Preaching Helps

April 3–June 26, 2022:
Fifth Sunday in Lent through
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Preaching in the Postscript

Many of us are wondering if real live people will fill the sanctuary on Easter Sunday. Do we dare to imagine that we will ever be living in post-Covid time? We thought we were living in post-Cold War time but as I write these words, Russia is viciously attacking Ukraine as a step to establish the glory of its empire.

What were the disciples doing in post-resurrection time? "I'm going fishing," said Simon Peter. "We will go with you," said the others. It wasn't a very profound conversation. Why would Simon Peter go fishing after Jesus had appeared to him and the others saying, "Peace be with you"? Why would Nathanael go? He was from the hill country—he wasn't even a fisherman! Why would Thomas go after Jesus showed him his wounded hands and side? Hadn't Thomas proclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas should be out preaching, not fishing.

This fishing story comes in John 21. We'll hear it on the Third Sunday of Easter. The writer for this issue of Preaching Helps focuses on the Acts text for that Sunday so I'm not trying to correct anything he says there! I'm simply fascinated by why this story is here at all. John's gospel already ended in chapter 20—after Jesus called Mary Magdalene by name, after the risen Jesus breathed on the disciples saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Listen to how chapter 20 ends:

> "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in Jesus' name." (John 20:30–31)

That's the end. Close the book.

But it isn't the end. After saying there are many other signs which are not written in this book, John writes more in the book! Or someone else added it after John finished writing—it doesn't matter! Here it is! The story begins all over. After everything was written that needed to be written. A postscript. Another chapter and another ending. Why did they leave both endings? Surely a scribe could have cleaned that up long ago. This is the wonder of scripture: everything isn't cleaned up. The Bible isn't tidy. I used to worry about this messiness. Now I believe this is the Spirit's wisdom to give us a fuller picture…

> *Two creation stories—no attempt to fit them together to make more sense*
> *Two completely different nativity stories—one with shepherds and angels, the other with magi and a star*
> *Two endings to the Gospel of John*

And this last ending sounds more like the beginning, doesn't it? We hear the story with a strange sense of *déjà vu*. The disciples fish all night and catch nothing. At dawn, Jesus appears on the shore (but they don't know him). "Children, you have no fish, have you?" Clearly, Jesus already knows the answer. We do, too. We've heard this story before. "No," they shout back over the water. "Cast your net to the right side of the boat and you will find some." We know what will happen. They'll throw out the net and it will soon be filled with so many fish they can barely haul it in. We know this story—but it shouldn't be here at the end. It belongs at the beginning, when Jesus first called Simon Peter and the sons of Zebedee to fish for people.

That's where the story comes in Luke's gospel. But not in John. In John it's at the end, in the postscript. On the Monday that always comes after Sunday when the music has died down and the lilies have wilted. We could speculate forever about every detail of this text. Why was Simon Peter naked? Why did he put on his clothes to swim to shore? Why such a specific number of fish—153? Augustine ventured that 153 was the sum of all the numbers from 1 to 17. Break 17 into 10 and 7 you get the 10 Commandments and the 7 gifts of the Spirit. Finally, Augustine said, "It's a mystery."

Or, as Jesus said, "Come and have breakfast." Don't worry if you can't explain everything. Later in this chapter, Jesus turns to Simon Peter and says, "Follow me" —as though for the first time. Follow me in the postscript—after you've closed the book. The postscript is important. Postscript doesn't mean after-thought after all. Imagine that you've gone away on a long trip and you write a letter to someone you love. You describe what you're doing and everything you've seen—majestic mountains, exciting cities, concerts and plays, ancient temples, exotic markets, interesting people, glorious beaches. You sign your name, then:

> *"P.S. I miss you more than I can say."*

The postscript makes all the difference. It is surely as important as the mountains and the marketplaces.

We yearn for a word in the postscript. For we live in post-times: post-Christendom, post-Enlightenment, post-modern. It's hard to live in the post-script, hard to be open when we've closed the book. Jesus knew it would be so. Before he died, when he sat at table with his disciples for the last time, he told them, "I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you."

Jesus came after the story ended. He came to Galilee where the disciples had gone back to what they were doing before. It could have been a Monday. Whatever day it was, they had closed the book. They went fishing.

There are many reasons people decide to close the book. I don't mean just the people out on the street, but those of us inside the churches. When I was in confirmation, we memorized Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed. Each section ended with "This is most certainly true." If we forgot the rest, we said those words with gusto! Close the book—we wouldn't ever have to learn anything again. Absolute certainty can close us to Jesus' coming in new ways—after confirmation—in the postscript. There are days when we tally up whether Christianity has done more harm than good. Some of us have been harmed by the church because of divorce or sexuality or shame or simply asking too many questions. Some of us who preach have closed the book. But something brought us back. Sometimes it was an emptiness we can't even name. Sometimes, nostalgia for a story we gave up long ago in favor of more reasonable answers—and we discover that our yearning was deeper than nostalgia. Hopefully, we and the people sitting in the sanctuary will hear Jesus say, "Come and have breakfast" —and know the invitation is meant for them and for us. Even after we've closed the book.

I am deeply grateful to these writers for engaging biblical texts in the postscript. Some have been doing this work for years, others are new to ministry. Some are in big cities in the Midwest or in towns you've never heard of. One teaches in a Chicago seminary; another preaches on an island in Maine.

Eric I Hanson was recently called to serve as pastor of East Koshkonong Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Wisconsin. He served at Faith Lutheran in Andover, Iowa, from 2016 to 2022. His wife, Carina Schiltz, currently serves as pastor of Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Watertown, Wisconsin and they live in Waterloo, Wisconsin. Eric authored the essay "The Hope of Grace: An Essay Exploring the New Atheism, the Church, and the Gospel," published in Vol. 44 No. 2 of *Currents in Theology and Mission* and also contributed to *Preaching Helps* published in Vol. 48 No. 3 (2021). He is passionate about faith-based advocacy and is actively involved with the Midwest Chapter of *Bread for the World, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services,* and *Lutheran Services in Iowa.* **Elaine Hewes** is a retired Lutheran pastor who now serves St. Brendan Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine. She has lived in the small coastal town of Sedgwick for more than forty years, where she and her husband, Michael, raised their three children. A former homiletics teacher at Bangor Theological Seminary and a lover of the arts, Elaine is passionate about finding ways of breaking open (kaleidoscoping) the biblical text using the language of music, poetry, and the "ordinary things"" of our beautiful, fragile, suffering world.

Justin Lind-Ayres serves as the co-pastor of Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. He gives thanks to God for your work and witness as a proclaimer of the gospel! **Catherine Malotky** is a retired ELCA pastor, having served the church as teacher and preacher in congregational and non-congregational settings. She has been writing devotional and curricular materials for the church for many years, and, with her husband, David Engelstad, recently co-authored *Carrying Them with Us: Living through Pregnancy or Infant Loss* (Fortress Press). They are privileged to be family with two daughters and their spouses, three delightful grandchildren, and one vigorous rescued canine.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe lives in Minneapolis with her spouse and their two daughters, where she has taken on more houseplants than one person can reasonably manage. An ELCA pastor, she serves as Director of Children's Ministry at Christ Church Lutheran. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John's book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C* is now available, along with Years A and B. John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church.

Barbara Rossing teaches New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, where she also directs the seminary's Environmental Ministry emphasis. She loves hiking and skiing in the Cascade Mountains, and serving on the board of directors of Lutherans Restoring Creation, wwwlutheransrestoringcreation.org. [Editor's note: Rossing's book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* is a particularly helpful resource for Easter 2 – 7 when the second readings are from the book of Revelation.] **Phil Ruge-Jones** has learned and tells the Gospel of Mark by heart. A recording can be found on the "Phil Ruge-Jones" YouTube channel playlist "I Tell You, This is the Way It Is." Every Sunday he posts visual reflections on the next week's gospel with #earlysermonseeds. He is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. **Javen Swanson** is associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where he has served since 2014. His ministry is shaped by a background in community organizing, and he is a clergy leader with ISAIAH, which organizes Minnesota's faith community around issues of racial and economic justice. He lives with his husband, the Rev. Oby Ballinger, in Saint Paul.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

P.S. You're not doing this work alone. God is with you and me, even after we've closed the book.

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 3, 2022

Isaiah 43:16–21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b–14
John 12:1–8

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
–Psalm 126:4

Always the Poor

Today we find Jesus at table with his friends in Bethany, celebrating with a meal—perhaps celebrating Lazarus' astonishing return to life at Jesus' hands. While Martha was serving the meal, her sister Mary begins to act in a rather bizarre manner. Suddenly she starts pouring an inordinate amount of costly perfume over Jesus' feet and then begins to wipe them with her hair. I've been a guest at some pretty strange dinner parties in my day, but I've never seen anything approaching this. More to the point, I don't think Jesus' table companions had either. Had Mary become unhinged at her brother's death and suddenly loopy at his surprising resuscitation by Jesus? Try to imagine the emotional roller-coaster Mary had been on.

It's striking that this story is a piece of the traditions about Jesus that apparently stuck in the craw of the early church, for all four evangelists tried their hand at retelling the story, each in his own way. The details differ (which we haven't space to discuss here) but three of the four, including John, preserve not only the story of the woman's anointing but also the memory of the angry reprimand she received for performing this strange act. Today's reading puts the rebuke in the mouth of Judas (whom John calls a "thief," suggesting we think of him as the original church treasurer gone bad) who asks testily: "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (v 5).

But to Judas Jesus responds: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (v 7). Which doesn't quite explain why Mary "jumped the gun," so to speak, in anointing Jesus but certainly does serve to send a shiver of recognition up our collective spines. For as the other accounts make a bit clearer, this is an act anticipating Jesus' impending death and burial where other women disciples will come to the tomb, some of the traditions say, intending to anoint his dead body, but instead become the first witnesses to the news of his resurrection including Mary of Magdala who tradition sometimes identifies as the Mary of this pre-crucifixion anointing. John Adams' stunning oratorio "The Other Mary" offers an imaginative merging of these stories.

But that's not all Jesus has to say in his rebuke of Judas' criticism of Mary's lavish anointing. For he also responds to Judas' caviling at Mary's wasting money that could have been given to the poor by adding the resonant words found also in similar form in two other accounts, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (v 8). We can be excused for finding this part of Jesus' retort a bit chilly, Jesus being a person who time and again we know in the Gospels to have taken the part of the poor and outcast. Could he really be so uncharacteristically callous here as to be saying, as I'm afraid people have too often taken him to mean, "The poor? Oh, there will always be the poor–you can't do anything about that–don't worry about the poor!"

That doesn't sound at all like Jesus' voice to me. Rather here, I think it's Mark's version of the story that comes to the rescue of John's unusual terseness. For Mark's Jesus says, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me" (Mark 14:7). You'll never lack opportunity to show care for the poor, Jesus is saying, for in your kind of world there will always be poor folks needing your help and advocacy. Your criticizing her for her lavish act of worship and thanksgiving in anointing me is bad faith. For you can and should show kindness to the poor whenever you can—and God knows there are more opportunities than you will ever respond to. She's done what she could and, as Mark's Jesus goes on to say portentously, "Truly I tell you, whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (14:9). For the Gospel is, after all, "good news for the poor" as we remember from Jesus' inaugural sermon and his mother Mary's "Magnificat."

It's a false dichotomy that we in the church too often assume between worship and service, between spirituality and social justice, between the vertical and the horizontal calls to discipleship, as we will soon find Jesus reminding his disciples when he takes up a basin of water and a towel and begins to wash his disciples' feet. This is the "new thing" of which Isaiah prophesies in our Hebrew scripture reading for today, where Israel is reminded by *YHWH* that they are "the people for whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise" (vv. 19, 21), that "new thing" Paul speaks of in our second reading that God has done, that act of "cosmic novelty" we know as Jesus' resurrection that gives us all a stake in God's promised future.

A hymn that sings well of this message is "When the Poor Ones" (ELW #725).

John Rollefson

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday
April 10, 2022

Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Luke 19:28–40 (Palm Sunday story)
Luke 22:15–23:56 (Passion story)

Reflections on the Passion Text

Every year on Palm Sunday we read the story of Jesus' passion, and each year the story comes to us from a different gospel writer's perspective. The interesting thing about this routine is that we get to hear slightly different versions of the story every year. Each of the gospels tells basically the same story, of course, but when we look a little closer, we start to notice minor differences. It's worth paying attention to the differences.

Toward the end of Luke's passion story, just after Jesus has cried out with a loud voice and breathed his last, a centurion praises God and says, "Certainly this man was innocent." Matthew and Mark narrate this same scene in their own gospels, but in their versions of the story, the centurion who witnesses Jesus' death praises God and says, "Truly this man was God's son." Luke's centurion declares Jesus "innocent"; the centurion of Matthew and Mark calls Jesus the son of God (Matt 27:54, Mark 15:39).

Consider another scene. In Matthew and in Mark, the trial before Pilate happens quickly. Jesus is brought before Pilate, who examines Jesus briefly before setting the criminal Barabbas free and sending Jesus to be crucified. But Luke's version the trial is much longer. Pilate examines Jesus and says he finds no reason for punishment. But the people become insistent, protesting that Jesus has been stirring up trouble. Pilate responds, "I've already said I find no crime in this man. I'll flog him and have him released." Again, the people are enraged: "Crucify him!" For a third time, Pilate tells the people, "I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him." Ultimately, the people prevail and Jesus is crucified. But notice that Luke's Pilate declares Jesus innocent no fewer than three times! Not so in Matthew and Mark's versions of the story.

Then there is the exchange between Jesus and the other two criminals crucified alongside Jesus. In the other gospels, the two criminals mock Jesus together and suggest he save himself if he's so powerful. But in Luke's gospel, only one of the crucified criminals mocks Jesus. The other one protests: "We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." This criminal recognizes that Jesus is innocent. We get this only in Luke's passion narrative.

Luke seems determined to make the case that Jesus is innocent. Matthew and Mark spend more time trying to show that Jesus is the son of God. They want to show that Jesus is sent from God, that he is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. For Luke, what's most important is showing that Jesus didn't do anything to deserve crucifixion.

Why is Luke so focused on proving Jesus' innocence? The Jesus of Luke's gospel is a radical figure. He comes into the world proclaiming salvation for all people, not just the Israelites. At every step of the way, Jesus reaches out to sinners, Samaritans, tax collectors, women, and other social outcasts. Perhaps more than any other gospel, Luke's gospel paints Jesus as one who is constantly challenging the social prejudices of the day. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is always calling into question relationships built on social structures that separate insiders from outsiders and uphold patterns of dominance and dependence. Luke's Jesus wants to upset the systems of power and control that define traditional relationships. Only Luke gives us Mary's Magnificat; it is Luke's Jesus who emphasizes a great reversal—the proud humbled, the poor lifted up.

The Jesus we meet in Luke's gospel is a Jesus who is at work upsetting the status quo. From the very beginning of his ministry, Luke's Jesus faced opposition to his preaching. His own townspeople rejected him because he came proclaiming a message of salvation to outsiders—a message that wasn't popular in his hometown of Nazareth. It was a message that was disturbing to those who were defenders of the status quo.

When we get to the end of Luke's gospel, to the passion story that we read on Palm Sunday, it's not surprising that the author spends so much time declaring Jesus' innocence. Throughout Luke's gospel we've seen that Jesus wasn't popular. Luke's message is this: Jesus was crucified not because he was wrong, but because he made people uncomfortable. Jesus was innocent.

The Jesus of Luke's gospel is a Jesus who is always challenging systems of domination and oppression. It is a Jesus who demands that we, too, confront the realities of a society that rewards those who are already on top and takes advantage of those at the bottom. It is a Jesus who is constantly disrupting the status quo and calling us to do the same in our own time. It is when our following Jesus lands us in hot water and we come under attack that we need to hear and take comfort in the centurion's proclamation: "Certainly this man was innocent."

Javen Swanson

Maundy Thursday
April 14, 2022

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

Engaging the Texts

The assigned Exodus text is a portion of the great story of the liberation of the people of Israel from enslavement by the Egyptians. Nine of the ten plagues have already come to pass, and the last terrible plague of death is foreshadowed in chapter 11. Chapter 12 almost seems like an interruption from another time, with careful priestly instruction for just how to prepare for this liminal moment between captivity and freedom. Clearly, it is the people of Israel who are addressed, not the Egyptians, and it is also clear that they are to share, eat, and then be ready to flee.

Mark Throntveit notes that there is deep cultural significance in the inclusion of both flock and field in the establishment of the Passover meal. Other commentators highlight the instruction to share the wealth, and still others note that this "liturgy" will be lifesaving for the people. The commanded attire and feast eating will prepare them for travel. The blood they paint on their doors will spare them the death that will be visited on the Egyptians, including livestock. This liturgy has consequence.

The appointed psalm is surely meant to be heard as the voice of the people reflecting on their liberation in hindsight. For this salvation, the psalmist promises to offer a thanksgiving sacrifice, highlighting the inspiration for the Passover meal for generations to come.

The Corinthians text appears in the midst of Paul's responses to abuses of the meal by the Corinthian congregation. Assigned to this liturgical moment, it makes a connection for followers of Jesus between the Lord's Supper and the Passover. Paul's purposes are to remind the Corinthians of the origins of this meal with Jesus, in particular the meal Jesus hosted on the night he was betrayed. Ironically, while the people of Israel were liberated by their Passover meal, Jesus left his table doomed to arrest, imprisonment, and crucifixion. Yet, as Paul points out, this remembrance of Jesus' act establishes a new covenant.

Finally, the reading from John centers around Jesus' new commandment, that we love one another. John sets the story on the verge of Passover and immediately introduces Judas' intent to betray Jesus. John also asserts Jesus' full awareness of what is happening. This is not true of all the gospel accounts, but in John, Jesus intentionally prepares his disciples for what they will experience in the coming hours. The disciples are kept in suspense about who the betrayer will be, and the foot washing is clearly disconcerting—its timing is off (mid-meal?) and the expected power dynamic is reversed. What does this mean? After Judas leaves (these verses are not included), Jesus offers the disciples the north star to focus them through the events and years to come. They are to love one another.

Pastoral Reflections

For many of us, the actual texts read on Maundy Thursday can be out-shown by the drama of the liturgical experience: washing feet, eating the meal, and stripping the altar. Washing feet and stripping the altar are liturgically rare, and all three are profoundly sensual. These acts take up a lot of oxygen! However, for seasoned Christians and for those exploring the tradition, these texts are both formative and difficult. Preachers need to tend to the difficulties for modern hearers.

If we exclusively adopt the point of view of the people of Israel, the Exodus text is an understandable and strong statement illustrating that the arc of history bends toward justice. It is no wonder that the Exodus story is formative for so many oppressed peoples yearning for liberation. The power of empire is trounced by a God who is so clearly on the side of those who suffer. Yes, yes, and yes!

But for those of us who find ourselves in the role oppressor, either within our own personal relationships or societally, there is not, frankly, much good news in this story. Who of us has not oppressed another within a relationship? What parent has not resorted to, "Because I said so!" with a little one whose demands reached the point of exasperation? What human being has not turned away from the pain of another because it would be uncomfortable or awkward or potentially demanding? And, lest we over-personalize this at the expense of systemic matters, how many of us fail to curtail our energy consumption simply because we can afford it, and in so doing, close our eyes and hearts to those who are suffering the most with climate change? How many of us find places and people where we can protect ourselves from those who, bearing the burden of our cultural biases, suffer disproportional harm from economic and social policy that favors people who look and act and believe like us?

From this point of view, it makes it harder to overlook the fact that this story promotes God's violence as salvific. Can we read this story as the warning it is to those who find themselves on Pharaoh's path, as well as the model of liberation for the oppressed?

Perhaps, for North American, middle-class, white Christians, the power of God's determined bias for those who need liberation, the leveling of power implicit in these Exodus

and John texts, the command to love one another, is just the reminder we need for these last days before Easter to move us through repentance to resurrection.

Catherine Malotky

Good Friday
April 15, 2022

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

Engaging the Texts

Good Friday liturgies ground themselves in the powerful narratives that have been foundational for the Christian faith from the beginning. The assigned Isaiah text, the fourth of four songs in Isaiah about the mysterious "suffering servant," dwells in themes of the reversal of fortune and the power of awakening. At the time of its genesis this song was directed at people who had once understood themselves to be the chosen ones, but who had been conquered and exiled to a land and culture they did not know. Like their enslaved ancestors in Egypt, they struggled to make sense of their suffering. They came to understand covenantal infidelity as the cause of God's apparent abandonment. While they could easily see themselves communally as the suffering servant, they also yearned for a rescuer, one who would redeem them and restore their health and wellbeing for the sake of coming generations.

Psalm 22, so raw and agonized in its lament, seems fitting for a Good Friday. It embodies the fundamental human question behind suffering, not just "Why me?" but also, for people of faith, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It features prominently in the passion stories of Matthew and Mark, but not, interestingly, in John's, which we read today. Psalm 22 is also veined with thanksgiving, and powerful assertions of faith in the God who seems so silent.

Our Hebrews text begins with the words of the Holy Spirit, the promise of a new covenant and a promise to "remember their sins and lawless deeds no more" (10:17). It is a portion of an essay that is working out the efficacy of Christ's death and resurrection, asserting that the sacrifice of Christ's blood satisfies the sin offering requirement for all time, as opposed to the annual gesture of offering the blood of animals. Because of Christ, all may enter the most holy of places (using the metaphor of the temple).

The gospel reading follows John's unique perspective on the passion. The story slows way down—we are engaged by the hour rather than by the year or decade. We walk alongside of Jesus, who, in John, is very clear about what is happening, and still leans in, willingly taking on the suffering that is his path. Beyond the gory details of the crucifixion itself, the story highlights the responses of those who push Jesus closer to death. With a life at stake, all of them—the religious leaders, Pilate, and even Peter—betray their own values and interests, for fear of the power of others. The basest of human instincts, to survive, is powerfully at work, except in Jesus, who, at death, announces that his mission is finished and hands over his life (note that the same Greek word is used of Judas' betrayal.)

Pastoral Reflections

Even for believers, we can shortchange John's story of Jesus' passion as no more than another example of the callousness of colonizing empire, or the dangerous narrowness of religious tribalism. Both are true, and outrage is a righteous response. It happens far too often, and far too many innocents, human and otherwise, are bulldozed when these forces are unchecked. Our history is littered with stories—the Crusades; the Doctrine of Discovery and its Manifest Destiny; the struggles post-USSR; the sweep of Euro-American colonizers over Indigenous peoples in the US and elsewhere; the lingering damage of economic and social policy that preference one identity over others; and the ongoing challenge of our exploitation of the creation and uneven impact of the consequences. There is plenty to get riled up about.

But if we stop here, we will not have caught the fundamental good news that is embodied in these texts. When Pilate asks Jesus who he is, Jesus answers with the Greek word for "I am." His answer in English translation may seem benign, but he is claiming one-ness with the God who spoke from the burning bush (Exod 4:14), the name so hallowed that our Jewish cousins never utter it. John's gospel is clear: this one, this Jesus, is not just anyone, but the one whose broken body and shed blood flings open the holiest of holies and we, even we, are welcomed into the presence of God. The subject of the salvation story is God. God acts, so that we might be one, with each other and with God. Our welcome is no longer predicated on our behavior, but is a gift hard won by the giver, who chose, for our sake, to enter completely into human suffering and follow through to the end. Such is the desire and commitment of the God of the whole universe to us. To you.

Of course, Good Friday is the penultimate story of our faith. Knowing that God even risked God's very identity to be among us is stunning enough, but we know that there is more to come. Yet, for this day in the liturgical year, we remember the God who was willing to become one of us so that we might know more fully, within our human shortcomings, that God is never absent, not in our joys, when we might neglect

to remember God's goodness, and in our suffering, when we can easily lose track of God's redemptive impulse within us. Our quest to understand will remain. When the burden of life is heavy, we will still cry out with the psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" But we need not fear the asking. We are welcome into God's embrace. In faith, we are in it.

Catherine Malotky

Easter Sunday
April 17, 2022

Acts 10:34–43 (or Isaiah 65:17–25)
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
1 Corinthians 15:19–26
Luke 24:1–12

Reflections on the Easter Texts

Easter is one of those festival Sundays where there are often a few "extra" pieces added to the service—a time for children even if that's not generally part of your congregation's order of worship, or an extra anthem to feature the choir or the brass ensemble. It's a Sunday when you might be concerned about turning over a full parking lot in between multiple services. It's an easy Sunday to justify cutting some readings, even in communities accustomed to hearing them all every week.

At first glance, maybe that would be fine. After all, your people have come this day to hear the good news of resurrection that comes from the Gospel reading. They have come to shout, "Alleluia! Christ is risen, indeed!" more than they have come to chant the psalm. But every last one of the texts assigned for this day declares the good news of resurrection whole-heartedly, in a way that contrasts with the story in Luke's gospel—you know, the one where the apostles dismiss what the women have found as an "idle tale."

At first, to be honest, their dismissal makes me mad, which is certainly one angle for preaching this text. The men dismissed the women. They didn't believe them. In some physical manifestation of mansplaining, Peter won't just take their word for it—he has to go see for himself. But when I stop and think about it, I'm not sure I would have believed the women, either. I have to admit that I might have dismissed their account just as easily as the men did.

Every morning is Easter morning from now on! Every day is resurrection day, the past is over and gone! I remember hearing the choir sing this anthem refrain in my home congregation when I was a child. As a theologically trained adult, I understand the concept that every Sunday is a mini-Easter, even the ones during Lent. As Christians, gathered regularly for worship, we know how this story ends. This is good, no doubt, but it can be detrimental on this particular day. It can get in the way of imagining what it was like for the people in this gospel story to hear the news that we will shout over and over this morning: He is risen!

Imagine the very best news you can that will never, ever come to pass. Think back to the time when you were at your most devastated, and imagine the news that would have reversed that devastation, no matter how far-fetched or outright impossible it would have been. Now multiply it by a thousand and maybe we can come close to imagining what these women were trying to convey; what these men were trying to comprehend.

This wasn't just run-of-the-mill good news. This news was so good it was simply incomprehensible.

And this incomprehensibly good news is what we hear, over and over again, week in and week out until we become so accustomed to it that we often take it for granted. "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree," we read in the book of Acts, "but God raised him on the third day." Now be honest: are you completely shocked by this? Are you giddy or rendered speechless? Has your vision gone blurry? Or did you just keep reading like it was no big deal, because that news is about as exciting to you as discovering that this is a day which ends in the letter Y?

"I shall not die, but I shall live," declares the psalmist. "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead," Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "so all will be made alive in Christ." I'm sorry, what? What on earth are they talking about? What business do we have assuming that after we die, we will be anything other than dead, dead, dead??

None. We simply have no business assuming that death will bring anything to us apart from the absolute end of life itself.

But in Luke's gospel, the two men in dazzling clothes ask the women, who are terrified with their faces bowed to the ground, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

Can you imagine? Can you even begin to imagine their confusion? Their hesitant hope? Their fear that this is some terrible joke? Their speechlessness or blurry vision?

Can you begin to invite the members of your worshipping community to imagine? Perhaps this is the work of the preacher every year on Easter Sunday, but it feels especially burdensome this year. It feels as though our imaginations—individual and collective alike—have been dulled by more than two years of pandemic living. Our voices have been muffled under masks. Our greetings dampened by distance.

That burden, though, makes the task that much more invigorating. Can you invite your community to hear good

news in all the other readings—the references to resurrection that come to feel casual and off-hand because we hear them so often—through the lens of the women at the tomb? What a gift that news was to them. What a gift it can be to us, too, if our imaginations are ready to receive it.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe

Second Sunday of Easter
April 24, 2022

Acts 5:27–32
Psalm 118:14–29
Revelation 1:4–8
John 20:19–31

Reflections on the Texts

Of all the Bible stories whose popular interpretations I love to refute, this gospel story is among my favorites. "Doubting Thomas" we call him, with an air of superiority on our tongues, because we believe in the resurrected Christ without physical evidence, while he did not.

Please.

Thomas is grieving. He is devastated. He staked his very existence on this man's claims to be the son of God, and now this man is dead. It's all over, just like that. He can hardly breathe sometimes, the weight of it all is just too much to bear.

Thomas lived through the horrors of Good Friday without knowing that Easter was on its way. We have done no such thing. His closest friends—who were equally devastated—are now saying that Jesus is alive, not because they believed the women who told them as much, *but because they have seen the wounds on his hands and his side with their very own eyes*.

When Jesus appears again and says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," we assume that Jesus is patting us on the back while chastising Thomas. But we have to read into it to arrive there. All Thomas asks for here is exactly what Jesus gave to the others—Jesus showed up for them, and in the end, he shows up for Thomas, too.

Blind faith doesn't do any of us any good. But doubts do. Wrestling with our questions and our doubts does us a lot of good, in my opinion. And insisting on proof if someone tells us it's out there? That seems like common sense to me.

My friend Mamie Broadhurst is a Presbyterian pastor in Baton Rouge. She inspired the stance I take with my confirmation students, which is that they don't have to believe or agree with every single statement in the creed in order to affirm their baptismal promises. Rather, they have to say yes to the creed itself, to the idea of wrestling with this particular set of beliefs, and reckoning with it as they grow in their faith.

Thomas wasn't saying no to the possibility that he would believe. He wasn't refusing Jesus. He just wanted what Jesus had provided to his friends. He wasn't willing to get his hopes up just to have them dashed again, and also—this wasn't some small rumor. It's not like he heard the McRib is back on the menu, and he's crossing his fingers that it's true.

He was being asked to believe in the idea of bodily resurrection. The concept is bonkers. It simply doesn't happen. Yet we fault him for saying, "Show me." Our arrogance is astonishing.

John's greeting in Revelation to the seven churches in Asia is as familiar to me as it is powerful: "Grace and peace to you from the one who is, and who was, and who is to come." I don't remember when I first heard these words; it seems as though I have always known them. But this is a greeting to those of us on this side of Easter morning, from one who is on this side of Easter morning, as well.

Doubts in general get a bad rap, and I get it. Doubts require more time, more energy, more thought. There are an awful lot of churches out there for those searching for easy answers and black and white thinking. But all it takes these days is a read through the newspaper or a few minutes with the news on TV to see that our world is more complicated than that. Maybe a healthy dose of doubt and a full handful of questions could be a good thing.

The world doesn't need more communities of faith insisting that theirs is the only way. We don't need more preachers disparaging Thomas as a doubter as if we aren't called to be the same, or as if we wouldn't have insisted on the same proof had we been in his shoes.

The world needs more communities of faith willing to wrestle with hard questions, and to engage with complicated situations. We need more people who will take a stand, to say, "Here's what I need in order to move forward in this conversation."

In the end, after all, Jesus showed up for Thomas. Jesus told him, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But if Thomas had not been blessed just the same, Jesus could have saved himself a trip and stayed home.

But Jesus showed up, and he will show up for us, too, if we let him. Let's make sure our people know as much.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe

Third Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2022

Acts 9:1–6, (7–20)
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11–14
John 21:1–19

Engaging the Texts

God's people are enriched when we realize that resurrection does not wait until the end of our lives, but interrupts each of our days offering us new life. Peter's lakeside visit with the resurrected Jesus turns his mourning into dancing, and clothes him with joy (to borrow the lovely imagery from Psalm 30:11). If you read this story and found yourself thinking, "Didn't I just preach on this?" you are discovering that the lectionary has offered us within a few months of each other both Luke's pre-resurrection account of a miraculous fishing trip (Luke 5:1-11, Fifth Sunday after Epiphany) and John's resurrecting of that story. John adds to that telling and you could speak of resurrection in Peter's three-fold declaration of love rising above his memory of his denial of Jesus, but that story, too, is well-worn.

What if we reflected on the reality of resurrection in the Acts story? This could be fruitful, especially with the longer lectionary option. But first, I will warn you that this story comes with baggage and people hear things that the passage never says. While Paul is knocked to the ground before rising again, nowhere does the story mention an animal he had been riding. Caravaggio's painting *The Conversion on the Way to Damascus* and others of its ilk supplied the beast. Paul landed on his ass, but not off of one! Second, the biblical stories of other divine calls have infiltrated our hearing of this story. Unlike Abram who became Abraham, Sarai who became Sarah, or Jacob who became Israel, God does not change Saul's name through this encounter. Saul and Paul are names he assumes to move through different worlds in his travels. The duo-name indicates a level of comfort negotiating his identity in relationship to others.

The risen Jesus stands in solidarity with the people Saul persecutes. Twice this point is made. First, Jesus asks the question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? (v. 4)" and then the verb is repeated in Jesus' self-revelation, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting (v. 6)." The resurrected one in solidarity with the policed and abused people comes to Saul to overturn his life.

The truly amazing turning in this story is neither that of Saul nor Jesus. To me, the most amazing dying to self and rising to newness occurs in Ananias. The one whose community has been the target of Saul's threats and murderous desire opens up to Saul with mercy. Resurrection happens when a persecuted people shows the way for their persecutors to live in repentance. The miraculous generosity in Ananias' honest encounter gives Saul the opportunity to live in a new way. More important than the names which Saul interchanges from context to context, Saul learns what it means to negotiate his identity away from death and violence. Saul hears this word and understands the new possibilities that his enemy's hospitality opens for him. He reevaluates his life and moves through the world in new ways.

Pastoral Reflections

This story allows for hope that might seem too big for the realities of this world. However, I have experienced resurrection in this way. Every time a woman has shown me that I have chosen a path of misogyny, resurrection is offered. The countless LGBTQIA+ people who recount to me their painful pilgrimages through valleys of death carved out by people of faith, I have received a vision of resurrection's opportunities. The innumerable times a black person put themselves out there with hope that maybe this time they will be heard, stones are rolled away from chambers of death and I am left to decide whether to leave the tomb or remain in its confines.

Let me be clear. All of these opportunities to hear again what I should already know are the gifts of incredibly generous people who keep speaking the word even when they know their sacrifice might be in vain. Yet they trust that denial of Jesus could be replaced with love. We understand why some have left the conversation in hopelessness. But those who dare to say, "Why do you persecute me?" come with the solidarity of Christ offering the opportunity of new life for all.

To Saul's credit, he listened to those he had once violated. He did not minimize what he had done. He did not defend his own goodness. He was knocked to the ground by the force of the word, but did not crumble in fragility or wallow in guilt. Saul listened to the testimonies of what his death-dealing meant in the lives of others and changed his ways. The persecutor became a brother, because the persecuted treated him like kin.

What if resurrection meant this kind of change in our own lives and churches? What if we opened our ears, our hearts, our minds to the reality that we have persecuted Jesus in the systemic violence we have accepted and enacted? What if we rethought and rejected the religious assumptions that undergird that violence? What if our numerous betrayals could become genuine declarations of love? What if we learned to become generous gifts to others patterned after the people who offered us resurrection? Mourning would become dancing. We would be clothed with joy.

Phil Ruge-Jones

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36–43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9–17
John 10:22–30

Engaging the Texts

If we wish to explore the Easter theme of resurrection, Acts is an excellent place to begin. We encounter a disciple of Jesus, devout, good, and charitable; she has died. Some in your congregation might be surprised that a woman in the New Testament is identified as a disciple, since we have an overwhelming tendency to restrict that title to men. Help them to see how we lose track of diversity that exists within a group when our expectations for that group are too narrow. Tabitha or Dorcas (another bicultural person like Saul/Paul in last week's passage) was much loved and in her death was surrounded by a circle of those with whom she shared her faith. They speak to each other and to Peter of all that she meant to them. Much tenderness resides in these stories born of Tabitha's kindness. Resurrection often is preceded by communal grief. These women tell Tabitha's story to draw Peter into the life of the woman they knew and loved. Resurrection comes in the gathered community remembering the faithfulness they have known. After the women do this important work together, Peter calls Tabitha back to life. She returns to nurturing the flourishing of life that her service has always meant for the community. The woman treasured in the widows' stories has an opportunity to add yet more stories of faithfulness to their testimony.

Thinking about Dorcas disrupting the designation of disciple made me wonder if we need to revisit "shepherd" on Good Shepherd Sunday. Recently I have come across two scholars who have broadened my understanding of shepherds in the Bible. Wilda Gafney in her expansive book *Womanist Midrash* notes that shepherding was not restricted to men in the Hebrew Scriptures. Rachel is a shepherd in Gen 29:9, even though the NRSV turns her title into an activity. Gafney notes that the Jewish Publication Society and the Gender-Sensitive adaptation of that translation, together with Fox's translation get it right. Also Zipporah and her sisters (Exod 2:26) fulfill this vocation.[1] Additionally, another biblical scholar, Amy Lindeman Allen, points out that shepherding was not restricted to adults but that boys and girls participated in this familial economy.[2] While Psalm 23 and Jesus' own use of "shepherd" have masculine referents, I wonder how our memories and imaginations of the promise offered in these passages might become more expansive if we allow a wider vision of shepherding to inspire us. My sense is that Psalm 23 is not primarily comforting to us because we filter it through images of the male, blue-eyed Jesus, but because we have recited it together over and over again as we gathered to grieve the Tabithas who have loved us. The image of shepherd has marinated in the memories of the faithful companionship of those who had shepherded us as we prayed at the ends of their lives. The shepherd of the psalm and, subsequently Jesus, are endowed with the tenderness of our loved ones' care.

Pastoral Reflections

Expanding people's images for God is often a challenge. I have been in both a congregation and a university where singing Bobbie McFerrin's *The Lord is My Shepherd*[3] met with resistance, as all the pronouns for God in his translating of the psalm are feminine. But I also saw the song embraced in a funeral for a woman, a beloved mother and wife, who had died too young. This positive reception happened in spite of the strong conservative leanings of the extended family. Why did this happen? The talented filmmaker Jason Chesnut accompanied the song with visual images of all the ways his mother had cared for others. When the descriptions of God's activities were woven into the fabric of that woman's tender love and care, speaking of God in this way became not only tolerable, but beautifully moving.

One way we could expand our community's theological imagination is to follow Chesnut's example. What if either through story or visual images you wove a tapestry which has the biblical passages' descriptions as the warp and the congregation's lived models of faithfulness as the woof? Share stories of people from various gender identities and multiple ages as they have helped another to lie down to rest, as they accompanied another on journeys beside nature's peaceful places, or as they comforted, led, and fed the faithful with mercy (all these are images from the psalm). Share congregational stories of children whose voices console, of matriarchs whose life led toward deeper living, of the quiet ones who *knew* you and helped you to develop your own identity (John passage.) Gather the stories and show the creative artistry of lives well-lived. Invoke new life as did the widows who witnessed to Tabitha. Tell stories as diverse as the saints who gather around God's throne (Revelation).

Phil Ruge-Jones

1. Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 55.
2. Amy Lindeman Allen, "A Sign for You: A Child Savior Revealed to Child Shepherds" *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 29, no. 2 (2020), 1-27.
3. Bobbie McFerrin, "The 23rd Psalm," track 12 on *Medicine Music*, EMI, 1990, compact disc.

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2022

Acts 11:1–18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1–6
John 13:31–35

[Editor's Note: Barbara Rossing was asked to focus on the Revelation text because of her extensive work on the book of Revelation.]

Engaging the Revelation Text

My new favorite word is "Behold"—Greek *idou*; Hebrew *hinneh.* Some newer biblical translations render the word as "See!" God's "behold's" in Revelation's New Jerusalem vision (21:3, 5) call us to marvel at how God is making a home with us on earth. Heaven comes down to earth. God and the Lamb Jesus have "moved into the neighborhood," as Eugene Peterson describes in *The Message.* Like Moses at the burning bush: we are called to turn aside to see our own place as holy ground. Behold!

The New Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21–22 is one of the most wonderful visions in all of scripture, fulfilling Isaiah's promises of newness ("I am about to do a new thing" Isa 43:19; "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth" Isa 65:17). Contrary to popular apocalyptic thinking, there is no "rapture" or a future snatching of Christians from the earth in Revelation. Instead, God is "raptured" down to earth to take up residence among us. Revelation declares God's commitment to the earth as the location of salvation. God's bridal city (*polis*) will descend to earth and God will "dwell" or "pitch a tent" there (*skene*, *skenoo*, Rev 21:3), in the midst of the city. With great tenderness God wipes away people's tears and takes away sorrow (a quotation from Isa 25:8, used also of Jesus the Lamb in Rev 7:17).

Revelation's vision of the New Jerusalem, the city with the gleaming golden street and pearly gates, where death and tears are no more, has given form and voice to the dreams of God's people through the ages. African-American spirituals and gospel songs invoke imagery of the golden holy city and its river of life. All God's promises now come to fulfillment in this culminating vision of the entire book.

For the first time since Rev 1:8 God speaks not through angelic intermediaries but directly, repeating, "Behold, I make all things new." C. S. Lewis' image of "New Narnia" can be helpful for understanding Revelation's idea of newness in terms of both continuity and transformation. As Lewis depicts it, New Narnia is not an escape from the old Narnia, but rather a way to enter and experience more deeply the very same place. Everything is more radiant. It is "deeper country," Lewis says. New Narnia is "world within world," where "no good thing is destroyed"[4]

The vision is economic. God offers the promise of water of life for all who thirst, free of charge, without money. The word *dorean*, "without price" (Rev 21:6; 22:17), underscores a key economic contrast between God's political economy and the Roman Empire. Unlike the unjust commerce of Babylon/Rome, God's New Jerusalem is a city where life and its essentials are given as a free gift, even to those who cannot pay for them. In our time when too many of the world's poor are being left behind by a globalized economy, this vision of participation for all, even those without money, can be important for preachers to proclaim.

New Jerusalem is a profoundly urban vision. "God wills to restore this world to a beauty we can scarcely imagine," writes Kathleen Norris. "It is a city, not a solitude, an important distinction in the narcissistic din of American culture."[5]

The call to us from Revelation 21 is to envision our own cities, our own lives, in light of this glorious city! Whether we live in a city or in a small town or outside a town, this call is for all of us. The city that descends from heaven invites us all to enter as citizens and to "inherit" (Rev 21:7) its blessings, as God's own beloved children.

Pastoral Reflections

The creative people behind Disney's attractions are called "imagineers." John of Patmos is one of God's imagineers: his apocalypse helps us imagine God's future dawning on earth and God's people living in the vision. The future comes toward us here and now.

The preacher's task today is to reignite and reshape people's imagination, to recreate their identity as people who live already in God's future hope. Help listeners become imagineers!

A sermon by Bishop Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church USA, invites us to "imagine" our world and our role as people who work in partnership with God's new creation.

> Imagine! A world where children do not go to bed hungry at night.
>
> Imagine! A world where we learn to lay down our swords and shields down by the riverside and study war no more.

4. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 181.
5. Kathleen Norris, Introduction to *Revelation*, xii.

Imagine! Where our air is clear, our water clean, our environment healing.

Imagine! A world where there is liberty and justice for all.

Imagine! A world where every person is seen as God sees us, as a child of God, equally endowed, *imago dei*, in the image and likeness of God, and therefore treated equally under law and in all human relationships.

Imagine! A new heaven, a new earth. God's earth and people restored.

Imagine! [6]

This is a day to make connections between Revelation's vision of a heavenly city and re-imagining all the cities of our lives. Catherine Keller in *Climate Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy and Other Last Chances* (Orbis, 2021) names Revelation's visioning process as "dream reading" the world. While Revelation's first twenty chapters offer nightmarish prophetic visions that wake us up to the perils we face at the end of empire, most of all, Revelation gives us the vision for hope—an alternative political economy of gift.

God's vision of the New Jerusalem also turns our eyes to the present-day Jerusalem. The situation in today's *earthly* Jerusalem, which has been closed off to most Palestinian Christians and Muslims since 1967, makes the longing for the holy city expressed in Rev 21 especially poignant. Most Palestinians have no permit to enter their holy city of Jerusalem since Israel annexed the entire city. The ELCA's *Peace Not Walls* program gives advocacy suggestions. Christians around the world are called to pray and advocate for a shared Jerusalem, an international city, holy and open to all.

In the city of Jerusalem, and in every city where people search for signs of hope for a future, God's vision of a New Jerusalem can function both to expose injustice and to nurture the promise of renewal for life in God's *polis*.

Barbara Rossing

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2022

Acts 16:9–15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5
John 14:23–29 [or John 5:1–9]

Engaging the Revelation Text

The tree of life is the core image we need from today's text from Revelation. God does not plan to destroy the earth; God plans to **heal** it. Healing is for all of us and for the nations. Healing does not come directly from God but through the created world — through the leaves of a living tree.

John models this second New Jerusalem tour on Ezekiel 40–48, making changes to universalize Ezekiel's priestly vision. Contrary to popular imagination, pearly gates are not guarded by St Peter, but open to all. New Jerusalem is a welcoming city, not a gated community. In our time when nations and neighborhoods build walls to keep people out, the church needs to claim Revelation's vision of openness and multicultural welcome, Justo Gonzales reminds us.

New Jerusalem has "no temple." God's presence now extends to the entire city's landscape, with all of God's people serving and reigning with Christ as priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; 22:3, 5).

The final verse of the chapter (Rev 21:27) is a prophetic wake-up call, exhorting faithfulness so that our names are written in Jesus' book of life and we may enter as citizens into God's New Jerusalem. If you include this verse in your reading, be sure to underscore that exhortation, not prediction or threat, is the function of such verses.

Green space and God's river of life fill out the final description of the city. Revelation 22:1-5 recreates the garden of Eden in the center of a thriving urban landscape. Ezekiel's fruit trees on both banks become the wondrous "tree of life" in Revelation (Rev 22:2), invoking Eden and paradise traditions. The fruit of the ever-bearing tree of life satisfies the hunger of everyone who is faithful (Rev 2:7), overcoming the prohibition of Genesis 3:22. Most importantly, Revelation universalizes Ezekiel's already lavish vision by adding the "healing of the *nations*" to the tree's medicinal leaves.

The tour of the city concludes with a reference to God's servants who offer service and worship (Rev 22:3)—the Greek word *latreusousin*, from which we get our English word "liturgy." As God's people, we are called a "kingdom of priests" (1:6; 5:10, drawing on Exod 19:6, Isa 61:6)—verses that shaped Martin Luther's idea of the priesthood of all the baptized.

At a time when Rome claimed to reign forever, Revelation boldly proclaimed that it is God who reigns—not the Empire—and that God's servants will also reign with God. Note, however, that there is no object of the verb "reign." God's servants do not reign over anyone else. The text invites us to explore ways to understand our reign not as domination over, but as sharing in God's healing of the world.

6. From "Imagine: God's Earth and People Restored," 2021 Ecumenical Advocacy Days Worship, https://tinyurl.com/47jt8r5f, starting at minute 26.30.

Pastoral Reflections

The Bible starts and ends with the tree of life. In the Gospel of John, the tree becomes the image of Jesus as a vine, with all his followers imagined as branches (John 15).

Throughout the history of Christian art, the tree of life has given people an image for linking their own lives and landscapes to biblical landscapes and communities. A thirteenth century mosaic in the Church of San Clemente in Rome helps people imagine the rivers and trees of paradise already in their daily lives, flowing from the tree of the cross. The art of Christ Lutheran Church in Pacific Beach, California, shows a grove of trees of life beside life-giving waters. (see photo in Larry Rasmussen's article "Spiritiual Practices for Creation in Crisis" in this journal; July 2020 https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/260/288). The blue river of life flows out from the trees, down the center aisle to the baptismal font, and out of the door of the church!

The preacher's calling as an "imagineer" is to beckon hearers to this wonderful world-healing tree of life beside the river, to eat its fruit, to discover its healing.

Medieval strands of Christian eschatology focused people's imagination individualistically on the "four last things"—death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Today, however, our eschatological imagination needs to focus more on healing, and on life in a community of relationships. The tree of life, an interfaith image common to most world religions, can help us.

Help comes also from the tree of life from evolutionary biology first drawn by Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century, showing the kinship and lineages of all organisms. Geneticists' circular tree of life envisions genetic relationships modeled by lines across the circle. In an amazing way, it resembles Hildegard of Bingen's Tree of Life which she, too, imaged as circular. In all these models of the tree of life—whether religious or scientific—what is pictured is a community of relationships. It's like a family tree, only it's all the relationships in the whole biological world, all of us in the genealogical tree of life.

St. Bonaventure's *Tree of Life* from the thirteenth century images the medicinal fruit of the tree of life as the eucharist:

> Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain…. Imagine that the leaves are the medicine to prevent and heal every kind of sickness. The flowers radiate each beautiful color and every perfume aroma, waking up worried hearts, attracting human desire. The twelve fruits, with every delight and pleasing taste, offered for servants of God to eat and be satisfied…are one undivided fruit with a variety of consolations.[7]

The biological and religious trees of life can serve as correctives to overly individualistic religious understandings of our place on Earth. The tree of life reminds us that we are who we are thanks to a community of relationships, all connected, in mystical communion with God, with one another, and with every living cell and creature throughout the universe's history.

Barbara Rossing

Ascension of Our Lord
May 26, 2022

Acts 1:1–11
Psalm 47 or Psalm 93
Ephesians 1:15–23
Luke 24:44–53

Blessing of Ascension

Admittedly, the Ascension often gets short shrift in worshipping communities. This is a natural consequence of the feast day's timing. According to the account in Acts 1, the resurrected Jesus appeared to many "during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" and then ascended as "a cloud took him out of their sight." Therefore, the Ascension always lands forty days after Easter Sunday—on a Thursday. Some may call it Holy Thursday, but many communities of faith do not gather in celebration. An unintentional result of a midweek festival may be a general lack of theological import ascribed to the ascension of Jesus. For those communities that do gather on a Thursday, you likely have much to teach the rest of us about the Ascension!

The truth is, you cannot have Pentecost without the Ascension. Jesus' parting words as he is ascending are "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you." The Holy Spirit's arrival amid the mayhem of wind and fire (Acts 2) is the cacophonous consummation of Jesus' promise. Luke's version of the Ascension described as the messianic fulfillment of scripture and the proclamation of Jesus to the world is fully dependent upon the apostles being "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49) at Pentecost. The movement from ascension to descension is inextricably connected to the divine work of the Trinity and the outpouring of salvation "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." But this is not Holy Trinity Sunday; a theological

7. Bonaventure, "Tree of Life," in *The Souls' Journey Into God,* Ewert Cousins (Paulist, 1978), 120.

excursus on the inter-workings of the Trinity can wait a few Sundays. Rather, Ascension Thursday (or observed on the Seventh Sunday of Easter) is an invitation to encounter an embodied theology seen through the hands of Jesus.

It is somewhat ironic that when Jesus' body was being carried into heaven, he demonstrated a very bodily act. As described in Luke's gospel, Jesus "led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them" (24:50). With hands outstretched, Jesus blessed his followers. We do not know what words—if any—were spoken along with this gesture of blessing. Perhaps no words were necessary, and Jesus' hands said everything? Maybe that's the point. What do we experience when we look at the hands of the resurrected Christ?

Just a few verses earlier in Luke, Jesus had to calm his terrified band of followers who believed him to be a ghost. He declared, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself" (24:38-39). As we encountered at the end of John's gospel on Easter 2, the crucified hands of Jesus reveal everything. This is the resurrected One—God who conquered sin and death on the cross and now offers us "the riches of his glorious inheritance" and "the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe" (Eph 1:18ff). The hands say it all.

Gazing up at ascending Jesus with his pierced hands extended in blessing, the disciples see the embodied Word: the embodiment of the scriptures that spoke of Messiah's suffering and rising on the third day, the embodiment of the forgiveness of sins, the embodiment of God's love outpoured for all nations. While Jesus was still blessing the disciples, he is carried up into heaven. The blessing of Ascension prepares the way for the Holy Spirit to enliven our bodies with the very presence of our God.

Simply stated, we are called to bless. Or rather, we are blessed by Jesus to be blessings to others through the Holy Spirit. On my desk, I keep close at hand John O'Donohue's *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* as well as Meta Herrick Carlson's *Ordinary Blessings: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Every Life*, and *Speak It Plain: Words for Worship and Life Together.* These are just three of many wonderful resources available for faith communities to offer blessings to one another on this festival day. For on this Ascension Thursday or Ascension Day observed on Sunday, we are called to bless anew in Jesus' name.

On Ascension, we offer blessings throughout the whole of the liturgy. There are ample opportunities to mirror the gesture and promise of resurrected Jesus as an embodiment of blessing. For starters, preach with hands outstretched as sign of God's wide embrace. Find ways to invite others to lift their hands in blessing, perhaps as a closing prayer to the sermon? At the outset of the liturgy, plan a communal confession of forgiveness. As the word of forgiveness is proclaimed, the presider ought to emphatically raise their hands in blessing. Make a note of it in the worship bulletin highlighting the gesture here and throughout the service. During the prayers of intercession, lift up hands as a movement of ascending prayers to God. Do the same at the table during the eucharistic prayer. The sharing of the peace is part hands of blessing, part arms of embrace: share them (safely in these pandemic days). These may be normal practices for you and your community of faith but calling attention to them—verbally or written—may reframe the gestures in light of the Ascension word.

And finally, give the blessing at the conclusion of the service with hands held high. For we are dismissed as beneficiaries of blessing, ready to receive the Holy Spirit anew and to:

> Go in peace. Be the hands of Christ in the world.
> **Thanks be to God**.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 29, 2022

Acts 16:16–34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21
John 17:20–26

Endings and Beginnings

Johannine scholar Gail O'Day once wrote, "The farewell discourse thus demonstrates through its narrative form what is the overriding theological reality for the community of the believers: God and Jesus are not limited by temporal categories."[8] John 17:20-26 is the conclusion of Jesus' farewell discourse begun at 14:1 and situated around the table and Jesus' act of foot washing in John 13. For four chapters, Jesus' speech-turned-prayer interweaves the relational work of the Holy Trinity, affirms the enduring presence of God in a hostile world, embodies the divine friendship offered in Jesus, promises the arrival of the Advocate, and commands love to be the way forward for the community of faith. Chronologically, the farewell discourse happens before Jesus' passion and resurrection; however, O'Day's argument stands: God and Jesus are not limited temporally. In fact, we hear these words in the Easter season because they feel like words from a resurrected Christ readying us for the power of Pentecost.

8. Gail O'Day, "'I Have Overcome the World' (John 16:33)," *Semeia* 53 (1991), 153-166.

Theologically, categories of time—past, present, and future—collapse within the work of the Triune God. Endings and beginnings find their meaning not in *chronos* time but in the *kairos* time of the Divine. As declared in Revelation 22:13, God has God's own sense of time: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." Here stands the truth of God as the source and end of creation, who, united with Christ Jesus as "the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star" (22:16) and in communion with the Holy Spirit, beckons us to "come" and drink deeply of the promise (22:17). The scope of time is held in the reality *God*, so that endings and beginnings are blurred within God's own self.

At the outset of John 17, Jesus looked up into heaven in prayer: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life…and this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you sent." Here, the temporal hour is refracted through the eternity of God so that "the hour" is really the culmination of the glorification of Jesus—his life, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, the outpouring the Spirt at Pentecost, and his enduring presence in the world. The glory of Jesus is the glory of God, for Jesus prayed, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one." The unity of God with the Divine-self is both bound in time and beyond time through the love of God who loved Jesus "before the foundation of the world."

Here is where we begin again: love. Centered within the heart of this pericope disclosing the unity of Jesus and God in glory is the gift and command of love. As Jesus prayed to God, "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." The Easter promise poured out by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is finally the love of God on full display in the incarnation of Christ. It is why in the Prologue of John's gospel, the Word who "was in the beginning with God" (1:2), was enfleshed in Jesus, the Son, who is "close to the Father's heart, and made him known" (1:18). It is why John 3:16 is so compelling, that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." It is why, with basin and towel in hand moments before his farewell discourse, Jesus says to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13:34). Love has its beginning and ending in God. In God, love, like time, is not limited to temporal categories.

So, another Sunday to preach the love of God? Yes! If ever there was a time to do so, it is now. The unity within God's self, beyond time, is the realized glory of the love God. Jesus' hour that has now come is the expansive hour of love holding all our beginnings and endings in Love's embrace. For it is Jesus' desire that "they [namely, ***we***!] may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23). It is a Sunday to preach love in preparation of Love's fiery entrance next Sunday!

What does preaching and embodying the love of God look like in a non-temporal way in your context? Is that even possible? Perhaps the sermon could be used to suspend the "normal" time frame of liturgy. Preach at the beginning of the service instead of the usual time. Or better yet, offer three sermonettes: one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end. Proclaim God's love not bound by time and show it in the timing of the service. It could be trinitarian in this manner, and you could enlist other voices sharing stories of God's crucified-risen-ascended love made known in people's lives. Another way to see the "hour" of worship as time beyond time is to offer prayers of love scattered throughout worship. The love of God needed in our hurting world; the love of Christ that calls us to justice and peace; the love of the Spirit that emboldens us to act on behalf of the neighbor. If you choose to keep the sermon at the usual spot, disorient people by "popcorn" love prayers throughout the liturgy by community members of all ages popping up to pray. However the worship flows, keep this at the center: God is the Alpha and the Omega, our beginning, our ending, our love everlasting.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Day of Pentecost
June 5, 2022

Acts 2:1–21 (or Genesis 11:1–9)
Psalm 104:24–34, 35b
Romans 8:14–17 (or Acts 2:1–21)
John 14:8–17 [25–27]

The Letters and the Words Fall Away

It was as if winter had come to stay forever. After seven weeks without any sign of Jesus' promised return, the eleven disciples, a disheveled and mournful band indeed, met to share their despair, to pray, and to practice listening for the sound of something other than loss and inconsolable grief. (Faith is the practice of such listening, said Martin Luther, which is why, when asked once to draw a picture of a Christian, he drew a picture of an ear).

And while after that day, no one could say exactly what had happened, one of the on-lookers (a young girl, gathered along with thousands of others from every tribe and tongue for the annual Jewish Harvest Festival of Shavuot), wrote a poem

in response, which she titled "Winterberries"… *The bright red berries,/ as signs of summer's end/ and autumn's transition/ into winter,/ point not only to/ the changes about to come,/ but also to the way/ in which we might/ be signs/ in the endings/ of our own days./ That is,/ by flaming out/ in colors so vibrant/ they say, "Look here!/ We have something/ to tell you we heard/ from the earthworms,/ who heard it/ from the underground rivers/ who heard it/ from the stars/ who heard it from the wind (the* ruach*)/ Listen!/ Even when the songs/ have been silenced,/ the music/ still finds/ a way."*

And after writing her poem, what the young girl would tell you by way of explanation, is that somehow those closest to Jesus who had gathered to grieve his absence and to wonder together about how to proceed, suddenly (by wind/spirit/ breath untamed), flamed out like the winterberries in the ending of their own day (at the ending of their own hope), and spoke a message so real and authentic and deep and true, it was as if the letters fell away and the words fell away, leaving only what lives and moves and has its being **inside** the letters and **inside** the words… (Rather like what you discover when you break open an apple to find what's **inside**; going deeper than the skin, deeper than the flesh, deeper than the core, all the way to the seed of the apple, where what you find inside is… an orchard)…

What the girl would say is, "It was like that," trying her best to describe what happened when the letters and the words fell away, and those who flamed out like winterberries uttered something that spoke to the deepest heart of everyone present, **no matter what letters and words they normally used for talking about the weather and the stock market and what to buy for supper**… Something more akin to music than to language… Something that had been received and conceived in earthworms and underground rivers and stars alike from the very beginning, finding its way to prophets and poets, dancers and dreamers, and finally to one who would carry (in his very body) the sound of that music in such an unsettling, expansive, and excruciatingly open way, the authorities did everything possible to put it to an end…. The one who could not be confined by cross or grave or a single space of place or people, and in whose absence the disciples had now languished and despaired for fifty days, thinking the music had been silenced forever...

The sound of that "something," so rung-sung with love and life, it brought 3,000 people that day all the way to the end of letters, to the end of words, and all the way into orchards, into winterberries… all the way into music… all the way to where the music always leads; that is, all the way to… *(What letters can we use, dear reader, or what words, to speak of… God… to speak of a Love that will go all the way to death, to absence, to make itself known?)*

Which is why the young girl who wrote the poem about winterberries has, since that day, suggested that anyone intending to preach on the story from Acts 2 might watch the film "Shawshank Redemption." Specifically the scene in which a multitude of prisoners serving time in the notoriously unjust and cruel Shawshank Prison (prisoners of many different backgrounds and languages), are gathered outside in the prison yard, when, suddenly, from the loudspeaker (thanks to the ingenuity and "winterberry-daring" of one of the inmates), there comes the sound of two sopranos singing an aria from Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro" (in Italian of course, a language few of the prisoners knew)… "Watch what happens," the girl would say, "as those voices rise higher and higher… watch what happens, and you will have a sense of what happened on Pentecost."

"Watch what happens. And then, if you can find the letters and the words with which to preach a Pentecost sermon, do so. But if not, do not fear, for even when the letters and the words fall away, and even when the songs have been silenced, the music will find a way. This is the promise breathed into creation from the beginning of time… the promise made real and tangible and visceral and audible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus… So… listen… listen… Even in the endings of our own day, it sings of the orchard stirring inside the seed and the music, dear Winterberry preacher, stirring in you…"

Elaine Hewes

Trinity Sunday
June 12, 2022

Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31
Psalm 8
Romans 5:1–5
John 16:12–15

Prismed Love

All those who have been fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of Lady Wisdom, report noticing similar things about her—like the way she's always conversing with people at Greyhound Bus stations and soup kitchens (always hanging out on the "corner of Mystery and Mundane," as one theologian has put it)…And the way she seems to resist the classification of things and people in the dualities of up/down, black/white, right/wrong, male/female, even to the point of answering to both the feminine name "Sophia" and the masculine name "Logos"… (She's been around since before the beginning after all, well before the word "duality" was even invented. And as a sign of her capacity for holding all of

creation in her heart, she has stars in her hair, muck boots on her feet, and tattoos of every kind from head to toe).

What Lady Wisdom is best known for though, is the small prism she gives to everyone she meets, saying as she puts the gift into their open hand, "Here, hold this up to the light and watch what happens." And then, as the person holds the prism up to the light and sees the way colors splash and dash all over everything, including their very own bodies, she reads this poem, beginning with the title, which is simply "Trinity." *Trinity… Light,/ Immense and unbounded,/ Heaven rent,/ Divine descent,/ Downward grounded/ and prism-bent,/ sent into the world/ in the colors of love/ to be seen/ and known/ and spent and spent,/ again and again and again.*

Mostly people just look at her like they don't have the foggiest notion of what she's talking about. And mostly Lady Wisdom understands why they don't understand, because of course, she knows what she's trying to show them has nothing to do with the "mastery of understanding," but rather with the "mystery of standing-under," as the prism (lifted to the light) reveals the verbs **"rending," "bending," and "spending" all blending therein into one extending, unending gesture on behalf of love**; (the unbounded immensity of light, sometimes called "God," finding its most fulsome expression only as it is rent and bent, redacted and refracted in the crucible of the prism, and "chrismed forth" full-spent in the colors of love, to be seen and known… to be splash-dashed on faces and hands and hearts and souls until in the **receiving** of such "love-rent, love-bent, love-sent" love there comes a **conceiving**… a piercing of the womb of the heart… an "in-ness" only lovers could ever imagine possible, the fruit of which is excruciatingly Easter-ful and passionately colorful and carnally incarnational all at the same time).

Which is why Lady Wisdom is partial to the Gospel of John and all the "in-ness" of which the Gospel writer speaks when creating his "Trinity" poems; taking the traditional trinitarian language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" all the way to the **"in-ness"** of "abiding in" *(meno)*… and to the **"one-ness"** of "I am" *(ego eimi)* … and to the **"with-ness"** of mutual giving and receiving *(lambano)* so immense and intense among the three it cannot be contained, but prisms forth out into the world in colors of love, there to be received and conceived and spent and spent, again and again and again…

None of this, Lady Wisdom realizes, is anything anyone could ever understand… Which is why, when she puts the prism into each person's hand, she says, "Don't try to understand it.

Just hold it up to the light and stand under it… Because, if you do, you will begin to see the colors of love where you would least expect to see them…

"Like in the green oxygen tanks alongside the bed of a dying mother; those green oxygen tanks transformed into Christmas trees by the mother's young daughters who decorate them with construction paper stars and bells and angels…

"Like in the front doors of Transfiguration Lutheran Church in the Bronx, where, after nights of 'vandalism by graffiti,' those doors were transfigured one day by the neighborhood kids; their art work featuring a fire hydrant gushing forth rivers of bright blue water that overflowed the door frame, spilling into the lives of those kids, who were met that day at those very doors by Pastor Heidi Neumark with paints and brushes and a story about the claiming waters of God's love and its wild, unboundaried grace that extended even to them…

"Like in the blue piano placed in an empty lot in downtown Bangor, Maine, so even in darkest of days music can be played and heard…

"Like in the red raspberry one might imagine while standing at the Holocaust Memorial in Boston and reading the words of Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissman Klein – *'Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night in a leaf. Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you give it to a friend.'*

"Like in those times and places where there is no color visible at all… But only the promise that the light immense and unbounded is yet down-grounded, rent and bent, spent and sent into the world God so loves… The cross being the prism through which the light does shine.

"Don't try to understand," says Lady Wisdom. "Just stand under and see what happens."

Elaine Hewes

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 19, 2022

Isaiah 65:1–9
Psalm 22:19–28
Galatians 3:23–29
Luke 8:26–39

Reflections on the Texts
Isaiah 65:1–9

Just a few chapters earlier in Isaiah, specifically in 60-62, things seemed to be going quite well. But in chapter 65 there is a falling out between יְהוָה (Yahweh) and Yahweh's people. Yahweh calls out to the people, but they do not listen and do abominable things instead. "I held out my hands all day long, to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke

me to my face continually.[9] Further, the people act in this rebellious way while considering themselves "holy." Thus, Yahweh declares, "I will indeed repay into their laps their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities." However, Yahweh also continues, "As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, 'Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,' so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all. I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah inheritors of my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it."

The way things unfold over these nine verses in some ways reflects the complex relationship between Yahweh and Yahweh's people throughout the Old Testament. Preachers could use this as an opportunity to capture the incredible depth of God's ongoing relationship with creation, hitting on various beats in this Isaiah passage to do so.

Psalm 22:19–28

This section of Psalm 22 offers great "praise" for Yahweh. It also offers an incredibly hopeful vision: "The poor shall eat and be satisfied" and "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him." This is all because "dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations." Notice that the language used in this concluding verse is present tense, meaning things that are real in the here and now, i.e., "rules" and "belongs." This contrasts with the futuristic language used to describe the vision in verses 26-27, i.e., "shall." This points to an important part of our faith which one of my seminary professors called the "already, but not yet" unfolding nature of God's Kingdom. Indeed, God does rule and has dominion over God's creation now, and God's creation also shares the hope of a reality in which the most vulnerable among us will be satisfied. However, this promise is not yet fully realized, as much injustice still persists across creation.

Capturing this paradoxical part of our faith without coming across as what I have heard others refer to as a "Jesus band aid" is quite difficult. We preachers need to use caution and care, seeking to capture the balance between the simultaneous uneasiness and heartache humanity feels for the suffering of God's creation now, yet at the same time the very real hope and promise we share through the words of Psalm 22.

Galatians 3:23–29

The community in Galatia was wrestling with whether Gentiles needed to undergo all the rituals of converting to Judaism in order to become part of the newly formed Jesus movement. Paul spends much of his letter to the Galatians engaging that question.[10] This passage is part of a larger section of Galatians in which Paul explores the true purpose of the law.[11] Paul concludes here that something truly transformative has happened to everyone who has been "baptized into Christ." Thus, every member of this Jesus movement, regardless of their social rank, their gender, or whether they are Judean or Hellenist, are all now "one in Christ Jesus." This is what makes members of this group heirs of God's promise to Abraham. [12]

I have sometimes heard Paul's declaration used to argue against embracing any forms of diversity. However, in addition to the important historical context behind Paul's words, preachers should notice that Paul does not list every single possible kind of distinction here. In fact, he only names three kinds of distinctions and only one, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, receives any attention in this letter.[13] Thus, preachers should use caution so that the declaration that "all of you are one in Christ Jesus" is not incorrectly heard as "everyone must conform to the dominant culture." Finally, preachers may also want to give some special consideration to how Paul's statement that "there is no longer slave or free" might be heard by communities where enslavement has been or continues to be a reality and also how the statement that "there is no longer male and female" might be heard by members of the LBGTQIA+ community.

Luke 8:26–39

In this story Jesus and the disciples arrive in "the country of the Gerasenes." As soon as they do, a man "who had demons fell down before [Jesus] and shouted at" him. We are also told that "many demons had entered" this man. Individuals who behaved as this man does were usually considered a danger to the rest of the community and were often excluded as a result.[14] When Jesus confronts these demons, they "begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss," and requested that Jesus let them enter a herd of pigs instead. Jesus grants this request. When the crowds came out to see what happened, "they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." This man then "went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."

9. Unless otherwise noted, translations cited from biblical texts come from the NRSV.

10. Stephen Finlan, *The Apostle Paul and the Pauline Tradition* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 76–77.

11. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 309.

12. Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 207–208.

13. Powell, 320.

14. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 260.

There are many angles preachers can take from this story. One could focus on Jesus mercifully listening to and granting the requests of the demons in this story; another could focus on the ways that Jesus' healing allowed this man to re-enter the community without being ostracized anymore, and perhaps another could focus on Jesus talking and engaging with this man at a time when no one else in the community would. Whichever aspect of this story a preacher engages, the healing Jesus provides is integral. Like many other clergy, I have had members of the communities I served suffer like the man possessed by demons in this story. Some of their sufferings have been amplified by bad messages they have heard about faith and healing, i.e., if they are not feeling good, it is because they are not good enough Christians, or if they just have enough faith they will be cured. Preachers should be mindful that there are probably people sitting in the pews whose suffering has been amplified by such messages before. Thus, care should be given to proclaim Jesus' healing in ways that will be experienced as truly being good news for all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit.

Eric I. Hanson

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 26, 2022

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Psalm 16
Galatians 5:1, 13–25
Luke 9:51–62

Reflections on the Texts

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

In this reading which closely mirrors much of the language that is used in the gospel passage for this day, Elisha begins following Elijah, becoming his "servant." Similar to some other Old Testament readings, this passage is broken up and has some verses eliminated by the Revised Common Lectionary. The contents of what is omitted are quite violent: "Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill" (17). Thus, preachers must make the decision as to whether or not to include these passages in their reading or preaching from this text. An important consideration to hold along with making this decision is that many people in the world suffer from trauma and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from violence. The violence in these omitted verses may serve as a trigger for such individuals. This does not mean that preachers should completely avoid these verses altogether, rather it is a caution to use extreme care and sensitivity if doing so.

Psalm 16

Psalm 16 is full of joyous language—"delight…"glad"…"rejoice"…and "joy." Yahweh is the source of all this joyfulness and is the one in whom the psalmist places their trust or takes "refuge."[15] The deep sense of joy and security which Yahweh grants to the psalmist here stands in sharp contrast to "Those who choose another god" which only increases "their sorrows. Thus, Psalm 16 provides a great opportunity for preachers to proclaim the joy and refuge which God provides.

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Paul begins this passage with the words, "For freedom Christ has set us free." *Freedom* is a central theme throughout this reading as Paul continues, "you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." This section of Galatians has been considered by many theologians as central to understanding *Christian Freedom* as it highlights the "paradoxical notion that one is really free only when one is 'free to serve'."[16]

At the time I write this article, we are nearing the two-year-anniversary of when COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and a state of emergency was issued in the United States. Like almost everywhere else around the world, this pandemic has deeply challenged the communities which I have served in many ways. One of these challenges has been the constant debate over which safety precautions should be considered optional and which should be mandatory. These same sorts of discussions are happening all around the United States and even in many other parts of the world. At the heart of many of these discussions seems to lie questions about what freedom means and looks like. Having served in predominantly white and heteronormative communities, many of the people I have served understand freedom as pertaining to their ability to make choices for themselves. Obviously, this is not the same understanding of freedom as what Paul describes in Galatians. Preachers should be mindful of what freedom looks like in the communities in which they serve and consider how Paul's understanding of *Christian Freedom* challenges and/or affirms these understandings. One final important consideration is that Paul uses the word "slave" throughout this passage. As I stated in my previous entry on Galatians, preachers should be mindful of how this might be heard by communities where enslavement has been or continues to be a reality.

15. BDB, s.v. "חָסָה"
16. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament,* 321.

Luke 9:51–62

At the very start of this story Jesus sets "his face to go to Jerusalem." When Jesus and his disciples pass through a Samaritan village, the people in the village "did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem." This thrust of Jesus focusing on heading to Jerusalem continues throughout the rest of this reading as well as Luke's whole gospel, until he finally arrives in the city in chapter 19.

Imagining Jesus making his way to Jerusalem with such determination and focus reminds me of a story I once heard involving Mahatma Gandhi and one of his sons. The two had driven away from their home into the city in their car one afternoon. Mahatma Gandhi was dropped off by his son and instructed his son to pick him up at the same location several hours later. However, the son lost track of time and was late picking his father up. When he arrived, he tried telling a lie to explain his lateness, but his father knew he was lying. Mahatma Gandhi then insisted that he walk the whole way back to their home, which was many miles away, with his son following slowly behind him in the car so they could each reflect about what had happened. Just like Mahatma Gandhi slowly making his way back to their home, I can also picture Jesus making his way toward Jerusalem. How might preachers capture the power and the good news of Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem and journeying there for the sake of the world?

Eric I. Hanson