in your own context to lift up, with humility.

I can also imagine a pastoral sermon that would focus on the epistle reading and on Jesus' final words in the gospel text. I am writing in November, and I assume that many congregations will still be worshipping online during Lent due to the pandemic. Perhaps some congregations will experience some infighting and division as some members return to in-person worship while others continue to worship online. Political divisiveness persists. Reminding people that the wisdom of Christ's self-giving love is at the center of our life together is a healing message in the midst of divisions. Lifting up the truth that God is located not in a building but in Christ who we encounter in word and meal and in the love we share with one another would be a welcome proclamation of good news.

Martha Schwehn Bardwell

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4–9
Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22
Ephesians 2:1–10
John 3:14–21

Snake-Bitten

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
because of their iniquities endured affliction...
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress....

—Psalm 107:17, 19

Today we hear John 3:16, what Luther called "the Gospel in miniature," set in its larger following context (unlike Lent 2, Year A, when the preceding context including the night-time dialogue with Nicodemus is recounted). But in today's first reading we hear the originating story from the time of wilderness wanderings and the bronze serpent affixed to a stick upon which the Israelites who had been bitten could look and be healed. It is a story that John sees as prefiguring Jesus being "lifted up" on the cross as the source of the world's salvation.

The story is a curious one, introduced by yet another occasion of the Israelites grumbling about the primitive conditions of their wilderness sojourn—especially the rather "miserable food." So, they asked what I learned in logic class to call a "complex question" akin to the proverbial "When did you stop kicking your dog?" "Why," they asked Moses, "have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in this wilderness?" Yahweh's no-nonsense answer is to send snakes—poisonous serpents—to afflict the complaining people, which I suppose at least got their minds off the poor food. But many who were bitten died, which sent the people scurrying to Moses repentantly pleading, "We have sinned against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take the serpents from us." So, Moses prayed for the people, to which Yahweh responded with a peculiar command, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." Moses did as he was told, and indeed, it was so. It was a kind of divine reversal of the golden calf episode: a graven image becomes the source of healing rather than the object of idolatry—perhaps a kind of divine joke?

The episode smacks of what anthropologists might call "sympathetic magic." But for John it provides a "prefiguring" of how the cross of Christ (think "crucifix" here with the crucified Jesus still affixed) provides the miraculous antidote (salvation equals healing in Greek) to humankind's mortal disease called sin which has afflicted us since that first biblical snake story. Just as God's healing/salvation is made available only through trusting God's Word that the repellant snake on the stick is to be the instrument of healing (itself, of course, the emblem of the very thing that had bitten them), so also the crucified one (equally abhorrent as a reminder of both our own human cruelty and our own mortality) becomes by God's promise the instrument of salvation/healing through faith.

Of all possible stories in the sacred scriptures of his people, this singular tale, John is telling us, is what came to Jesus' mind during his rambling conversation with Nicodemus the Pharisee, inspiring this most well-known and best-loved articulation of the good news of God's love for the world. It is a love so profound, so long-suffering, so mysterious, that Jesus could somehow imagine himself in the place of the snake on a stick, lifted high that all might look on him in their desperation and instead of perishing from the poison of their sin, be healed, be inoculated for eternal life with the anti-toxin (the vaccine, we might say in this time of pandemic) of God's forgiving grace. The peculiar theological genius that lies embedded in this story of cosines, is that God is sufficiently canny and creative as to turn the very cause of his people's dying into the means of their healing/salvation.

Our second reading from the deutero-Pauline writer's letter to the influential church at Ephesus probes more deeply into the workings of God's intention to save in language strikingly parallel to John 3:16. "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (vv 4–5). In case we didn't get it, the author adds for emphasis, "by grace you have been saved" and then a verse later goes on to reiterate, in words especially dear to Lutheran ears, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (v8). Even, in Johannine terms, our lifting our eyes of faith to the cross, even our clinging to the promises of God's Word in trust, in Pauline terms, is not our own doing but is the "gift of God—not the result of works so that no one may boast" (v 9).

The covenant of grace culminates in the affirmation "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God created beforehand to be our way of life" (v 10). Good works, whether repentance, faith, or love of neighbor are here to be understood not as our human contribution to or act of cooperation with our salvation but always and only as "the way of life" of responsive and responsible living made possible by God's initiative in making us heirs with Christ Jesus to all the covenant promises.

John Rollefson

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Psalm 51:1–10
Hebrews 5:5–10
John. 12:20–33

The New Covenant

The psalmist's plea for a new heart is recast by the reluctant prophet Jeremiah into the promise of a day when the covenant of old (described as God's marriage with unfaithful Israel) will give way to "a new covenant ... not like the covenant I made with their ancestors." This "covenant" (the word is used four times), the Lord says, will be one in which Torah is put "within them" and will be "written on their hearts" rather than on tablets of stone as at Sinai. The promise at the heart of the covenant, however, remains unchanged: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (vv 31–33).

Our Gospel reading from John 12 depicts Jesus immediately following his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (which we will hear from Mark next week) to the accompaniment of hosannahs and waving of palm branches by the crowd. Here he is found prophesying his own death using the typically Johannine figurative language of being "lifted up from the earth," an act which "will draw all people to myself" (v 32).

The earlier verses of this passage from John bear curious resemblance to the synoptics. For example, Jesus' reverie, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say?—'Father, save me from this hour?' No it is for this reason that I have come to this hour" (v 27). This sounds remarkably similar to the slightly differing synoptic accounts of Jesus' prayer to his Abba in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then, too, his remarks, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain but if it dies it bears much fruit" (v 24) echoes several of Jesus' synoptic parables that employ his favorite image of the seed. So, too, the punchline, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (v 25), is very close to Jesus' characteristic synoptic refrain, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (Mark 8:35, e.g.).

For all of John's special theological spin on the Jesus story, as we approach the extended passion account a striking convergence with the synoptic narratives seems evident.

Taken together our appointed texts invite reflection upon God's ever-deepening covenant relationship with Israel culminating in Jeremiah's prophesy of a new covenant. Christians cannot help but "overhear" the prophet's Word from God as a promise that finds its fulfillment in Jesus. According to today's passage from Hebrews, Jesus the "Son of God" is also to be understood as a God-appointed eternal high priest. Unlike a priest who officiates at the altar of sacrifice, however, in words that yet again are redolent of the synoptic accounts of Jesus in Gethsemane, Hebrews reminds us how "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up many prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (v 7). In effect, Jesus the high priest becomes himself the sacrificial offering and thereby, "he having been made perfect became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (v 9).

Both John and Hebrews provide clues as to how Jesus contemplated what he sensed lay ahead of him in Jerusalem. Hebrews goes so far as to claim that "he learned obedience through what he suffered" and thereby "having been made perfect"—might we translate it "completed" or "fulfilled?"—he became the source of eternal salvation…" (v 9).

This Lent, Year B, has been a time for the church to be reminded of God's successive covenants—God's promises—of old. Beginning with God's covenant with Noah, we next remembered the covenant with Abraham and Sarah followed by the covenant given at Sinai and then, last week, the covenant tested during Israel's forty-year "wilderness school." This is the central storyline of scripture, the master-story by which the church continues to live and discover meaning, which finds its Old Testament climax in the "new," might we call it "transfigured," covenant announced through the prophet Jeremiah. As Robert Davidson, a former teacher of mine has put it, "It is Jeremiah's repeated complaint that the obligations of the covenant were ignored by the people. They were happy to bask in all that God had given them, but unwilling to give the obedience which Yahweh expected." Furthermore, it was Jeremiah's "bitter experience," according to Davidson, "that no attempt at reformation, however sincere, could remedy the situation. All broke down on the sheer cussedness of human nature" (*Jeremiah and Lamentations*, *Vol. 2*, 88-90). I love that phrase and cannot help but hear it with the Scottish burr of my old Edinburgh professor, "the sheer cussedness of human nature."

The lesson of Israel's successive covenants with God is clearly this: between what God expected and what the people gave in response loomed an unbridgeable gulf. As Davidson comments, "Jeremiah knew that this fact had to be faced or all talk about a new future would end up under the shadow of the same disobedience which had ruined the past. The new covenant passage claims that the unbridgeable can be bridged but only from God's side." This is the reason, Davidson concludes, "We can see that the New Testament"—and

"testament" is simply the Latin word for "covenant"—claims that this hope of Jeremiah's has been fulfilled in Jesus. In him we see the unbridgeable bridged. In him we see a human life which in all its glory and true humanity gives that obedience which Israel was never able to give" (Davidson, 88, 90). In Jesus we behold Jeremiah's "new covenant" not merely announced but embodied—a covenant in his blood we share week in and week out in our communion together.

John Rollefson

Passion Sunday
March 28, 2021

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Mark 14:1–15:39

Engaging the Texts

The texts for Passion Sunday all speak to the very human suffering we witness in Mark's account of the narrative. The gospel text is quite long and offers many rich avenues for deeper engagement. The backdrop of the Passover festival sets the stage for the events that follow (14:1). Reflection on the Exodus story of liberation creates an environment in which those plotting to kill Jesus desire to avoid stirring up dissent (14:2). The plot leaves almost no one innocent; religious and secular authorities as well as disciples all are guilty in some way. The plot that follows is full of political drama and intrigue, complete with covert operations, betrayal, a show trial, and a very public and gruesome murder.

Within this plot, Mark emphasizes several components. Consistent with the rest of Mark's gospel, the disciples continue to miss the point of Jesus' words and actions and to fumble on the path of what it means to follow him. They adamantly claim that they would never abandon Jesus even to the point of death after he says this much will happen (14:31). However, they can't even stay awake for one hour when Jesus is in perhaps his most tense, suspenseful, and distressing hour at Gethsemane, and they promptly flee when Judas arrives with an armed crowd. The failure of the disciples is most acutely demonstrated in Peter's unraveling after his thrice denial of his teacher (14:72).

In contrast to the complete failure of those called "disciples," Mark shows how women who followed Jesus seemed to be the only ones who came close to understanding–consciously or unconsciously–his identity. The disciples scold the woman who poured costly ointment on Jesus' head for being wasteful, but Jesus calls this act an anointing, signaling that the woman did a holy act (14:8–9). Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome bore witness to Jesus' suffering and death on the cross after the disciples fled (15:40). These women also witness where Jesus was laid so that they can return the next morning to anoint his dead body (15:47, 16:1).

Throughout Mark's Passion narrative, what the author most emphasizes is the very human nature of Jesus. Jesus' anguish in the garden and his pleas with God to change the plan, if possible, illuminate his very human fear and very human desire to avoid the pain and suffering that is quickly approaching (14:36). Jesus is alone in his suffering and despair, without the accompaniment in prayer of the disciples in the garden. His followers flee at the first sign of trouble. In Mark, Jesus' only words on the cross convey a deep sense of anguish and betrayal.

Pastoral Reflections

The possibilities for preaching on Mark's two-chapter Passion narrative are both challenging and rich. The length of the reading presents the challenge. With so many meaningful moments for Holy Week in these two chapters, what does a preacher focus on for this day? Some may choose not to preach and let the text speak for itself. However, there are several inroads for the pastor who does chose to dive into this text.

There are many directions to go, but two themes speak to me at this moment in our world. The first is the very humanness of Jesus, particularly in Mark's Passion narrative. Jesus expresses a range of troubling and very human emotions throughout these chapters. We see him scared, anguished, angry, despairing, and frustrated. Jesus suffers in very human ways. He suffers mentally and emotionally in anticipation of what is to come, he suffers physically from the torture and abuse heaped on him, and he suffers spiritually in his cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34). Jesus knows pain and suffering, not in some divine and omniscient way but in a real, embodied, human way.

This week marks just over a year since COVID-19 began its assault on our country. We have witnessed unspeakable suffering as the pandemic swept into each of our lives. Perhaps this Jesus who truly knows the extent of human suffering and grief may be the Jesus who speaks to the people of God this Holy Week. Perhaps those who come to worship this Sunday yearn to be reminded that they are not alone in their most difficult and terrifying moments. We need reminding that we have a God who knows our pain, and even in that knowing promises new life.

The second theme that feels pertinent centers on those who "show up" for Jesus among a cast of characters who only

seem capable of betrayal and complacency. Nearly everyone holds responsibility for Jesus' death. The religious authorities seek it out; the Roman authorities make it possible. The disciples flee when faced with imminent danger. Peter repeatedly insists he knows nothing of the one on trial. It is the women who continually "show up" for Jesus. The lowest on the societal grid of import, the ones who are essentially without value in their own bodies, they are the ones who recognize Jesus. As a nation and as a church we are grappling with the racism that has shaped us. In these chapters, we see how easily the power of sin can pull us into patterns of death and oppression. We see Jesus because of the witnessing of those the world would least expect.

Abby Ferjak

Palm/Passion Sunday
March 28, 2021

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29
Philippians 2:5–11
Mark 11:1–11

Reflections on Palm Sunday 2021

Four years ago, my wife and I travelled to Scotland to hike the West Highland Way. This nearly 100-mile walking path runs from the relatively level southern lowlands up into the spectacular, rugged highlands region of the country. We thought the first flat day of our trek was kind of tough. On the second day, we began to climb. The Way took us to the top of Conic Hill, whose quaint name belies its steepness and height. After hours of uphill climbing, our feet blistered and sore, we reached the summit. From the top, we were rewarded by a breathtaking view of Loch Lomond below us and craggy mountains stretching out as far as we could see. While the trek up Conic Hill took nearly all we thought we had, it was in fact only our last stop in the lowlands, the point from which we entered into the more beautiful and vastly more difficult highlands ahead. My wife and I sat there, looking at what was before us, wondering: *Are we actually up for this?*

Unlike most of us, who ramble on vacation or amble to our cars, Jesus was a full-time walker. From the time of his baptism onward in Mark's gospel, he is on the go–walking from one village to another to heal, feed, teach, and proclaim. But even an experienced ambulator like Jesus would have felt the strain of the climb that brings him to the start of our text today. From the lowlands of Jericho where he leaves Bartimaeus in Mark 10, he climbs nearly 4000 feet in just a dozen or so miles to the summit of the Mount of Olives. I imagine Jesus sitting to rest his weary feet and catch his breath at the top of the mountain. I imagine him there catching his first glorious sight of Jerusalem, of its bustling Passover pilgrims who will soon shout "Crucify him!" and its beautiful temple bound for destruction. I imagine Jesus facing the reality that for all the miles he has walked and steep hills he has climbed, he is only now entering into the real pain and struggle of his journey.

We enter into Palm Sunday each year after a wilderness journey through Lent. We enter into it in 2021 after a long, hard climb of a year, when death has been far too close at hand for far too many. For some, to have made it this far feels like nothing short of a miracle. And yet we find ourselves with Jesus today on top of the Mount of Olives, looking out over a week ahead that will contain enough peaks and valleys, heartbreak and pain, mystery and love for a lifetime. The preacher might reflect on this turning point in the journey, looking back at where we have been on our walk so far with Jesus in this season and looking forward with him at what will lie ahead if we are to follow. Might we stop and catch our breath for a moment here with Jesus? Might we sit together here with the uncomfortable truth that we must enter into more death to find life?

When Jesus does descend the mountain, he does it in style. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is less of a spontaneous celebration than it is a kind of inaugural liturgy meets public protest. The crowds welcome Jesus as the long-awaited Davidic king, which is a threatening proclamation to Herod and the Romans. Throughout Mark, Jesus has been trying to keep his identity quiet, likely to avoid the fate that generally befalls messianic pretenders. Finally, though, Jesus is ready to go public. After so many miles on foot, he rides into Jerusalem on the back of a colt, the messianic mount prophesied by Zechariah, and is surrounded by a crowd that hails him as king. It is a strikingly similar reception to the one that greeted Judas Maccabaeus a few centuries earlier when he drove imperial forces from Jerusalem. Yet Jesus is a king unlike any that Israel or Rome has ever seen. Might the congregation be invited to hold the image of a king in their minds throughout Holy Week, and to discover how it is reshaped by Jesus' last days?

A preacher might also explore the scene in which the disciples borrow the colt for Jesus. When have we been called upon, like the disciples, to do something for Jesus' sake that may make us uncomfortable? Anyone who has been in charge of a stewardship campaign will know the awkwardness of asking someone to give away something valuable because "the Lord needs it." Are we prepared to give when called upon? To lay down the cloaks on our backs or lend a prized colt to aid or to honor Jesus when we encounter him in our neighbors? I think of the Black Lives Matter protests in my neighborhood

this summer. It was no Palm Sunday procession, but there was something holy in the way that total strangers schlepped coolers of water and popsicles and backpacks full of first-aid equipment and bagels block after block, offering them freely to anyone experiencing hunger or thirst or pain as they marched through the hot city streets in hopeful defiance of the ways of death. As we enter into Holy Week, how might a preacher invite the congregation into concrete acts of joyful, self-giving love in the face of the crosses of our world?

Becca Seely

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