Preaching Helps

April–June 2021: Maundy Thursday through the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

In the Time of Trials

This issue of "Preaching Helps" begins on April 1, Maundy Thursday. Three days before, on Monday of Holy Week, the trial of Derek Chauvin was scheduled to start with jury selection slated to begin on March 8. (By the time this issue is published, the trial date may have changed.) As most of this country knows, Chauvin, a former Minneapolis police officer, is charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter in the killing of George Floyd. A cellphone video captured Chauvin's dispassionate expression as he pressed his knee into George Floyd's neck. "I can't breathe," Floyd gasped, and called out for his mama. Once more an unarmed Black person was killed by a White police officer, charged with trying to pass a counterfeit $20 bill. Protests erupted in Minneapolis and St. Paul, in many other cities across the U.S. and around the world. Preachers in the Twin Cities will not be the only ones who struggle with this trial alongside the trial of Jesus. Some may compare George Floyd to Jesus: an innocent man killed by white supremacy and racism. Others may say (or think) that Derek Chauvin is like Jesus, judged guilty before any trial begins.

Comparisons to Jesus are dangerous, but not rare. Two years ago, Steven King, U.S. Representative from Iowa, was stripped of his committee assignments by his Republican colleagues for making racist comments affirming white nationalism and white supremacy. Speaking about his treatment in the House, King told a gathering in his home state: "When I have to step down to the floor of the House of Representatives and look up at those 400-and-some accusers—you know we just passed through Easter and Christ's passion—I have better insight into what [Jesus] went through for us, partly because of that experience." (Robin Opsahl, *Des Moines Register*, April 23, 2019)

Of course, Steve King isn't Jesus. Neither George Floyd nor Derek Chauvin is Jesus. But many people listening to the passion story this week will have the 2021 trial in their ears. This year Simon of Cyrene, the African man pulled out of the crowd to carry Jesus' cross,[1] may also be bearing a sign that says: BLACK LIVES MATTER. As preachers we need to take care that the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion isn't forgotten under newspaper headlines and social media feeds about a trial in Minneapolis. But we also want Jesus' suffering and death to touch people far removed from Pontius Pilate's court room. Jesus strapped in an electric chair would be closer to Roman execution than a cross necklace. Jesus' suffering and death intersects with our lives and our history. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone marks this intersection in powerful ways:

> Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a "recrucified" black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy. (Cone, xv)

We pray that lynching is a tragedy from our nation's past. Then why did someone erect a gallows with a noose on the Capitol steps during the insurrection on January 6? What was revealed to us on that Day of Epiphany?

A little over one month later, at sunset on February 22, 500 candles shone in silence on the South Portico of the White House. Five hundred candles to commemorate over 500,000 who have died of COVID-19. You may be remembering those who died in the congregation you serve, funerals delayed until–no one knows when. It has been a very hard year, a hard year of too much dying. A hard year of divisive politics. A year of different kinds of trials for thousands who have lost jobs, medical workers who are beyond exhausted, children who have lost a year of learning. When we most needed to be together, we couldn't even go inside our churches. It has been a hard year to be a pastor.

Whatever connections you make between the trial of Jesus and the trials of our present time, there are also personal connections between Jesus and each person who hears the story again this year. The poet Miriam Kessler makes that connection in her poem, "Eli, Eli."

> My God, my God, he cried
> if he is quoted right.
> Somehow that moan is comforting
> to us, alone at night,
> who tremble, daring dawn,
> that He, so wise and strong,
> should weep and ask for aid.
>
> Somehow, my lovely distant god,
> it makes me less afraid.

Blessings to you as we move from Holy Week to the Sundays after Pentecost. Let me say it again: it has been a very hard year to be a pastor. I'm deeply grateful to the pastors

1. See Mark 15:21.

who have written for "Preaching Helps" this season: **Brenda Bos** is Assistant to the Bishop for Rostered Leadership in the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA. Before entering ministry, she worked in television production for eighteen years. She lives with her wife, Janis, their son, Joshua, and three very interesting dogs. ELCA pastor **Emily Ewing** (they/them), originally from Colorado, has journeyed through the ELCA to end up in Iowa. They currently serve as Social Justice Pastor of Trinity Las Américas United Methodist Church in Des Moines and part time as a hospital chaplain. Pastor Emily co-hosts the podcast *Nerds At Church* and curates queerying.org, a blog queering and querying the Revised Common Lectionary. They dedicate their life to justice work locally and globally, revel in creativity and art, and are fed by Lutheran theological geekiness. **Patrick Keen Sr**. is a retired pastor of the ELCA, having served congregations in Milwaukee, New Orleans, and Chicago. He has preached in congregations and assemblies across the country, and has been a guest preacher on Day 1 Television and radio broadcast several times. He was also featured in a Hallmark documentary titled: "The Good Shepherd." At present he owns and operates Legacy Gun Range and Timbuktu Weapons Academy in Kentwood, Louisiana, where he teaches gun owners how to be responsible with their weapons.

Justin Lind-Ayres currently serves alongside his amazing colleague, the Rev. Babette Chatman, as co-pastor at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. Justin enjoys keeping up with three kids and standing knee-deep in moving water while fly fishing for trout. **Ron Luckey** served for forty years as pastor and campus pastor in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Kentucky. In addition to his pastoral ministry, he has been involved in faith-based community organizing through the DART (Direct Action Research and Training) network for twenty years. He holds a fifth degree black belt in Kenpo karate and is a certified instructor. He and his wife, Pacita, a retired public school teacher, have four grown children (and seven grandchildren!). **Andrea Roske-Metcalfe**, an ELCA pastor, serves as the Director of Children's Ministry at Christ Church Lutheran in Minneapolis, and as the virtual teaching assistant for her two elementary-aged daughters in their family's living room. **Kate Reuer-Welton** (she/her) serves as Lutheran Campus Pastor at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. She is married to Jim, mother to Benjamin and Eleanor. She is grateful her children are old enough to enjoy watching the Great British Bake Off and go for bike rides together! Kate graduated from Harvard Divinity School and Luther Seminary (MTh). Her approach to the Christian life? "Awe, humility, and curiosity." **Jeff Sartain** has served as co-pastor at Edina Community Lutheran Church in Minnesota since 2018. He attended Luther Seminary and earned his DMin from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Jeff was ordained and served congregations in the United Church of Christ prior to being rostered with the ELCA. He and his husband live in St. Paul and enjoy getaways to their cabin in northern Wisconsin. **Susan Plocher Thomas** is a retired ELCA pastor living in Lebanon, New Hampshire. She has served in congregational, campus, and international ministries, during which her understanding of healing was pulled and stretched, only expanding, never breaking.

Barbara K. Lundblad (she/her/hers)
Editor, Preaching Helps

Maundy Thursday
April 1, 2021

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

Engaging the Text/Pastoral Reflections

Maundy Thursday is undeniably a table day. With bread and wine, we remember Jesus' Last Supper and his embodied presence of divine love that passes over, with, and through the world. Worshiping communities gather virtually or in socially distanced ways with the table of the Triduum set before us figuratively and, for some, literally. The table is central to our beginning of the Great Three Days as Paul's words from 1 Corinthians echo overhead: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26). Yet, this year may be less table-centric and more about the feet.

In John 13, little is said about the meal Jesus shared in his final hours with his disciples. The table serves more as a backdrop during their celebration of the Passover meal, for nothing is written about their ritual practices at dinner. True, we are told that the scene in John 13 happens "during supper," but the primary action and dialogue occurs when Jesus approaches his friends with a water basin and towel. On his knees, Jesus "began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with a towel tied around him" (13:5). It is all about the feet. Dirty, dusty, bunion-crusted, wart-filled, fungus-infested, stinky feet! Why the feet? What is Jesus revealing to his disciples (and to us!) when he takes calloused feet into his hands in this footwashing moment?

I think the default interpretation revolves around service and servanthood, which of course are present given Jesus' remarks in John 13:16: "Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their masters." But there is more at work than a

symbolic act of service. Resmaa Menakem, trauma therapist and author of *My Grandmother's Hands,* wrote, "Washing someone's feet creates deep harmony and strong body-to-body connection. It is an immediate, tactile, visceral expression of caring, respect, empathy, humility, and service. It is simple and wordless, yet its message is unmistakable: *You matter to me."*[2] Building off Menakem, I would say the profundity of this simple act is summed in "matter-hood." That is, the body-to-body connection in the footwashing ritual speaks to an intimate act proclaiming that the recipient is seen, heard, known, and, dare we say, loved. When Jesus–the Word incarnate, the Son of the living God, Light from light, true God from true God–silently washes his disciples' feet, he loudly proclaims: you, with all your warts and cracks, stink and scars, *you* matter to God!

This act is both declaration and invitation, a holy proclamation of matter-hood and a full embrace by the radical hospitality of God. Just as footwashings were used in antiquity to welcome people into their homes, Jesus welcomes and invites his disciples into the household of God. Those gathered around the table that night are told by touch, "You matter; you are fully welcome." Jesus then gives the command for us to do likewise: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example..." The footwashing is an embodied act of the divine that demonstrates, in part, Jesus' example/command/mandate (*mandatum)*: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34).

It is a table day, but perhaps more so a feet kind-of-day as the whole liturgy of Maundy Thursday is sacramentally held together by Jesus' love revealed in the body. How we do proclaim, enact, and participate in this foot-focused day amid COVID-19? Even if a worshiping community has well-established practices for a footwashing ritual, those practices would likely have to change due to socially distancing safeguards. Even more, many communities continue to worship virtually. How do we as church engage in this significant sign of Christ's mandate across our screens? Similar wrestling has and likely continues to occur around celebrating holy communion virtually.

No matter how the footwashing is lifted-up in the liturgy, this is a time to preach on the feet. Admittedly, many people are reluctant to show others their feet, let alone let someone touch them. This speaks to the power of Jesus' gesture and our God who tends to the hurts, pains, faults, cracks, and brokenness we carry in our feet–in our very lives! How can we encourage such a vulnerable act in this exceedingly vulnerable time? We preach it, and we show it.

Here are a few ideas for your consideration: Invite people to show their feet by coming to worship with sandals or displaying their feet in their Zoom screens. At some point in the liturgy (e.g., the confession and forgiveness), encourage people to remove their shoes and touch their own feet. Craft a specific prayer of blessing for feet and share it as the invitation to communion. If your community pre-records worship, enlist short videos from households with family members or friends within their COVID-safe bubble washing one another's feet. Imagine how powerful this could be accompanied by song, prayer, and the gracious reception by the worshiping community! Of course, it is important to note that in some circumstances footwashing is not physically possible. In these instances, be sure to include the option for hand washing as another way to communicate the matter-hood of all God's beloved.

With feet washed, vulnerability claimed, and the full welcome of God's love enacted through the mandate of Jesus, we now follow the Spirit's lead deeper into the Triduum to the cross at Golgotha.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Good Friday
April 2, 2021

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

Engaging the Text/Pastoral Reflections

From the garden of Gethsemane (18:1) to the garden of the grave (19:41–42), John's passion account from beginning to its *telos* sets the stage for our Good Friday observance and day two of the Triduum. These two heavy chapters give narrative substance to the suffering servant who "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole" (Isa 53:5). On this day of trial and crucifixion, we follow Jesus into death's maw. The piercing teeth of death have had their grip on our communities in significant ways this past year. Today is a *good* day to name this truth.

At the time of writing this reflection, over 510,000 people in the United States had died due to COVID-19. Globally, the number is well over 2.5 million deaths. This pandemic has brought suffering and death to the forefront of our collective consciousness. Death's dominant truth among us has been particularly felt by the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities revealing the stranglehold racism and white body supremacy continues to have upon us. Dovetail

2. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recover Press, 2017) 241.

the pandemics of COVID-19 and racism with the pandemic of climate change, and this past year has been a season of perpetual mourning of our collective losses. One might say we've been journeying toward Good Friday not for six weeks, but for fifty-six weeks.

Given this unprecedented communal reality of the nearness of death, Good Friday may be experienced by worshiping communities differently than years past. Often sermons are set aside on this day as the passion of Jesus is told through scripture and song. In solemnity, the community gathers around the cross with bidding prayers and with Psalm 22 ringing out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is entirely possible that our context of pandemics alone will be enough to allow the liturgy of Good Friday to speak anew. But how might simple changes within a prescribed liturgy permit the proclamation of "the life-giving cross, on which was hung the Savior of the whole world?"[3]

Depending upon one's location, today may be a good service to hold outdoors. This would enable more safety precautions for an in-person experience amid COVID-19. If possible, gather around a fire. What is more, have charcoal present for the blaze. It is at a charcoal fire in John 18 where Peter denies Jesus three times. As we gather at the fire, we remember that we are part of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. The rejection of divine love and grace is why humanity placed Jesus on the tree. If we center our worship in this truth and place the shouts of "crucify him" upon our own lips, we recognize our complicity in the denial and rejection of God's saving grace. The charcoal, ashy truth of our propensity to reject life and turn toward death echoes Ash Wednesday, reminding us of our captivity to sin and death. A charcoal fire is also the place Peter will encounter the resurrected Jesus in John 21:9-19. This Good Friday fire connection may lend itself to a powerful Easter proclamation on Sunday: despite the powers of death over us, Christ Jesus meets us with forgiveness and life eternal. The new fire of the Easter Vigil would be an excellent way to highlight the interconnections of the Triduum and God's power of life over death.

John's passion story is filled with dramatic scene changes, many of them swirling around Pilate and his movements in and out of his headquarters. As Johannine scholar Raymond Brown wrote, "Pilate goes back and forth from one to the other in seven carefully balanced episodes."[4] These scenes can be broken down as follows: 1. Outside: 18:28-32; 2. Inside:18:33-38a; 3. Outside: 18:38b-40; 4. Inside: 19:1-3; 5. Outside: 19:4-8; 6. Inside 19:9-11; 7. Outside: 19:12-16a. When laid out in this way, it is quite dramatic how much movement exists in the passage. The movement reveals the lack of power or control the Empire has over Jesus and Pilate's own uncertainty–an embodiment of his question, "What is truth?" (18:38). How might liturgical movements communicate that the principalities and powers of this world are in fact powerless when confronted by Jesus? Perhaps the movements involve physically moving a processional cross at appointed times during the passion reading. Or, maybe the lectors themselves move from one location to another representing the shifting landscape. Finally, what if everyone in the space (Zoom or in-person) was encouraged to shift their bodies back and forth when directed. How might that help us feel the story?

Because we speak the truth of death among us on this Good Friday, it may serve the community well to open space to name those who have died in this past year due the pandemics of racism, COVID-19, and the climate crisis. Much like All Saints Sunday, this is a time to remember, honor, and grieve those we have lost. What better time or place than today at the foot of the cross? Read of Jesus' final breath "'It is finished,' Then Jesus bowed his head and gave up his spirit." Then offer up the names on the hearts of the assembly; weave the names with hymn or chant; lament and pray; entrust our beloved ones who, having felt the teeth-like sting of death, now rest in the arms of Jesus. Jesus, the one who enters into the gaping throat of death with us and for us.

And with that, we set our face to the garden of Easter and wait.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Vigil of Easter
April 3, 2021

Readings from First/Old Testament
Romans 6: 3–11
John 20: 1–18

It just keeps getting worse for Mary, doesn't it? In this Gospel reading, I mean? As if the last few days weren't horrifying enough, now the body of her friend has been taken. The broken, mocked, mangled, maimed, well and truly dead body of her friend is gone.

I'm not sure she would ever have believed it could get any worse than Friday afternoon, but here she is, horror layered upon horrors–his body is gone. In Mark's Gospel, the women are reassured almost immediately: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

But this is not Mark's Gospel; it is John's. Mary was run-

3. From "Good Friday" liturgy in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 264.

4. Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 858.

ning, then Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, but once they discover the body missing, it's as if time has stopped. We are not in a hurry here, whether we want to be or not. In some ways, this makes it perfect for the Easter Vigil, for this already-but-not-yet time and space between Good Friday and Easter morning.

Have you ever received really terrible news? Or realized that something really terrible was happening? Do you know that bizarre feeling where nothing feels real and time stretches out and it feels as if the room around you has filled with funhouse mirrors?

That's what I imagine is happening to Mary in this moment, after the men leave and she's weeping outside the tomb. Just when she thought it couldn't get any worse, the unthinkable has happened. They couldn't leave him alone even in death. Couldn't allow him the dignity of a resting place to actually rest; the dignity of a space where mourners could come.

I wonder how many of our parishioners will be able to identify with Mary Magdalene this year in ways they never could have before. The COVID-19 pandemic has kept so many of us from accompanying our loved ones in sickness and in death in the ways that feel loving or dignified or even just plain human to us. We've been kept from waiting rooms and bedsides and death beds, we've pressed palms against the glass of nursing home windows, we've made hospital visits and said final good-byes over computer screens.

I am not suggesting that we name, as a silver lining of this global pandemic, the possibility that so many of us will have a more visceral understanding of the mystery of the resurrection this Easter season. On the contrary, I would much prefer a complete lack of understanding to the suffering and death we've endured collectively as a result of this disease.

And yet, Easter is upon us, and we are ridiculously hungry for a word of hope, for a word of resurrection.

Here in the United States, we've already surpassed 500,000 dead from COVID-19. (By the time you're reading this and preparing to preach, that number will almost certainly be far higher.) This is an unfathomable loss, both in its magnitude and in simply trying to wrap our brains around that magnitude. The dead are reduced to numbers, it feels like, more often than not.

But even with Jesus standing right in front of her, it isn't until Mary hears him call her by name that she recognizes him, and recognizes that he is risen, indeed.

He calls her by name.

What would it feel like to do that in your community? To call each of those who has died, from this disease or otherwise, by name, even while you recognize (perhaps without saying it out loud) that others worshipping with you that day will almost certainly succumb before this is all over? What would it feel like to honor them by name on this day, without waiting many months for All Saints to roll around? To tie those we've lost–by name–to the promise of resurrection?

Or, perhaps especially for those of us in smaller worshipping communities, what would it feel like to simply name everyone on the Zoom call? To recognize that the promise of the resurrection belongs to each of us, by name?

This Easter, when time and space have expanded and contracted for so many of us in ways that rend them almost unrecognizable, when so many of us and so many of our loved ones are suffering in ways we never saw coming, when we have lost so many of our own that the numbers no longer even compute, we need the promise of this resurrection more than ever before.

We need to be reminded that we are a part of this resurrection story through our own baptisms–that Jesus' death is ours, and his life, and his resurrection. We need to be reminded that Jesus calls us by name, even if the newspapers call us by numbers.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe

Easter Sunday
April 4, 2021

Isaiah 25:6–9 or Acts 10:34–43
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Mark 16:1–8 [or John 20:1–18]

"For terror and amazement had seized them." I've read this Gospel text I don't know how many times. I've preached on it many times over. And I'm not sure I've ever registered that line. It reminds me of the quote from Frederick Buechner, "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."

Easier said than done, right? The young man sitting inside the empty tomb tells the women, "Do not be alarmed," but alarmed they are, quite clearly, and can you blame them?

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were expecting a body, and a smelly one, at that. They were expecting a rotting corpse if we want to get technical about it.

Instead they find an empty tomb. There is no mention of a stench; I imagine then that it smelled like moss and damp earth and green things. This is the way resurrection smells to me, anyway.

This abrupt ending to the Gospel of Mark bothers some people, but it doesn't bother me. Have you ever had news that you knew would change everything, whether it was good or bad or it just *was*? Do you remember that liminal time and space after that knowledge was yours but wasn't yet anyone else's?

That's what this ending feels like to me. It feels like liminal time and space. It feels like these women holding onto this knowledge that—for the moment—is theirs and theirs alone.

They are terrified.

They are amazed.

When was the last time you felt those two emotions at the same time? When was the last time the members of your community did? Maybe not to the same degree as these women, who have witnessed resurrection first-hand, but still, do you remember? Can you find that feeling in your body?

In my experience, the combination of those two feelings—terror and amazement—is an indication that something really important is happening. Something that really, really matters. Though I've only just now connected it to resurrection—because this really is the first time I've paid any attention to this line of the text—I've always experienced this combination of emotions as holy.

Maybe you have, too.

Maybe your people have, too.

What if we just stay there for a while?

I know there is debate about the ending of this Gospel. The shorter ending, the longer ending, no added ending at all. I know verse 8 seems like an odd place to stop. I know we get all caught up with questions about how the Good News is supposed to reach anyone at all if we just stop here, but what if we do? What if we take this opportunity to revel in the fact that nearly everyone who hears you preach this Easter morning knows this story already, and we just invite them to hang out in this liminal space for a bit, with Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome? What if we invite them to do their best to be "seized by terror and amazement" as those three women were, so many years ago?

This is both the hardest and the easiest sermon to preach all year. It's the easiest because it's the best story we have; it's the only story we really need, when we get right down to it. Preachers are always hearing the advice to "just tell the story" for their Easter morning sermons, and that advice isn't wrong.

At the same time, this is one of only a handful of days each year when the church will be packed—or this year, at least, it will be a little more full than it has been. The Zoom room will expand an extra page or two. So it really needs to be a barn-burner, right? Just in case some of those people might come back if they like what they hear?

Dear friends, we already know how this story ends, at least on paper. We can lean into that. What we don't know is how the wild mystery of this resurrection story will play out in each of our own lives, in each of our own communities.

Then what if we just sit with it for a hot second, or an entire Easter season?

You could argue against that, this year. You could point out that there is so much uncertainty, so many unknowns, and people need to move all the way to the bitter end of this story, all in one day.

And. There is so much uncertainty right now. There are so many unknowns.

The world is ripe for resurrection, dear friends. Our lives are ripe for this promise.

What if we just sit with it, for a bit, with the women, right there in the middle of the terror and amazement? What if we join them in that liminal time and space?

Maybe this is precisely the year for an Easter like that.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe

Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2021

Acts 4:32–35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1–2:2
John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

The story of Thomas comes every year on the Sunday after Easter. If you are a preacher who generally takes that Sunday off, perhaps you haven't had to wrestle with this story very often. But if you frequently preach this text, how do you look at Thomas' questions in 2021? You do not need to repeatedly read this story to remember it. We can picture Caravaggio's painting of Jesus' exposed chest and Thomas' finger poking into the wound. When I prepare to preach this text, I am tempted to say to myself, "Oh yeah, doubting Thomas" and start to think about what to say. But I invite you to sit with his questions more deeply this year. What have you learned about your own distrust since the pandemic began? What have you discovered about yourself now that you cannot see or hear or touch things like you have in the past? Is your faith strengthened without empirical data? Or have you struggled not having first-hand experiences of so many things? How do you approach Thomas differently this year, knowing his disbelief simply comes from the fact that he wasn't present when Jesus appeared the first time?

Perhaps the inclusion of 1 John 1:1 in this set of lectionary texts is a clever "inside joke." The author talks about the things we have heard and seen and touched. Our gospel passage features the famous insistence that Thomas touch Jesus' wounds. This is rarified air, in which the earliest believers operate, those who actually heard the voice of Jesus, those who could touch him, in life and in the resurrection appearances. Read 1 John 1:1–4 thinking of each phrase as a reference to the risen, in-person Jesus Christ. "The word of life"

(vs. 1), the "life revealed," and "we have seen it and testified to it" (vs. 2), "we declare to you what we have seen and heard… that you may have fellowship with us" (vs. 3) and "that our joy may be complete" (vs. 4). These verses become less ethereal, more visceral and urgent when you imagine the author talking about witnessing the resurrected Jesus. Does it make it more powerful for you, or do you feel like you've missed out on something wonderful when you think of the author talking about seeing and touching Jesus? How does that make the reader feel about Thomas, who had missed out on the first appearance? We relate to him more than we imagine.

We read several Acts readings each Easter season, the idea being to show the modern church how the early believers lived in response to the resurrection. Acts 4 reminds us of that remarkable community, each person contributing selflessly to the good of the whole. People are of one heart and soul, "no one claimed personal ownership of any possessions" (vs. 32). "There was not a needy person among them," (vs. 34). Of course, this is a wonderful passage if one wishes to preach socialism in its purest form, and some communities will drink that up. But note that *in the middle* of this utopian description, verse 33 seems to break the flow to say the apostles were able to powerfully proclaim the resurrection of Christ. This may seem like an odd insertion. We are talking about shared possessions, everyone cared for. Why do we also say the gospel is being proclaimed boldly? This passage tells us people are capable of great power and witness *when their needs are met.* The emergence of a bold gospel message is not a coincidence.

Psalm 133 layers on the idealistic idea of a united community. "How very good and pleasant is it when kindred live together in unity!" followed by an overly lavish description of an anointing with oil. Excess and beauty as the anointing oil pours down over the king's beard and robes to the floor. Wow! We need to get along! I would propose this psalm is used to promote that communal good will. I confess to preaching on this beautiful psalm once and reminding folks that community life in this form is luscious and rich, but we will still need someone to mop up the floor after we are done.

Pastoral Reflections

Easter 2021 may be a time when worshipping communities are meeting in-person in parts of the United States, but many congregations still worship the Resurrection of our Lord digitally. We miss an important opportunity if we simply celebrate "church back to normal" when in reality we have all been changed deeply by the pandemic and our time of social distancing. Perhaps we can approach Thomas' questions, which simply come from missing out on the first appearance, differently. What have we learned about access in the past year? Who missed out? Who was able to participate online in ways they never were able to do in-person? What have we learned about the lack of touch? In this passage Jesus gives Thomas exactly what he needs: Thomas needs to see and touch the wounds, and Jesus allows it. If you look closely at Caravaggio's painting "The Incredulity of Thomas," Jesus' hand is firmly gripping Thomas' finger, pushing it toward his wound. Jesus meets Thomas' need.

Which brings me with curiosity to the Acts passage. The early church made sure believers' most basic needs were met. No one lacked for anything, and in that security the gospel was able to be proclaimed boldly. How might we assure that people's needs are met, not only the physical needs of food and health care, but also their emotional and spiritual needs? Thomas' fears needed to be allayed before he could profess Jesus as his Lord and God. As we emerge from the pandemic, what needs is God calling us to meet? How might we meet those needs in deeper, more spiritual, self-less ways?

Brenda Bos

Third Sunday of Easter
April 18, 2021

Acts 3:12–19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1–7
Luke 24:36b–48

Engaging the Texts

The Easter season continues with another story from the Book of Acts. This time Peter has just healed a crippled man simply by pulling him up "and his ankles were strengthened." This draws plenty of attention, and Peter takes the opportunity to explain where the power to heal has come from: "his (Jesus') name itself has made this man strong." Indeed, the early miracles of the church were done "in Jesus' name," which is why we use that to close prayers for this day. There is power in that name. Peter explains the power comes from Jesus being the fulfillment of Hebrew scriptures. In this passage, Peter condemns those who have killed Jesus as murderers of the Author of life. Peter makes sure to accuse Jesus' killers as often as possible. Yet he claims the power of Jesus' name. From where do you, as a preacher, find the power of Jesus? In his death? In his resurrection? In his healing miracles? In his teachings?

The Luke passage tells the tale of Jesus showing his wounded hands and feet to the disciples after his resurrection. These moments would have deeply influenced Peter's confidence in Jesus as the Risen Savior. Jesus is proving he is their crucified friend, now alive and in the flesh, able to eat food. He goes on to explain his role in God's story, how *he* is the fulfillment of the law and prophets. *Finally* he opens their

minds to understand who he truly is. Imagine how Peter and the other disciples are now empowered to proclaim what they know. Then Jesus commands them to preach repentance and forgiveness. Take another look at the Pentecost story. Take another look at the preaching of Peter throughout the Book of Acts: "Repent!" is his constant theme.

The first part of the 1 John passage focuses on us being children of God. I knew a Presbyterian pastor who quoted the first part of verse 1 as the baptismal water was poured on every baby he baptized. What a wonderful way to claim that promise. The second half of the passage, however, delves into righteousness, sinlessness, if you will. How do we become sinless? By abiding in Jesus. Abiding? What might that mean? How might Jesus' call to repentance and forgiveness be a part of this process? How does Jesus' power inform this righteousness? And how does one abide with a powerful Jesus?

The psalm is a classic, powerful proclamation of God's faithfulness, but perhaps the preacher will want to focus on verse 3, where the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself. The disciples have been set apart by the personal knowledge they have of the Risen Savior. And then it was their job to "lower the barriers" between God and humans, by proclaiming the good news of reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

What does it mean to pray "In Jesus' name?" In Acts 4, Peter says, "by faith in his name" and then says, "by the power of his name, this man is healed." Those might be two different things. Was it Peter's faith that healed the man? Remember, Jesus claimed some people's faith made them whole (Mark 5:34, Luke 17:19). Rather than *receiving* healing through faith, Peter may be able to *give* healing by faith. So simply having faith in Jesus was enough to do this work.

But then Peter says, "by the power of Jesus name, this man is healed." Is the name of Jesus an incantation? Is the name a "magic word"? Is that what we believe? I invite you to really drill down on that question. I think I have used the power of Jesus' name as an incantation of sorts. This question challenges me.

Or is Peter simply acting on Jesus' behalf, like an emissary who has a signed letter from the king, giving permission and power. Jesus *did* give his permission and power to his disciples. In fact, Jesus said the disciples would have more power than he did (John 14:12). Perhaps Peter is simply claiming that power, naming the One who gave it to him, in essence saying Peter can heal because Jesus gave him the ability to do so.

What do we believe as present-day followers of Jesus? What power does Jesus' name have? How have *we* been transformed, claiming that name as the Name Above All Names? Mainline, progressive "modern" Christians may be guilty of "holding a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5) when we discount the power of Jesus' name. How might these lessons call us to a deeper relationship with Jesus?

Brenda Bos

Fourth Sunday of Easter/ Good Shepherd Sunday April 25, 2021

Acts 4:5–12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16–24
John 10:11–18

Engaging the Texts

What is the pattern of the lessons as they unfold before us Sunday after Sunday? What is the pattern as we go through the cycles of the church's calendar? These are questions I ponder as I prepare to minister before the people of God via the preached word. My preaching style has evolved over the years as I try to faithfully utilize the text, seeking the voice of God and the will of God in the Word of God for the people of God. This form of sermon preparation is what one might call "Lectionary Liturgical Preaching." Preaching the text according to the day, season, location or occasion.

Acts 4:5-12

Peter and John are before the Sanhedrin Council, accused of healing a paralytic man. Do we follow or obey the authorities or the leading of God's Holy Spirit? How do we discern what is ultimately our will or what is God's will for us? Those being called "Insurrectionists," who invaded our nation's capital, may believe they were doing God's will by their presence and their actions. There are times when we do the wrong thing for the right reason and times when we do the right thing for the wrong reason. The question should be, "What is the just thing to do?" Do justice, show mercy, and walk humbly before God and humanity.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd. That may have been true in the faith of our parents and those gone before; however, even though this generation may know this psalm better than the Ten Commandments, there is little evidence that these words are true for very many. How is your day-to-day life reflective of each stanza of this great psalm? Have we abandoned our faith to go our own way? We have come to depend on technology, the power and abilities that come with being connected to a satellite in space over the power that rules over time, place, and space. The Lord is my Shepherd because I trust in the

Kairos over the Kronos. The Lord is my Shepherd; therefore, I can go anywhere because I am led by a power that can and will open doors.

1 John 3:16–24

How do we know what love is? That we lay down our lives for another person. How is love made manifest in these days and times? What is the witness of the twenty-first century Christian? How does that witness differ from a non-believer? It has been more than fifty years since the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared the 11:00 hour on Sunday the most segregated hour of the week. It continues to be a fact. Racism, sexism, and other isms hold firm in the church of Jesus Christ in 2021. How is that love?

John 10:11–18

"I am the good shepherd."

Here we have Jesus exposing another side of his humanity, all the while, demonstrating to us how we, too, might obtain these characteristics, thereby displaying our divinity. The good shepherd is not just concerned with those who harm the flock by theft or death. The good shepherd is also concerned about the quality of life—water, grazing land and a comfortable environment. Do we pastors have any responsibility to sheep in the wider parish or is it just the sheep assigned to us? Can you or anyone in your parish say that you are a "Good Shepherd"? Dr. Albert Pete Pero who was professor of ethics at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago taught us that a good way to determine the effectiveness of a ministry is to ask, "If we were gone, would we be missed?"

Pastoral Reflections

"Who are you?"

Two of the most important aspects of the Gospel that have been overlooked by theologians, teachers, and preachers are the areas of social justice and public health. Jesus' concern for social justice is displayed in confrontations with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and in his sermons to those who came to hear him preach. Just about everything Jesus did in the lives of those who were healed gave evidence of his care for public health. It is unfortunate that we have spent our time and attention recalling the actions of Jesus without taking his action as a call to activation. A call for us to become actively involved in Kingdom Business, the care of God's people and God's strategy for bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth.

You may say the church has done a wonderful job addressing social justice over the years. We have a great history of feeding those who are homeless, and you are correct. We are feeding the homeless; however, what are we doing to provide housing for them? We often provide the service we want regardless of the need. A perspective through a different set of lenses can alter our ability to see differently what has been before us all the time, revealing new opportunities for us as we become the church of the not yet, the church of the future.

As I examine the texts for this day, I see a pattern that calls me to question my calling. The question of my calling is not what am I, but who am I? This is a question each of you must wrestle with at some point in your own life. There have been different stages in my life when I needed to have "a man in the mirror" moment and ask myself, "who am I?" By doing what I am doing, by participating in these activities and hanging out with these people, who am I becoming?

When Moses was on the mountain before God and asked God who God was, God revealed to Moses, "I am that I am." I am being what I am becoming. I will be your God if you will allow me to become your God. God has no problem with revealing God's self to us if we dare to look for God, dare to seek God's face, or dare to inquire of God.

We find places in scripture where Jesus reveals his identity as well as his calling. All we need do is to reflect on the "I am's" of Jesus. "I am the door. I am the bread of life. I am the Resurrection and the Life. I am the True Vine. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the light of the world. I am the Good Shepherd."

I spoke earlier of the opportunities that are before us for a time yet to come. Many in this time of global pandemic are facing their eschatological reality, living with stress and depression. Are we still preaching about what Jesus did, or what Jesus would do? What would it look like for us to begin preaching about what Jesus has inspired us to do, and our baptismal grace enables us to do in such a time as this? Once again, I will point toward opportunities in the areas of social justice and public health for the church to reclaim its place in this present age.

"How do we stake that claim?" I am glad you asked. Fighting for access to healthcare, fighting for environmental justice for all. Working to improve the quality of education for all people. Advocating on behalf of persons suffering with mental illness or addiction. People need co-workers and not case-workers.

Who are you? Better yet, who is God calling you to become? I don't know about you today, but by the power of God's Holy Spirit I can declare, "I am a good shepherd. I provide wholistic care for the sheep God has given me as well as those who go shepherd-less."

I am a co-shepherd with Christ.
I am an ambassador for Christ.
I am an agent of reconciliation.
I am an advocate for social justice.
I am a promoter for equity in public health.
I am a follower of Christ. I am one of his disciples.
The Lord is my shepherd and his sheep I am.

Patrick Keen

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26–40
Psalm 22:25–31
1 John 4:7–21
John 15:1–8

Engaging the Texts

Acts 8:26-40

Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch cross paths in a desert place. Phillip is moved by the Holy Spirit to approach the chariot where the Ethiopian eunuch is reading from the book of Isaiah. "Of whom does the prophet speak?" the Ethiopian asks. Phillip tells him about Jesus and the plan of salvation.

There was an opportunity for Phillip to cross a boundary when he approached the chariot and an opportunity for the Ethiopian to welcome the stranger. Then came the opportunity to be baptized, as he cried out in this desert place: "See, here is water!"

Who is this Ethiopian eunuch? I am glad you asked. Perhaps you know that a eunuch is a man who has been castrated. Sometimes castration is forced, sometimes volunteered. Eunuchs serve as courtiers, domestic servants, musicians/treble singers, concubines or sexual partners, religious specialists, soldiers, royal guards, government officials, and guardians of women. I submit to you that this eunuch was a governmental official and a religious specialist, but an outcast in society looking for answers in the Word of God: "Of whom does the scripture speak?" he asks. "It sounds like a prophesy about me," thinks the eunuch.

1 John 4:7-12

This passage from 1 John proclaims the love of God for us and God's calling to put love into action. What is love? We Christians walk around as convincing, convicted liars. Where is love in our selective tolerances? Where is love when we refuse to recognize the rights guaranteed under the 14th Amendment to the Constitution of these United States? People of color who are citizens of this nation are historically and traditionally treated as chattel, or as one white racist said very openly: "we see you as superior pets."

John 15:1-8

"I am the Vine, you are the branches." The branches should be bearing fruit, much fruit. What have we done to the vine? What have we done to the Tree of Life? There are people doing harmful acts that begin with a prayer before God and end "in Jesus' name." We have polluted the tree and poisoned the Vine.

Pastoral Reflections

The Acts story is a compelling story to me because of the actions of the dominant players, Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. It is amazing to reflect on these lessons in light of where we find ourselves in current times. Who would have imagined five years ago, we would be where we are today?

What do I mean? Well, let me explain by expanding our image of the Ethiopian eunuch, placing him as the central character in each of our texts for this day. Picture this eunuch in our psalm. "My God, my God, why have you persecuted me?" Why have you brought me to this position, this place in life and now seemingly abandoned me? Others look down upon me, disregarding my position, my status. My life may be taken at any moment for any reason.

Who is this eunuch? We know this eunuch was a representative of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia, the Kingdom of Kush. One of his responsibilities was to oversee the treasury of the kingdom. He was a trusted servant, but that would not explain his study of the Hebrew scriptures. If we were to examine just a few of the many roles held by eunuchs we would discover among them "religious specialists."

This psalm speaks to the plight of a transgendered person today who faces constant criticism, persecution, and ridicule. Even transgendered persons who practice, promote, and are sure of their faith and spiritual awareness are often oppressed. Listen to this psalm as one marginalized from society through no fault of their own—whether gender preference, identity, the complexion of one's skin, or economic status.

If we were to put into action the teaching of 1 John 4:7-12, we would know that God's love calls us to put the love we profess into action. Here we are, 2000 years from the time Jesus prayed "that we be one" (John 17:21a), but it has not yet happened. The church is not one because we find more and more ways to divide ourselves. 1 John 4 also insists that it is impossible to love God whom we cannot see and hate our neighbor whom we see all the time. The church appears to be fake because of fake Christians occupying the space and controlling the narrative. It's no wonder that people are leaving the institutional church to find other means for spiritual connection.

As our gospel reveals, we are branches connected to a divine vine, with expectations of bearing fruit worth presenting before God. "What type of fruit?" I am glad you asked. Let the whole church begin by doing a better job in producing "Fruit of the Spirit." Not our own spirit, or the spirit of others we may represent, or a demonic spirit or what may be called "the fruit of the flesh: impurity, fornication, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing" but the fruit of God's Holy Spirit: the fruit of Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, the fruit of Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gen-

tleness, and Self Control. Nine items to put on our agenda to become a better church.

Let us return to the Ethiopian eunuch. Scripture does not describe the actions this eunuch/ transsexual/marginalized person was engaged in after arriving home. History, however, will inform our thinking and knowledge of what happens when we take our baptism seriously. This "Spiritual Specialist" returned home and began to tell the story of his meeting and how he had been transformed. He began manifesting the Fruit of the Spirit so profoundly that it began to transform a nation. This eunuch was a fore runner of our beloved Martin Luther who declared, "Every time I wash my face, I remember my baptism." The eunuch was fully immersed in the waters and graces of baptism—his sandals were wet from the waters of his baptism. He had "Soggy Shoes."

In 2007, after Hurricane Katrina, the ELCA was planning to hold the Youth Gathering in New Orleans. The leaders of that event were careful to consider every possible detail and eventuality that could occur to ensure a safe and meaningful experience for our youth. They were careful to talk with business, community, and political leaders to become informed on how to have a good event. They were also care-filled to include local clergy in their questions and conversations. When asked, I told them it was important that our youth leave their footprints all over this city and affected area. It would be clear that 35,000 Lutheran youth were here and left footprints from their soggy shoes. Shoes that are soaking wet from the overflow of baptismal graces.

Patrick Keen

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 9, 2021

Acts 10:44–48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1–6
John 15:9–17

Reflections on the Texts

As the Ascension draws near, we are drawn again into the bigness of God's love—bigger than anything we could conceive of. For Peter and the early church, the Holy Spirit falls further than they imagined—poured out even on the Gentiles, and even before they were baptized! For those of us who hold baptism as a prerequisite for access to the Table and communion, this might prompt a revisiting of those beliefs. What are the boundaries that our institutions have set up? Do they still serve the mission and proclamation of the Good News of God? Do new ways of understanding God at work in the world challenge or change the way we understand the pieces of our faith that we hold dear?

The context of the Acts passage is vital for understanding its scope not only for the Early Church, but also for us today. We encounter Peter in the middle of his sermon to the centurion Cornelius and his household, after God has three times declared all foods clean to Peter. In the previous encounter, the Spirit has already spelled out clearly to Peter that the false binary of clean and unclean no longer applies and that he should go to Cornelius. When Peter does, the course of his ministry and of the Church shifts significantly. This encounter, where the Holy Spirit is too impatient to wait until Peter is done preaching or until humans decide that this group is worthy or ready to be baptized, prompts our own queery: what is the Holy Spirit impatient to do in our congregations and communities? Upon whom are we astounded to find the Holy Spirit is being poured out?

For some congregations, this will spark great conversation about queer-inclusion and where God's love fits in. Tying into 1 John's exhortations to love God and the children of God through the commandments, boundaries, and commitments made with and by God for life together, 1 John lifts up God's commandments as gift rather than burden, a reminder of Martin Luther's freedom of a Christian: that we are simultaneously subject to none and servant to all. God invites us into a relationship of care and mutuality for the whole community.

First John's depiction of Jesus as the one who came by water and blood, mentioned within the context of loving community, evokes memories of childhood pacts: children spitting on their hands, or when bleeding from various adventures, shaking hands to seal their friendship. What if today were about the diversity of ways we experience love, friendships, and relationship, rather than lifting up motherhood as the one ideal?

Theologically, the mention of water and blood also connects to the sacraments as we too are joined into community through the waters of baptism and the body and blood of communion. This adds to the potential for a conversation about the purpose for the sacraments and the ways they are used as burdensome barriers or as liberative forces. Do the waters welcome and affirm? Remove and conform? Does communion provide nourishment only for those who are in? Is it only valid for those who are physically present together? Does it extend beyond the one Table to all the tables where people gather?

In exploring God's love both in 1 John and John, the questions prompted in Acts deepen in considering ways that God's love is bigger than we might have previously assumed. For those in contexts that are affirming of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, digging deeper into transgender rights, inclusion, and affirmation could prove quite fruitful. What does it

look like to love oneself in whom we are becoming? How do we affirm our love for transgender and nonbinary beloveds of God? Within the context of many statehouses passing anti-transgender bills, what role do we as people of faith have to speak out about the Holy Spirit falling upon transgender people, about trans and queer people living out the love of God, deserving protections and rights rather than discrimination and persecution?

Further, as we near one year since George Floyd was killed, congregations may be well placed to revisit commitments and declarations made in the wake of his killing. Last May and June many congregations and organizations made statements that Black Lives Matter and began book studies and conversations. A year later it may be time to revisit those statements, those studies, that work to ask: what does it now look or feel like to love God? After a year of reading and learning, are there action steps to be taken? What might it look like to, as Jesus says in the Gospel, "lay down one's life for one's friends"? For those of us who are white or serving predominantly white congregations, it's particularly important to queery who we assume is outside the scope of the Holy Spirit, outside the scope of God's love. This year, when so many young people especially, have taken to the streets out of love for their communities and for each other, what has the Church learned from them? How have they been the Spirit, challenging our ideas of clean and unclean? How have they shown us what love looks like? How can we join them not just in word, but in deed as well?

Emily Ewing (they/them)

Ascension Day
Thursday, May 13, 2021

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

While the particular Ascension Day readings in Acts and Luke provide the gift of a deconstructed play that covers beginnings and endings that are actually the middle of the story, the Ephesians reading brings a helpful depth and starting point to this festival. After the initial greetings and praise to God, the author of Ephesians frames their letter in a prayer of love and gratitude, reminding the Early Church, "I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers." Throughout Lent this year, the congregation I serve received prayer calendars and prayed for different households or organizations each day. It was a way of connecting with each other and with God during a second Lent of disconnection.

As Ephesians begins, the love and care expressed prompts our own reflection, wondering what it could look like to take time, even during the sermon itself, to put people in breakout rooms of two or three on Zoom to give thanks for each other? Or perhaps each group could pray Ephesians 1:15-19 by replacing each "you" with another person's name. Festivals like Ascension create space within congregations to do things a bit differently. Just as Jesus' ascension is depicted uniquely in Luke compared to Acts, festivals invite us to try something new or different. What does it look like to embrace the care and majesty of Ephesians in a new way?

In the ancient world, Jesus' ascension, presumably into heaven, relies on a stratification of a hell beneath us, then earth where humans live, and heaven above us. Since then, science has advanced, and space exploration continues to increase, our knowledge of the vastness of the cosmos. The majesty and power alluded to in Ephesians call to mind a cosmic Christ, existing among galaxies and constellations, in supernovas and black holes, inviting us to reflect on the ways that just as Jesus ascends, so too, our prayers for each other ascend like stardust throughout the cosmos.

Continuing this cosmic connection, Jesus' ascension evokes memories of Jacob's ladder in Genesis. Jacob dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder to the heavens, while God appears alongside Jacob. The Ascension flips the script on Jacob's ladder so that God incarnate ascends while the angels appear at the side of the apostles. For further juxtaposition, Jacob's dream occurs in the middle of the night at a place he calls Bethel; Jesus ascends from Bethany, presumably during the day. Some congregations may celebrate the day with early morning worship.

Even with these juxtapositions, both Jacob's ladder and Jesus' ascension queer the assumed relationships between humans and the divine. One brings God's presence closer than imagined while the other expands God's presence, even incarnate, back into the whole cosmos, inviting humanity to experience God's presence in both the most intimate and the most expansive ways.

For some congregations, Ascension Day is a day celebrated or marked during the week for the festival always falls on a Thursday. This could be a Thursday morning sunrise service, outdoor worship on top of a hill, or simply blowing bubbles in the sun or wind. Other congregations are likely to move Ascension Day to the last Sunday before Pentecost, drawing attention even more explicitly to Pentecost and the Holy Spirit. The intentional ten days between Jesus' ascension, leaving the apostles, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit connects with the liminal space that we are in now as a country and world. The vaccine is here and yet the pandemic is still not over. Racism and white supremacy have been identified as sin and yet they still hold deep power in this country and

the world. Climate change's impact on the world is becoming increasingly obvious, yet we still have time to correct our course. In this in-between time, how does your congregation need to prepare for the Holy Spirit? How might we grieve Jesus' ascension, the perceived loss of Love Incarnate, even while anticipating the Holy Spirit's presence?

In this liminal space of wondering, we are invited to join in the apostles' question in Acts, "is this the time…?" We ask: is this the time when we will finally stop the pandemic? Is this the time when racial justice will be reality? Is this the time when we will embrace the new tools for accessibility we have been forced into this last year? Is this the time we will prepare for and address climate change? Is this the time when we will finally be able to hug without fear? Is this the time when we will learn from this pandemic?

The depictions and connections to the Ascension in both Acts and Luke invite us into more questions and reflections on the different ways we each experience the same event. Whether it is Ephesians' prayers and praise of a Cosmic Christ or the presence of angels when Jesus ascends, each reading draws us into both the intimacy of our faith and the expansiveness of our spirituality—the knowledge of relationship and the wonder of mystery.

Emily Ewing (they/them)

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 16, 2021

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Psalm 1
1 John 5:9-13
John 17:6-19

Engaging the Texts

The lessons for the Seventh Sunday of Easter lay a foundation for our observance of Pentecost, coming next week. To prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit, the texts invite us to consider what those who knew Jesus saw in him, believed about him, and what it means to follow him. The lesson from Acts speaks to bearing witness to Jesus' resurrection. The epistle explores what it means to give testimony to the gift of eternal life. The gospel reveals something of what the future holds for those who follow the way of Christ.

There is a sense of inevitability about those who are called to bear witness to Jesus' power in the text from Acts. In verse 24 we read, "Lord, you know everyone's heart." The successor to Judas is already known to God, and the remaining disciples only seek to know whom God has already chosen. This reverses the way the church often speaks about discernment. Rather than seeking to discern whom they should choose, the disciples seek to discern whom God has already chosen for them. It may be a subtle difference, but there is liberation in asking, "What has God chosen for me?" rather than, "What does God want me to choose?"

The most graphic details of Judas' fate are left out of the lectionary (Acts 1:18-20). While we might not want to read those traumatizing words in worship, the tragedy of Judas' death might help us place ourselves emotionally in the story as we prepare to preach. To feel the crushing sorrow Jesus and the disciples felt in the wake of Judas' betrayal and death underscores the love they had shared.

The Gospel reading, a prayer, comes at the end of Jesus' farewell to his disciples in chapters 14-17. These are his last words before his arrest in the garden. As Jesus prays, we overhear his desires for those who will remain when he is gone, for the disciples and for us. His prayer brings us into that sacred place of knowing the worry, the hope, and the love Jesus has for those who bear witness to his transformative power.

Unlike the Lord's Prayer, found in Matthew and Luke, this prayer is not an instructive pattern teaching us how to pray. Rather, this is a prayer from Jesus' own heart for those dearest to him. He asks, just as we ask for our dearest ones, that they might be protected, find joy, be made holy, and be kept close to one another and to God. Finally, he asks that they would be sanctified in truth, something many would say is in short supply these days.

Pastoral Reflections

Recently on the morning news a woman expressed her deep pain; her father was among those who stormed the United States Capitol in the insurrection on January sixth. The reporter asked her, "Do you still love him?" In tears she said, "Of course, I do. He is my father." Her story left me wondering about so many families who now look at one another in dismay. It was an extreme illustration of what has become too common. Relationships are torn apart by political betrayals and by systems that seem, almost inevitably, to separate us from one another.

The story in Acts of Judas' betrayal of Jesus and the disciples' grief and disorientation might be painfully relevant to the lives of many in our congregations. People they love dearly may now seem to be strangers to them. So much might be off limits for discussion. Phone conversations might be stilted and brief. Bonds that held them together might be strained, perhaps broken. The separateness imposed by the pandemic combined with the political tensions have left many uncertain what is left of the relationships that formed and nurtured them.

Into all this pain, these texts call for proclamation of the profound and sacred ways God's love can sustain us through all the struggles that following Jesus will inevitably bring. In

Jesus' moving and heartfelt prayer in the gospel, we glimpse the love shared among Jesus' disciples. He prays for a community that must bear the great burden of love for those the world does not love and who will carry the cross on behalf of those who suffer injustice. This bond is like the bond of family. Faithfulness to one another would be essential to their survival if they follow Christ's path.

His prayer reveals that authentic and deeply committed community in Jesus means hope for the future. This proclamation is not about pious platitudes, wishful thinking, or entreaties to "just get along." Trite attempts to unite across divisions will not carry the weight of what is to come for Jesus' disciples, or for us. Now we need a strong word. Christ is present to sustain us in the deep commitment, love, and trust of Christian community.

The pain we feel when human bonds are broken is deep and real; still, we take another step. We are guided to communities that will sustain us. Our families will always be our families. Our dearest friends will always hold an important and tender place in our hearts. But, when the bonds are strained to breaking, we are not abandoned. We are held in Christ's strengthening and grace-filled embrace manifested in community of God's people. For those who find themselves estranged even from the support of Christian community, Christ assures us then of the promise of the Spirit who prays for us, stays close to us, loves us, and gives us hope.

Jeff Sartain

Pentecost Sunday
May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21 (or Ezekiel 37:1-14)
Psalm 104:24-34
Romans 8:22-27 (or Acts 2:1-21)
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Reflections on Pentecost

Prepare for a dive into the deep end, or maybe a push into a sea of prophecy, suffering, mystery, promise, courage, hope, fear, dying, and rising. The breath of God blows across time and space through Ezekiel's valley of brittle bones to the disciples' awe-struck empowerment in Acts 2. Jesus promises the Advocate in John, and in Romans Paul describes the ways this Advocate/helper intercedes when words fail us. The Spirt comes, promised and surprising, violent and comforting, groaning and sighing. Images leap off the page igniting our imaginations. Even our familiarity with the stories cannot tame these texts.

The Acts passage will likely be the focus for many preachers this Sunday. The disciples, including the newly appointed Matthias, are all together in one place for the observance of the Feast of Shavuot. Some translations say they were "of one accord in one place," emphasizing the unity of heart and purpose that had been re-established after Judas' betrayal. The stage is set.

Enter the Spirit. What happened is a mystery. Something that sounded like a violent wind filled the house. Something that appeared like tongues of fire appeared and rested upon them. Not wind, exactly, nor fire, exactly, but with something like wind and fire, the Holy Spirit came. The Spirit's miracle was primarily one of speaking not of hearing. The disciples spoke in the specific languages of immigrants to Jerusalem, representing "every nation under heaven" (vs. 5). This is not the same as the spirit-inspired speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) of 1 Corinthians 14 and other places in scripture. The speaking at Pentecost was unique, a sign that Jesus' disciples were empowered beyond their natural abilities to proclaim God's deeds of power to the whole world. The experience unsettled the hearers. They asked, "What does this mean?" Whoever suggested that the disciples were drunk does not offer a very convincing explanation; who can suddenly speak another language because they have had too much wine? This grasping at explanations highlights the crowd's confusion.

Peter seizes the moment to begin his sermon that draws heavily on trusted sources, the prophet, Joel, and the psalmist, David. Because the lectionary ends at verse 21, we hear only the first of three sections of Peter's address that goes on through verse 36. The initial confusion gave way to an ultimate conversion. "They were cut to the heart" (vs. 37) and some 3,000 persons were baptized and joined in community.

The gospel reading is John's "Pentecost," the coming of the spirit that will "guide you into all truth." This truth will be hard to take. Jesus says, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." What more could possibly be coming? Already they have heard that he will suffer, die, and be raised. Already he has warned them that they will suffer persecution, be kicked out of the synagogues, and even killed (the lectionary leaves out these dire warnings in John 16:1-4.) What is coming, Jesus says, is truth–all the truth!

Gathered in a church basement, a conflicted congregation (clearly not of one accord) struggled to hear one another across a deep divide. The congregation council had proposed a vote fully to welcome sexual minority people. Clinging to civility by their fingernails, but rapidly losing their grip, they took turns speaking their understanding of truth. An elderly man, clearly upset, stood from his folding chair and raised his voice. Reminiscent of Peter in the Acts story, he shouted, "What this church needs is the wind of the Holy Spirit to blow through this place." The woman next to him, presumably his wife, remained seated, and tugged his sport coat saying, "Sit down! That is the last thing we need right now."

Perhaps she was right. Or perhaps the passion the man felt and the unrest in the congregation *were* the presence of the Spirit blowing among them that day. We have heard in these lessons that it is unsettling when the Spirit comes, befuddling, astonishing, perplexing, upsetting.

The texts invite us to consider if we can bear the truth the Holy Spirit brings. As preachers, we are left asking, "What is the hard truth we are being guided into today?" One clear and relevant truth, hard as it is to bear, is the role predominantly white main-stream Christian denominations play in the oppression of black, indigenous and all people of color. Our desire, in white culture, to be good people who have always been on the right side of history often blocks us from hearing this truth. Our traditions, many of them, established institutions that systematically hold back people of color. Our church financial organizations helped white immigrants build wealth while keeping people of color the objects of charity. Some of our colleges denied admission to black students. Many of our churches explicitly taught the subjugation of native people. It is more than we can bear but it is a truth that must be spoken.

Speaking this truth in predominantly white churches requires courage, inspiration, creativity, imagination, and love. Fortunately, the Spirit intercedes even when we do not have the words, and we trust that the ultimate truth is always God's grace.

We may not convert 3,000 people this Pentecost as Peter did, but some of us might be inspired to speak truth so boldly that people will wonder if we are drunk!

Jeff Sartain

Holy Trinity Sunday
May 30, 2021

Isaiah 6:1–8
Psalm 29
Romans 8:12–17
John 3:1–17

Reflections on the Texts

As the Lutheran Campus Pastor at the University of Minnesota, one of my great joys is the abundance of opportunities to enter into interfaith conversations, especially with the Muslim students who gather for Friday prayers each week at Grace University Lutheran Church (the same place that our Christian community gathers to worship on Wednesday night). Over the years that I've been in ministry in this place, I've come to expect that a question about the "Holy Trinity" will be one of the first and most earnest questions I receive in a panel discussion. This is in large part because for our Muslim siblings, it contrasts so clearly with Islam's profession of faith in the oneness of God. The beautiful part about these questions is that it opens up a big space for many Christian students to step up and say, "It's confusing to us too!"

The texts for this week are rich and compelling enough that they can certainly stand on their own. Some have been chosen for the trinitarian affirmations that can be found within them, though the word "trinity" is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Isaiah speaks to the limitations of human speech, and the necessity of humility in the face of an experience of God. If this isn't the week to tackle "confusing," there is still plenty of great preaching to go around. If the idea of unpacking the Holy Trinity is interesting to you, read on.

At one of these interfaith panels, right before COVID-19 lockdowns began, I found myself next to a brilliant young Islamic scholar. I came to engage in pastoral conversation. I was ready with bits and pieces of Christian history and theology, but primarily concerned with lifting up questions that Christians had wrestled with throughout time. He came with a notebook full of inconsistencies in Trinitarian theology and a solid academic argument for the oneness of God. We were speaking very different languages. At one point I simply stopped him and said as much, and then asked for a chance to speak from my experience of God (rather than quoting ancient church fathers arguing about the trinitarian controversy, or recent theology putting all the words in the right order). For me, words about the Trinity will always fall flat in relationship to the experience of the Trinity.

Whether it is felt experience, our scripture today, or within Christian theology, the beauty of the Holy Trinity is that it holds in tension both the immanence and the transcendence of God. The transcendence, the bigness, the mystery, the ultimate unknowability of God is awe-inspiring, AND the immanence of God that we experience through Christ doesn't undo that. Holy Trinity Sunday follows directly after Pentecost. After that incredible experience of God's showing up in this new way, the only response is humility, an admission of the limitations of our knowledge of God and God's ways. Holy Trinity Sunday gives us permission to say from the pulpit, "This IS confusing!" and "Won't it be fun to learn about God together!"

In *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "What if people were invited to come tell what they already know of God instead of to learn what they are supposed to believe? What if they were blessed for what they are doing in the world instead of chastened for not doing more at church? What if church felt more like a way station than a destination?"

As preachers, we have the chance to talk about John 3:16 this week. Over the years, this verse has been used in so many ways and to serve so many agendas, many of them causing great spiritual harm. I wonder if we might not use the call to

mystery that we're invited into on this Holy Trinity Sunday to read the first part of that verse with emphasis: "For God so loved the world…" God loved the world. God loves this world, and the people in it. What might happen if we reached out beyond our congregations into the world God loves with curiosity? What if we invited our neighbors to tell us about their experience of the Holy? Or, what if we invited people within our congregations to share their stories? What might happen if we set aside our need to teach people words about God, and instead offered an invitation to share in the experience of God? What might we learn about the ways God is showing up within and beyond us?

There will be time to share beloved prayers and teachings from this ancient tradition which is always being made new. At some point, felt experience seeks a container, and doctrine and theology are a beautiful way to give that experience structure. As more and more people lack traditional language about God and experience within Christian community, leading with "shoulds" and "oughts" is not going to extend the reach of God's love made known in community. This way of relating also radically underestimates the capacity of God to act beyond our own imaginations, experience, and context.

It is a gift to lead in such a complicated time, and to be given scripture and theology which is up to the task. Expansive. Complex. Concrete. Beyond us all. Let us sing with the seraphs, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Kate Reuer-Welton

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 6, 2021

Genesis 3:8–15
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1
Mark 3:20–35

Engaging the Texts

The texts today are full of words and images that can be particularly troublesome for our twenty-first century imaginations: sin, evil, Satan, leaving family behind and a mention of "eternal sin." That's a lot. For your people struggling with shame, these lessons will land a certain way. For your people coming from dysfunctional or abusive families, these lessons will land a different way. Good news abounds in these texts, though it takes some work to get there.

In the third chapter of Mark, Jesus is helping his disciples, the crowds, the scribes, and his family understand the ways that God's reign will be disruptive to both the kingdoms of this world and to cultural norms as well. It may be worth spending some time with the "eternal sin" Jesus addresses in verse 29, particularly because people carry cultural ideas about what this sin is within them. In this context, the eternal, unforgivable sin Jesus references is the scribes' misattribution of the work of the Holy Spirit. In claiming that Jesus' healing is the work of the devil, they reveal both that their hearts are hardened to the work of God and that they cannot imagine God working outside of their purview. Dr. Matthew Skinner writes,

> The verb commonly translated "forgiven" (*aphiemi*, as in Mark 3:28) operates out of a sense of "released" or "freed." Whatever we understand "forgiveness" to entail—in any context—has to involve more than simply eluding punishment or escaping responsibility for a misdeed. Jesus' comments about blasphemy appear to be describing a person who has utterly surrendered to a disdainful existence that has renounced all openness to God. (*Workingpreacher.org; June 10, 2018, Matthew Skinner*)

In the Gospel of Mark, where there is healing, wholeness, and abundance, where familial bonds extend beyond tribe and family, there is God and God's new reign. That is good news. The Holy Spirit was at work, and remains at work, and Jesus insists we open our hearts to receive that news.

The remainder of the texts speak to our recognition of sin, evil, and brokenness in our lives and in our world. Psalm 130 is a tender testament to the forgiveness of God, and could (and perhaps should) stand right next to a reading of Mark's "eternal sin." Second Corinthians speaks to reconciliation, the ways Jesus draws us into himself, and to the power of community in our life of faith. In the third chapter of Genesis, we have our first glimpse of human sin. This familiar, multilayered story is a vivid entry point into recognition of human brokenness and our participation in it. At the same time, this pericope has also been interpreted in harmful ways, attributing the fall of humanity and sin itself to Eve, and thus to women. Given that the words "sin" and "fall" are not used in this passage, and that Eve wasn't the only creature disobeying God in the garden, it is worth wondering with your people where these harmful, culturally rooted, interpretations might have come from.

Pastoral Reflections

As I write in early 2021, it's apparent that in the United States, we no longer carry a common definition of the truth, or how we arrive at the truth. Distrust in institutions and new depths of polarization have taken us to the point where people can watch the same event unfolding and believe very different things about what happened. It's not just the meaning of the event that is arguable, but the actual event itself.

"Blasphemy!" everyone seems to call. As someone in my mid-40's, who remembers evening news and the morning paper as trustworthy and reliable, this recent turn is stunning to me.

In the text from Mark, and in the chapter before it, Jesus accuses the scribes of blasphemy. Blasphemy is one of the severest charges Jesus makes, and points to a lack of respect for God, especially claiming divine powers for yourself or for Satan. As I read this text, I found myself wondering if I had ever committed blasphemy in this way, and I wondered if parishioners will wonder as well. If the scribes' misattribution of Jesus' healing powers to Satan (instead of God) is indeed an "eternal sin," I wonder how that will land with listeners? Will they get nervous about their own agency in deciding what is of God and what is not? Will they attribute the good things in their lives to the work of God, and if so, whose definition of "good" is being used? How will they know what is "of God"? What do you think? These are live questions for our culture, and this text offers an opportunity to enter into them. If we don't begin these conversations in our churches, people will find other places to engage with them.

We would do well to enter this conversation with humility, to be more descriptive than prescriptive, and stay close to scripture. This text opens an opportunity for us to tread carefully through the waters of competing narratives of truth. It offers the opportunity for people to discover how they navigate these times. What is their North Star? What is their ultimate truth? As we consider God's activity in the world, a thick description of Mark's kingdom theology becomes helpful, especially with its emphasis on the "now, but not yet," nature of God's reign. In Mark, we know God is present on the margins. We know God is present when there is healing, wholeness, and opportunities for restoration. We know God is present where grace abounds and where costly discipleship leads to new life. With the help of God, we can walk with our people, and together shine light on God's activity in their lives, and in the life of the world.

Kate Reuer-Welton

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 13, 2021

Ezekiel 17:22–24
Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15
2 Corinthians 5:6–10, [11–13], 14–17
Mark 4:26–34

Engaging the Gospel Text

The fourth chapter of Mark has the smell of earth and growing things about it. "Listen, a sower went out to sow," Jesus says, imagining a farmer sowing seed. Despite the eventual welcoming soil that produces a bumper crop, there is a sobering sense of realism permeating this parable—some of the seed either never, or only for a time, sees the light of day.

This gospel reading continues the seed motif of chapter four but with a remarkable difference. All the seeds in these two parables grow into maturity presumably independent of the kinds of soil in which they were sown. There is an air of eschatological inevitability in these two parables that generates a confidence in the listener/reader that God's empire of justice, peace, and love is growing relentlessly toward a climax which promises to supplant the existing systems of injustice, fear, and despair under which humanity now suffers.

Several elements of these two parables stand out:

- God's activity is largely hidden from view—like a seed growing beneath the surface. Not only is the seed's growth hidden, the odds for an abundant harvest seem like a long shot given the puny insignificance of the seeds sown. Therefore, the disciples (and, by extension, the church) must be schooled in the mysteries of God's strange behavior (vv. 33 and 34) in order to be able to "see" what is hidden beneath the surface and expectantly anticipate the future God is bringing about where the birds of the air (an image often used in the Hebrew scriptures to represent the nations) find rest and joy.
- As if he anticipates the questions about "how" and "when" this glad outcome will come about given the massive evidence to the contrary, Jesus portrays the farmer as oblivious to the intricacies of seed growth and ignorant of when and how the harvest will appear. The farmer seems to appreciate the division of labor in this enterprise. The farmer plants and then is willing to live with ambiguity and uncertainty, trusting a process that is now in the hands of another.
- The farmer waits and watches in hope, understanding that a quick harvest is not promised. However, one gets the impression that this waiting is not passive. The farmer sleeps and rises night after night, day after day; that is, she/he goes about the daily tasks, living "as if" the seeds are already sprouting and the harvest has already come.

Pastoral Reflections

Before rushing to proclaim the message of the gospel reading, the preacher would do well to remind the congregation about the two audiences who first heard the parables of the seed. Both audiences came to the parables with a sense of cultural hopelessness, anxiety, and fear. Jesus' audience around 30 CE were mostly subsistence farmers and fishers who, beside the daily humiliation of living under a brutal tyranny, were materially impoverished by Rome's demand to hand over to Rome and the chief priests and scribes an estimated 20 to 40 percent of their crops, catch, or herds.

Forty years later, Mark's audience heard these parables at the moment that Rome was violently putting down a Jewish rebellion with the destruction of the Temple, the devastation of the land with its attendant starvation, and the crucifixion of untold numbers of their neighbors.

As the preacher sets the historical context, her/his twenty-first century audience will already be nodding its collective head, seeing themselves in Jesus' and Mark's first century audience recognizing that they, too, have cultural fears and anxieties; that they have swallowed the same lies about scarcity and despair; that they have the same difficulty seeing God at work in the midst of blatant injustice, and that they suffer from the same lack of imagination about how God can redeem the mess we have made of our cities, nation, and world.

It is at this point that the good news of the seed parables can be understood—that in spite of what seems like a hopeless contest between Jesus' mustard seed-like message and movement against entrenched and unjust political, economic (and yes, religious) systems and in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, God is busy bringing a harvest to fruition, though, like the farmer, we cannot plumb the mysteries of how and when.

This day the preacher has the privilege of inviting the church to claim a revolutionary and busy hope. As Oberlin College Professor Emeritus David Orr has said somewhere: "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up." The preacher's task is reminding Christians that despair is not an option, and neither is feckless and glib optimism. "Hope is the sweet spot," Orr says. "If you're hopeful, you have to be active." Like the farmer in the parables, Christians are content to defer to God's timing and God's methods, but are resolutely unwilling to passively wait on the final harvest. Our hope has its sleeves rolled up, collectively behaving "as if" the harvest has already come by being a quiet voice of reconciliation and the insistent builder of organized power to do justice. In short, to be a sign of God's future when all people shall finally find shade and contentment.

Ron Luckey

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 20, 2021

Job 38:1–11
Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32
2 Corinthians 6:1–13
Mark 4:35–41

Engaging the Gospel Text

If the gospel reading last week pointed to the hiddenness of God's present activity and the necessary waiting period for coming to fruition, today's gospel reading conveys a radically different message, that of God's overwhelming and obvious activity in the present time.

After a long block of teachings (3:13–4:34), today's gospel reading contains the first of a series of Jesus' acts of power as he leaves Galilee to travel across the lake into Gentile territory. This series of miracles includes two exorcisms, four healings, and two feedings of large crowds.

Up to now in Mark's gospel, Jesus has been shown to be a teacher "with authority." In today's story we see that Jesus' authority extends beyond "the classroom" to a mastery over nature, successfully contending against an adversary as powerful as a life-threatening storm at sea. This will not be the last occasion in Mark's gospel in which Jesus demonstrates his dominance over winds and waves (6:45-52.)

In the ancient mind, the sea was a realm of chaos, the habitat of demonic monsters bent on the destruction of humanity. As such it was a metaphor for all the evil forces arrayed against God and God's people.

It is not difficult to imagine the audience for Mark's story conjuring in their minds stories learned at their mothers' knees—the spirit of God moving over the seething waters in creation, Moses parting the obstructive Red Sea, Jonah and his shipmates in the boat swamped by the waves, and psalms such as Psalm 107 (the psalm appointed for this day) which basically tells the story of Mark 4:35-41 in poetic form.

These stories and poetry from Hebrew scripture are the theological background for the motif of the christological epiphany in this story of Jesus' triumphant power over forces of chaos and destruction. This story also contains a strong ecclesiological emphasis on faith that should, but often does not, characterize the church's relationship with God. Having received the privilege of being called to be a part of Jesus' beloved community and having received instruction on the mysteries of the faith, the disciples' lack of faith in this stormy circumstance demonstrates that, in Mark's gospel, faith is never a destination reached but a journey that is on-going.

Mark's original audience encountered this text during Rome's brutal repression during the Jewish rebellion of 66-73

CE. They would surely have heard this story in light of their own desperate and death-dealing circumstances. One can imagine them hearing Jesus' rebuke of the disciples' fear as addressed to them and would have taken courage in his call to trust in a power stronger than the wind and the sea.

Pastoral Reflections

This gospel reading is one of the most familiar stories in scripture. The problem with familiar Bible stories is that we think we know all there is to know. This text is about God's power and the need to trust God in hard times, case closed. While the nature of God and the challenges of discipleship are here, there is so much more going on in this story. There are more, but here are three homiletical possibilities:

- Jesus and his disciples are not only in a dangerous place, they are also going to, if not a dangerous place, at least a daring and unwelcoming one, Gentile territory. So, while the stilling of the storm is a demonstration of Jesus' power over the winds and waves, his desire to go "to the other side" of the lake demonstrates his intention to extend the reach of his power and authority to "those people." This becomes a story of Jesus' embrace of the stranger and the church's responsibility to do the same.
- The disciples' accusation against Jesus, "Do you not care that we are perishing?" provides an occasion for the preacher to give voice to the human longing to understand God's seeming unconcern in the midst of personal trials as well as national divisions and upheaval. If the preacher chooses to concentrate on this aspect of the story, she/he might remind the congregation of last week's gospel reading which lifted up the mystery of the hiddenness of God's activity.
- I am captivated by the question the disciples ask each other when the storm ceases—"Who, then, is this that even the wind and sea obey him?" It is a profound christological question with enormous ecclesiological implications. "Who, then, is this Christ for us as a congregation?" Just as the storm becomes the occasion for the disciples' seeking clarity about Jesus' identity and their need for faith, so local, national, and world crises become occasions for asking critical questions of faith. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the church to seek greater clarity about what it means to be the church in the wake of a profound societal and cultural storm. What has the church in general, and the congregation in particular, learned about Jesus' presence and power as it has been forced to "do church" in new and innovative ways? Are there aspects of the church's ministry that we have learned are of lasting importance and activities once considered essential that we have discovered are actually chaff that can be discarded? What has the church learned about its role as justice-doers in a society where the pandemic has revealed its unequal impact on vulnerable populations—surfacing economic inequities, particularly in regard to health care access and vaccine distribution? These kinds of questions can and ought to be raised regarding a whole catalogue of storms—gun violence, the wealth gap, mass incarceration, racial and class divisions. The storms and the questions are endless.

Ron Luckey

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 27, 2021

Lamentations 3:22–33 [or Wisdom 1:13–15; 2:23–24]
Psalm 30
2 Corinthians 8:7–15
Mark 5:21–43

Engaging the Texts

Today's allotment of scripture lessons is balm for souls aching from long illness and sudden death. As we together look up from the COVID-19 pandemic—and the isolation, death, and profound change that has accompanied it—these texts ring. Listen to the song of God at work in the world. Learn the lyrics by heart—the poetry of lives opening up, vitality where there had been only relentless obstacles, only death.

Lamentations 3:22–33

Faith that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end.

Psalm 30

Healing and hope come with the new day, even after a night spent weeping.

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

A proclamation of fairness and balance, so that "The one who has much does not have *too* much, and the one who has little does not have *too* little." The healing of inequities.

Mark 5:21-43

Interrupted, interwoven stories of need, and Jesus' command to "Arise!"

Pastoral Reflections

This Sunday's gospel text pairs two stories about seeking healing. It shows us lives interrupted by illness and death. And the

need to act, even when we must wait for results.

In the first story, Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, acts on behalf of his twelve-year-old daughter, suddenly ill, who—the terrible news comes—dies even while he is out seeking Jesus' help. In the second story (inserted into the first), a hemorrhaging woman in the crowd, isolated by an illness that renders her "unclean," has fruitlessly sought healing for twelve years. She hopes against hope that reaching out yet again will finally cleanse her of her illness.

In both cases, healing begins even before the passionate appeals touch Jesus directly. Healing begins the moment those involved recognize these illnesses as real, and they choose to act to address them. One agent moves ahead urgently, the other steadily over twelve years.

In fact, the illnesses are so serious, the need so deep, that usual protocols have to be abandoned. Interrupted. Life simply cannot continue on as they have known it.

Stuff happens. Things aren't neat in real life and they aren't neat in our faith life, either. Expectations and direction change.

One helpful way to read today's gospel is as a continuing story of interruptions.

Jesus, busy with a crowd of people, is interrupted by a request to attend to just one. On his way to that needy person, he is interrupted again by awareness of one among the many, a woman who touches his garment with intent to be healed. While he is still speaking to the woman and acknowledging her kinship with him ("Daughter, your faith has made you well"), Jesus is interrupted yet again by people coming to say, "Never mind, it's too late. The girl is dead." Nonetheless, he continues. He stages an interruption of the grief already underway at the girl's home. The girl rises.

Jesus understands the changes and chances of life. And he understands the interruption of death, giving us signs of God's ultimate will in the midst. During my pastoral ministry, I have found myself often returning to a classic collection of five sermons preached by Leslie Weatherhead to his London parishioners during WWII, when the world was crashing down around them. Troubled by desperate and unwittingly cruel and unfaithful comments he would hear ("It was God's will that…"), Weatherhead sought to respect the tremendous losses endured *and* to speak faithfully about God's will—the intentional, the circumstantial, and the ultimate will of God.

The reality is that our ordinary life is interrupted by crisis, by sorrow and loss, by death. Our lives are also interrupted by graciousness, by openings when everything is closed, by new and renewed life. God is faithful in all of these circumstances.

A second pastoral way to consider this story would be to face head-on the different ways we hear news of healing, depending upon our circumstances.

These gospel stories of restoration to health, even when it's too late (the news comes that the little girl has already died), are, at the very least, poignant and—at worst—unbearably *painful* for those whose prayers for healing did *not* avail against the death of a beloved child. Painful for those whose illness, despite their prayers, has *not* been overcome.

It is important, whenever we rejoice over health restored, that we hold the complex challenges to faith and to life in which others, who have not experienced that same miracle, live. Likewise, it is important that those of us who haven't experienced that miracle of restored health still be able to rejoice when it comes to others. Judgments about faith and favor must be set aside. This is difficult to do, especially when today's text itself seems to hold up the faith of the hemorrhaging woman as pivotal to her healing and, in the case of restoring the little girl to life, gives us an instance of what looks to be gracious divine intervention or favor.

It's important that you, as pastor, speak of how inspiring it is to see your parishioners' perseverance in prayer, their trust that God works all things together for good. It's important that you give heartfelt thanks for God's graciousness poured out among them in unexpected places, often hidden to you.

But it is equally important for people to hear that you will never make a judgment about them or an event in their life that equates faithfulness with good fortune. Never.

Rather, you will continue to give thanks to God for both whenever you see them—for the gift of faith *and* for the gift of good fortune, which are not one and the same.

Amid all of the changes and chances of life, God has shown us the greatest mystery of all in Jesus' full presence with us in life, in suffering, and even in and through death. And so it is that we know that whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

Susan Plocher Thomas