

Preaching Helps

**Ordinary Time through Christmas
October 2, 2022 – December 25, 2022
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost to
Christmas Day**

Manna and Mercy

The October issue of *Currents* always focuses on the lectionary Gospel for the new church year that begins in Advent. In 2022-23 this means a penetrating look at the Gospel of Matthew from several different writers. These writers bring perspectives from different social and global locations: womanist responses to Rachel's never-ending cry for her lost children; Latin-American Jewish perspectives on the religious leaders in Matthew; South African experience from the Ujamaa Center where people have been studying Matthew's gospel for over thirty years as a source of insight about social problems in that nation. It's a wonderful practice to read a new commentary on each year's gospel, but many pastors can't afford one or imagine reading a whole commentary! This issue of *Currents* offers a mini-commentary that's free and won't take up space on your bookshelves. Be sure to save this issue because the Year of Matthew will last through November 2023 (with some side trips into John).

Just before this issue was published, we lost a dear friend whose insights on theology and scripture surprised generations. Pastor Daniel Erlander died on Sunday, August 28, 2022. His teaching and preaching, his writing and drawings have brought thousands of people closer to God and God's word. Dan's book *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe* seems an overly grandiose title. But when we read the book, we discover that God's whole story is framed by "manna and mercy for everyone." Dan's drawings awaken us to see that theme throughout the Bible. His picture of the "last supper" includes women, men, and children reclining around the table. Some have tattered clothing. Jesus is holding up a loaf of bread: "This is my body," he says. Manna and mercy for all of them (not just twelve male disciples). If you've read *Manna and Mercy* you probably have a favorite drawing. Perhaps there are pictures you could use for the bulletin cover or on the screen for a sermon series on manna and mercy this fall or in Advent. If you haven't read *Manna and Mercy* give yourself a gift. Don't assume the cartoon drawings mean the book is fluff! It's enlightening but it's not light reading.

Perhaps you know Dan's theology through his *Tales of the Pointless People*, stories that lift up God's grace as "pointless."

That is, we don't need points to be God's beloved children. His last story takes him to Knollwood Convalescent Hospital where he and his brothers take turns being with their mother. Every meal Dan pushed her to the dining room section for "people unable to feed themselves," and he lifted spoon after spoon to feed her (as she had fed him as a child). Dan heard two staff members talking about him one day. They referred to him as "one of the sons."

I started to complain to myself, "One of the sons – that's all I am around here. They don't care that I have a college degree from Pacific Lutheran University where I am now a campus pastor. They don't care that I have a Master of Divinity from Lutheran School of Theology. I even graduated with honors and received a \$200 scholarship, seed money for graduate school (it's still in the bank). They don't care...that I am an internationally-known speaker (I gave a speech once in Canada). All I am here is 'one of the sons.'"

Then I took my mother's hand and held it and felt proud and happy. "That's all I am here at Knollwood – stripped of everything except what I was the first hour, the first day of my life, her son." I realized "All is taken away and I feel rich, full, blessed." Then I thought of the baptismal waters. She held me there. To return to those waters is also to be stripped of every accomplishment, every honor, every point – to be only "one of the sons." When I return to that water, that birth, I am rich, blessed. There God whispers: "It is not what you gain. It is whose you are. You don't need points. You don't need points."¹

Thank you, Dan, for breaking through our assumptions about God, about the Bible and about each other. Now rest in God's eternal Sabbath.

*Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps*

Writers for this issue of Preaching Helps span the U.S. from California to New Jersey. I am grateful to each of them for their insights on the lectionary texts from the last Sundays of the Pentecost season through Christmas Day: **Kelly Chatman** became the first director for the new nonprofit Center for Leadership and Neighborhood Engagement (CLNE) in 2020. CLNE provides programs, coaching, and training to connect and support congregations and nonprofits and their neighborhoods. From 2001–2020, he was senior pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church and the non-profit Redeemer Center for Life. He has served as advisor to the Bishop of the

1. Daniel Erlander, *Tales of the Pointless People*, 2010. Available through Augsburg Fortress.

Minneapolis Area Synod since 2010. Kelly holds a Master of Divinity degree from Gettysburg Seminary and a bachelor's degree from Concordia Senior College, Ft. Wayne. He is married to the amazing Dr. Cheryl Chatman who was the Executive Vice President and Dean at Concordia University in St. Paul from 2000–2020. **Christa M. Compton** is a Lutheran pastor in her ninth year at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. She brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. As a high school English teacher, Christa was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a PhD from Stanford University and an MDiv from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. She currently chairs the Candidacy Committee of the New Jersey Synod. She loves to accompany people of all ages in learning about scripture and in exploring their faith with all its doubts, delights, and dilemmas. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** is a retired ELCA pastor, who served for thirty-five years in urban, bilingual congregations in the south Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. He is the author of the poetry collections *The Devouring Land* (Main Street Rag Publishing) and *Quitting Time* (Atmosphere Press). He has published poems and prose in over eighty journals and won awards from the Loft Literary Center and Minnesota State Arts Board. He is currently working on a novel, as well as serializing his second novella in a local monthly newspaper. His website is: www.artecabellohansel.com.

Amber Inglesbe serves as co-pastor at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Between college and seminary, she spent two years in London, England, as an ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) volunteer, a cross-cultural and ecumenical experience in a secular society that continues to influence her understanding of community, worship, and witness. She is frequently surprised and energized reflecting on the similarities and differences in ministry among the pastoral calls she has served, all in Minnesota: rural (first call), suburban (second call), and urban (third call). For twenty-two years, the Rev. **Jeff R. Johnson** has been pastor at University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley, a progressive, welcoming, and engaged community of faith “at work in the world” at the University of California, Berkeley. He also serves on the Campus Spiritual Care Team at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and shares a home with his husband in Oakland. **Catherine Malotky** is a retired ELCA pastor who has served as pastor, teacher, writer, coach, and retreat leader in the course of her career. She is co-author of *Carrying Them with Us: Living Through Pregnancy and Infant Loss* (Fortress Press, 2019), and just completed the Q3, 2023 issue of the Augsburg Adult Bible Study available through 1517 Media. She is living in retirement with her spouse, David Engelstad, and together they relish time and adventures with their two

adult daughters and their families.

Gladys Moore is a child of God. Ordained in 1984, she retired in February 2021, with her final full-time position serving as senior pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Summit, New Jersey. Prior to St. John's, she was the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life and Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Mount Holyoke College for six years, served as an Assistant to the Bishop of the New Jersey Synod of the ELCA for sixteen years, and served three urban congregations in New Jersey. **John Rohde Schwehn** (he/him) serves as one of the campus pastors at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. A graduate of St. Olaf College and Yale Divinity School, he has also served congregations in New Brighton, St. Louis Park and Northfield, Minnesota. He is a contributing author to Augsburg Fortress's suite of resources on scripture, theology, and Lutheran identity based on the works of Pr. Dan Erlander (*Manna and Mercy; Baptized, We Live; A Place for You; Water Washed, Spirit Born*). He lives in north Minneapolis with his wife, Anna, and their two daughters, Lydia (5) and Mira (3).

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost October 2, 2022

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

Psalm 37:1–9

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Luke 17:5–10

Engaging the Texts

If you and I were at the Festival of Homiletics and Habakkuk one of the preachers, I can hear all the “Amens” echoing through the gathered assembly. “Preach it!” somebody else might say. These responses recognize that the words this prophet proclaimed back in the seventh century BCE sound as true in the twenty-first century as they did back then! Indeed, the prophet has looked around at the destruction, violence, and injustice happening all around him and is both lamenting and complaining to God. “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?”

Habakkuk's question was the same question that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked back in 1965 as the March from Selma to Montgomery concluded. How tragic that nearly six decades later, the struggle for voting rights for Black and Brown people continues because of the massive attempts by White supremacists to suppress their votes.

How long? King's answer to that question signified his deep and abiding faith in a just God who would not allow evil to prosper forever. “How long will justice be crucified, and truth bear it? I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not

be long, because ‘truth crushed to earth will rise again.’ How long? Not long, because ‘no lie can live forever.’ How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”²

The arc of the moral universe does seem long, far too long, these days. But the prophet of old and prophets today still hear God’s word saying that help is on the way. How long? Not long...And why? Because the righteous will live by their faith—their trust in a God who ultimately, in God’s own time, hears and answers the cries of the oppressed.

Faith is also a theme in our second lesson from 2 Timothy. This is a faith that has sustained the generations, beginning with Timothy’s grandmother, Lois, passed on to his mother, Eunice, and now is a part of, but needs to be “rekindled” in, Timothy. Such faith, the writer reminds us, gives believers a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline—important spiritual gifts in a society run amok with people whose desire is hate-filled “power-over” others, rather than the love-inspired power of Christ.

As in the first two lessons, faith is one of the concerns in today’s gospel, too. In the NRSV, this text is part of a section of Luke titled “Some Sayings of Jesus.” Among these are verses about sinning, rebuking, repenting, and forgiving, especially forgiving those who have sinned against us. Jesus is urging his disciples (note that in today’s text they are called “apostles”) to be a forgiving community. When his followers ask him to “increase their faith,” one wonders what it is that would require such a growth in faith. Stoffregren (Exegetical Notes on Luke at CrossMarks) writes, “Perhaps moving mulberry trees into the sea is an easier act of faith than moving us to ‘rebuke’ and ‘forgive’ people who have sinned against us.” Nevertheless, it is the job or duty of those who follow Jesus, to live the gospel and be a forgiving community.

So it is, that when Jesus speaks of slaves plowing or tending sheep and then coming into the house to serve their master, he is speaking of them doing their “duty.” And he asks, “Do we thank people (particularly those who are enslaved) for doing what is expected (or commanded) of them?”

Pastoral Reflections

Each of these texts offers possibilities for preaching. Given the current divisions in our country, politically and in other ways, as well as the utter perversion of truth and abdication by some legislators of fulfilling the responsibilities for which they were elected, Habakkuk’s question of “How long?” would be good grist for the homiletical mill.

Using 2 Timothy, contemplating those women (and men) who have nurtured us in the faith, especially a faith that

2. Martin Luther King Jr., “How Long, Not Long” or “Our God is Marching On,” Speech: March 25, 1965.

is increasingly called upon to stand against such things that are anathema to the gospel, like Christian Nationalism, would be another possibility for a sermon.

Perhaps most difficult to tackle, (it was for me) is our gospel lesson. Expecting the baptized to live out our baptismal promises is one thing. Every Sunday we hear the presider say in the Great Thanksgiving, “It is indeed right, our *duty* and our joy...” and we do not wince at the word “duty.” We are called to be dutiful servants of Christ in the world.

But how do we speak of “slaves,” especially “worthless slaves” within our present national context? Slavery in the Bible is a complex subject, whether we speak about the Exodus and the rescue of the Hebrew slaves from their bondage in Egypt, or Onesimus, the slave about whom Paul wrote in his letter to Philemon, or the numerous unnamed slaves Jesus used as examples in some of his parables. Even if slavery in the first century was not as severe as slavery in United States history, it still meant owner and owned.

Even worse, the Bible was used to justify the enslavement of African-Americans in this country for nearly 250 years (1619-1865 [Juneteenth]). Undoubtedly, many of those who were enslaved were thought to be “worthless.” In today’s national climate, teaching about the history of chattel slavery and the persistent and pervasive injustices that resulted from it, is being censored for fear of wounding the sensibilities of little White children. Is it not therefore vital that the church speak a word of truth about the institution of slavery, and not try to rescue the Bible from its historical complicity in an economic system that was hardly “good news” for those who were captive? Navigating the complexity of such images is not something to be treated lightly, nor something from which to shy away in our proclamation. Perhaps when we tell the truth about the Bible’s limitations on some subjects, the gospel can shine forth more clearly.

Gladys Moore

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 9, 2022

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8–15

Luke 17:11–19

Engaging the Texts

Gospel singer and songwriter, Andraé Crouch, wrote a hymn fifty years ago, “My Tribute: To God be the Glory.” The opening words of this song could easily have been sung by both Naaman in our first lesson, and the ten lepers in our gospel lesson: “How can I say thanks for the things you

have done for me; things so undeserved yet you did to prove your love for me..." Before he acknowledged the source of his healing however, Naaman pouted and protested. And only one of the ten healed lepers returned to Jesus to give thanks--the Samaritan outsider!

Today's texts focus chiefly on healing and thanksgiving, with the refrain of Psalm 111 summarizing the theme well: "I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart." The lesson from 2 Timothy reminds us that even when we are faithless (and perhaps forget to give thanks), God is always faithful.

The gist of the story of Naaman's healing in 2 Kings is covered by the lectionary verses; however, the tale is much richer if the omitted verses (4-6) are included. By any measure, Naaman was a powerful man. Yet in spite of his status, he suffered from a terrible skin disease that, like HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, carried with it social stigma. When his wife's servant girl, a captive from Israel, heard of Naaman's illness, she suggested that he seek out the prophet in her land who could heal him. Thus, the drama begins. With a letter from his king, Naaman goes to the king of Israel, and eventually to the house of Elisha where he expects the famous prophet to come out and perform a miraculous public healing befitting a man of his stature. Rather than greeting him, Elisha sends a messenger with instructions for what he should do. Naaman not only felt spurned, but outraged. His fury was only heightened when he was told to go the River Jordan and do the required Levitical ritual of washing seven times. Not only is Naaman's ego bruised by this experience, his national pride is, too. Surely the rivers in Damascus are better than those in Israel. Even so, just as he listened to the advice of the servant girl from Israel, Naaman also listens to the advice of his servants. He does what he is directed to do and is healed of his disease.

As in our lesson from 2 Kings, the gospel text is also about people suffering from leprosy. Although what the Bible calls "leprosy" covers a variety of skin ailments, it was still required that those afflicted keep away from the community and cry out, "Unclean! Unclean!" when near others. It is interesting to note that while these men were normally separated by their religious beliefs and practices, the disease of leprosy brought them together. Thus, in the disease that had literally made them outcasts, nine Jews and one Samaritan found solidarity. What might enable us to find solidarity with those from whom we differ and how might that common ground be sustained?

Pastoral Reflections

There are a number of possibilities for preaching on these powerful and poignant texts. For instance, the inclusivity of God's saving activity could be lifted up. Naaman was a Gentile Syrian outsider; so too is the Samaritan who is doubly ostracized for being a Samaritan and a leper. Both were

thought to be beyond the scope of God's mercy; outsiders didn't count. Yet these are people for whom God cares deeply. Luke makes a theological point of this when, after Jesus' first sermon, (Luke 4:16-30) he reflects on God's universal mission by using Naaman as an example: "There were also many with a skin disease in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). Who are the outsiders in our midst today whom God longs to reach and care for? Our transgender siblings of all ages? Ukrainian and Haitian refugees? Others in your communities living on the margins of life?

Another approach to preaching might be to reflect on what it means to "see" in the context of healing. Culpepper notes:

The act of seeing plays a vital role in this story. First Jesus **sees** the lepers. Then the one leper **sees** that he has been healed...When he saw the lepers, Jesus saw their need and responded to it, just as the good Samaritan had seen the need of the man in the ditch and responded to it. The central event of the story is not the healing, however, but the response of the one leper, when he **saw** that he was healed."³

What and whom do we see in our individual lives and in our congregations, and what do we do when we see?

Still another possibility for preaching might be to explore the importance of gratitude in our lives of faith. Almost every commentator who has written on this text in Luke, suggests that the main thrust of this story is not the healing of the ten lepers as much as the Samaritan's "recognition" of his healing and his return to Jesus to give thanks. He clearly understands that the gift of healing from Jesus is a gift from God alone. As he prostrates himself before Jesus, he uses his "loud voice" (think "megaphone") to shout this to the world. So, too, does Naaman, when he finally accepts the source of his healing, saying, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel."

Both Naaman and the unnamed Samaritan demonstrate a faith that is complete because it includes thankfulness as a response to God. As disciples of the crucified and risen Christ, all of life for us is eucharistic living. Indeed, the very word used for "thank" in this text is "*eucharisto*." Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you ever say is 'Thank you,' it is enough." So too, Anne Lamott in the Prelude of her book, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (2012) says, "I do not know much about God and prayer, but I have come to believe, over the past twenty-five years, that there's something to be said about keeping prayer simple. Help. Thanks. Wow."

All of the main characters in today's lessons needed help.

3. "Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreters' Bible*, 1995.

Naaman and the Samaritan gave thanks for the healing they received. Wow! What a gift it is that we are privileged to preach on such faith-filled and faithful stories. Thanks be to God!

Gladys Moore

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 16, 2022

Genesis 32:22–31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Luke 18:1–8

Engaging the Texts

Today's gospel reading is focused on a parable about prayer. Luke's gospel takes particular interest in prayer. In this lectionary year during the season after Pentecost, we hear three parables about prayer that are unique to Luke's gospel. The first was several weeks ago; in connection with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, we heard the parable of the persistent friend (Luke 11:1-13). In the gospel readings for this week and next, we get the other two prayer parables unique to Luke: those commonly called the parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge, and the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector. Traditionally, the first character mentioned in a parable is understood to be the figure who represents God. For a whole host of reasons, it makes good sense to understand the judge as the God-figure here. Yet it is also fruitful to explore the idea of the persistent widow as the figure representing God—her persistence bears the image of God's relentless pursuit of justice, especially for those marginalized by social power structures; her continual bothering of the judge could reveal to followers of Jesus how constant prayer and not losing heart in the face of justice delayed changes those who pray.

Connected with the widow's struggle for justice, the lectionary offers us the story of Jacob's wrestling with the divine. In some ways, this story of Jacob preparing to encounter his brother Esau mirrors the story of Jacob fleeing from Esau. Then, alone in the desert, with only a stone as a pillow, Jacob has a vision and hears the promise first made to his grandfather Abraham—about numerous descendants and a prosperous life in a land God will give—granted now also to Jacob (Genesis 28). Many years later, having sent emissaries of his wealth and family ahead of him to meet his brother in what he assumes will be a tense meeting, Jacob is again alone in the desert as night falls, and he has another powerful encounter with the divine. Just before this pericope, Jacob is preparing himself to see his brother's face by scheming how to

appease Esau (Gen 32:20); just after this pericope, after Esau has met his scheming brother with arms open in a welcoming embrace, Jacob declares, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Gen 33:10). In between these two moments, Jacob has seen God face to face. Jacob—now Israel—will continue to be a schemer, but his wrestling with God and with humans is reframed here as a blessing.

The pericope from 2 Timothy offers an opportunity to reflect on the role of Scripture in forming faith and faith community. Maybe your congregation gives Bibles to children at a particular point in their faith formation journey, or you have youth preparing for confirmation, or this could be a moment to honor those who lead Bible classes for children, youth, and adults. The language in this text encourages us to remember what has been learned in Scripture as well as remembering and honoring the ones who help us learn it! The author of this letter is clear about what sacred texts do and why that matters; engaging this text may help provide similar clarity for our leaders and communities in our own contexts.

Pastoral Reflections

When presented with two of just about anything, our brains often want to label each as either good or bad. The same is true when we hear a parable like the one Jesus tells in today's gospel reading: there is a judge and a widow, and as there are two characters one must be bad and one must be good. But the closer we look at this parable, the less clear it becomes how either one ought to be labeled, let alone providing a definitive interpretation of the parable!

The widow continually comes to the judge, asking for justice against her opponent. We are never told the particulars of her complaint or whether her case is itself just. The judge neither fears God nor respects people but in the end does what seems to be the right thing. (It may just be a somewhat simplistic literary device, of course, but I appreciate his honest self-talk in verses 4 and 5—would that all people in authority had such self-awareness!) We don't know, however, whether this turn of events means that this fictional judge fears God and respects people from here on out. Using the lens of community organizing principles, we might gain new insight into this pair of characters. The widow and the judge both have self-interest, that is, each has something that ultimately motivates them toward the same outcome, a just outcome. In a surprising and intriguing way, the widow's actions move the judge toward justice. They both get what they want in the end: the widow is granted her preferred outcome, and the judge gets left alone. The need to pray always and not lose heart, it seems, has something to do with the way that persistence in prayer can create surprising connections that encourage (hearten) rather than discourage (dishearten).

There are interesting connections to be made between

the gospel reading and each of these other texts. The author of 2 Timothy encourages Timothy to persist in proclaiming whether the time is favorable or unfavorable, and the widow comes both day and night to the judge to advocate for her cause. Between the gospel reading and the Genesis reading, there is an opening to underscore God's gracious presence and activity in darkness, challenging much of the church's traditional language of light/white being associated with goodness and dark/black with evil. The widow's persistence in seeking justice means she bothers the judge both day and night; Jacob's wrestling all night with a mysterious divine being results in him receiving a blessing. All three texts make clear that there are powerful forces motivated to resist, or at least avoid, the good news of God's justice that challenges the set patterns harming individual and communal relationships, separating us from God and one another. All three make clear that God's justice, which is persistent and compelling and restorative, ultimately prevails.

Amber Inglesbe

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 23, 2022

Jeremiah 14:7–10, 19–22

Psalm 84:1–7

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Luke 18:9–14

Engaging the Texts

It's worth noting that in last week's gospel reading and this week's, Luke tells us both the audience for the parable and Jesus' purpose in telling it. These are details that do not necessarily accompany every parable! Those to whom Jesus tells this parable sound quite similar to the judge in the preceding parable—thinking highly of themselves and regarding others with contempt.

A subtlety in translation may be useful to note in the gospel reading: the Greek word *dikaïos* can be rendered as “righteous” or as “just.” Justice and righteousness sound like very different concepts in English—I tend to hear “justice” as relating to communities, social norms, and theories; and “righteousness” as individual, mystical, and maybe moralistic—but in Greek they are the same word.

It is helpful to remember that gospel stories that refer to Pharisees have come to have, over the centuries, casual antisemitism accumulate on them. This can be easy to overlook as trained preachers, and that makes poor assumptions all the easier for our hearers to retain. When such texts come up, it can be valuable to take a moment to present a more nuanced picture of who Pharisees were—religious leaders interested in

applying matters of faith to everyday life. While generally presented in the gospels only as foils to Jesus, in many ways they were trying to do the same thing Jesus was doing in his travels: helping ordinary people understand how God was present in daily life and how their love for God could be expressed in everyday moments.

Our reading from Jeremiah, two sections of communal lament, is on the same theme but coming from quite a different angle. Here, it is not a statement (“God is present.”) but a question: “Is God present?” The people acknowledge that they have sinned and turned away from God, that it seems God is now a stranger. Yet they declare the hope and belief that God is nevertheless in their midst. The prophet Jeremiah's position is as poignant here as anywhere in this book, as he alternately voices the desperate agony of the people and the heartbroken agony of God. The covenant is broken, all feel the painful consequences, and a path forward is not clear.

So as people of faith, what do we do when our relationships with God and others are strained or broken? The author of 2 Timothy offers some mentoring thoughts in the form of reflecting on his own experiences. He acknowledges that he has been let down by others, and also indicates both a hope for their forgiveness and an insight into the ways that, when deserted by others, God's presence and strength have been felt more fully. Despite challenging circumstances that led to painful separation among this group of believers, the author looks forward to sharing again with the community of faith, united with all who have longed for Christ's appearing, if not in this life, then in the next.

Pastoral Reflections

I recall a sermon I heard in my home congregation when I was a high school or college student. I don't remember the particular readings for the day, but the message seems to relate well to this parable in Luke's gospel. The gist of the sermon was the playful and profound observation that we can be tempted to be too generous with the gospel. Hearing a given line of Scripture or quote from a preacher, we might hope it hits home for someone else, in a way that makes that person uncomfortable while delighting us. “I sure hope Carl heard that!” or “Oooo, that's really going to burn Sue good!”

This parable can tempt us to apply its meaning to others without thinking about how it might zing *us*. We might be confident in our judgments of others being self-righteous, or over the top, in the ways they live out their faith and quickly correlate them with the Pharisee. The trick of this parable is not only within the story itself and how its first hearers would have been surprised by it; it's especially surprising in the way it traps us as we respond to it. One need not know much of anything about the cultural context of Pharisees and tax collectors and temple prayer practices to have a

rather immediate “I thank God I am not like that Pharisee!” response to hearing this parable. And just like that, it’s got us. In that moment, we become the very thing we loathe in others, confident in our own righteousness and regarding others with contempt.

These two men in the temple are not so different from each other. Each had a fairly clear social status. Each is in the temple praying at a distance from others. Each is praying in a manner with a long tradition and history; the psalms offer many examples of similar prayers.

Each man is also experiencing separation from God and from others; the tax collector seems all too aware of these chasms, while the Pharisee seems unaware of his disconnect with God and prefers distance from others. The Pharisee asks nothing of God and goes away apparently unaware of having received anything from God.

Is it possible that the characters of the Pharisee and the tax collector are closer to the complicated truth of being human than the caricatures we often have for such figures? Could it be that each of them offers both hope and warning – that each is what Lutherans might call *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously saint and sinner)? The tax collector’s humility and sincerity warm our hearts, even as his job means he participates in—colludes with?—empire and its oppressive systems, and there is no indication that he leaves the temple and changes careers. The Pharisee’s high opinion of himself and low opinion of others is repugnant, but perhaps his example of generosity and his commitment to faith practices still inspires others and benefits his community.

If the point of last week’s parable regarding prayer is to speak and act boldly when approaching God, perhaps this week’s point has to do with listening to God and letting God do the work that sets us in right relationship—that is, the work that justifies us and makes us righteous. In listening to God in this way, in trusting that God does this work, we are freed to speak truthfully to God and about God, and to speak generously to and about ourselves and others.

Amber Inglesbe

Reformation Sunday October 30, 2022

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalms 46

Romans 3:19–28

John 8:31–36

Engaging and Reflecting on the Texts:

When it comes to the festival of the Reformation, Lutherans can be lazy, even smug, about preparation. The result can be hackneyed history, nostalgic liturgy, and tedious, dogmatic preaching. God help us! It takes a bit of work to find our way into a reforming *experience*.

The late author and theologian, Frederick Buechner, reminds us that faith begins with experience. “Religion as ethics, institution, dogma, ritual, Scripture, social action—all of this comes later and in the long run maybe counts for less. Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat...”⁴

In your preparation, find your way to a reforming experience. The texts for this day can be our salvation, the tonic we require to refresh in us an experience of the reforming spirit at the heart of the reformation movement; an encounter with God’s unconditional loving-kindness *for you* and all humanity and the accompanying mandate of hospitality-justice for our neighbors and the whole of creation. Chase after the texts until they yield something more than an interesting idea. Better still, allow them to chase after you, until a lump comes to your throat, hair raises on your forearms, tears well in your eyes, and you feel again the presence of the One in whom you shelter for strength.

You might want to take some care with how you refer to the audience Jesus is speaking to in John’s gospel: *hoi Ioudaioi*, can be translated in various ways—the Jews, the Judeans, Tribal Members (First Nations), Israelites. There is a long history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in biblical translation and interpretation. In John’s gospel, *explicit references to Jews and Judaism are often hostile*.⁵ Consider in advance how you might read this text publicly.

Note, as well, that *slavery* shows up in this text as a metaphor for sin—on the lips of Jesus. There are many ways to speak of the mire of inherited sin. Consider how Jesus using the metaphor of slavery to speak of sin affects your proclamation. Given the history of our colonial misadventure, does

4. <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2018/8/14/mysticism>.

5. Adele Reinhartz, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Amy Jill Levine, ed. (Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition), 155.

enslavement continue to be the most helpful metaphor in our context?

While not directly on-point (usage of metaphorical language), consider the counsel of Professor Wil Gafney on the way the enslaved show up in scripture generally.

Across both testaments and the writings in between, slavery is ubiquitous, including on the lips of Jesus. While many translations use “servant” preferentially, I find that to be dishonest given that the persons so named were owned, controlled, raped, impregnated, bred, sold, maimed, and killed. Even when the bondage was of short *durée* or to pay off a debt, the lord and master had complete control of the subjugated person’s body and sometimes retained their children after their liberation. So while it is certain to produce discomfort in the reader and hearer, I preserve “slave” and invite the reader and preacher to wrestle with that term and its influence on and in crafting and defending the American slavocracy. Minimizing the footprint of slavery in the scriptures weakens the link between them and subsequent slaveholding societies and the churches that unite them and us. Readers are welcome to replace the word “slave” with “servant” knowing that doing so writes over the degree to which the scriptures are slaveholding texts with no imagination of the possibility of abolition. I would encourage congregations to talk about that language and why they will or will not retain it.⁶

The gospel text we have is part of a longer instruction that takes place during the pilgrimage festival of Sukkot, five days after Yom Kippur. This year, Sukkot is celebrated between October 9-16. Sukkot is a festival to give thanks for God’s sheltering accompaniment, protection, and sustaining goodness. It recalls the time of Israelite wandering toward the promised land after liberation from enslavement by Pharaoh in Egypt. (What do you make of the historical amnesia? *We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.*)

In his introduction to Days of Awe, a prayerbook for the season of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Rabbi Chaim Stern writes:

We call this prayerbook *Shaarei Teshuvah, Gates of Repentance*, though *teshuvah* might have been translated, perhaps more felicitously, “turning.” To the Jew, to repent is to turn back to the Source of goodness and truth. May this prayerbook help us turn to one another, and find the Eternal You, the Friend

amid all that is, the Nameless One whose “name” is Hope.⁷

Such *teshuvah*/turning doesn’t end with Yom Kippur. We are constantly invited to turn to the Source, *our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear* (Ps 46:1-2a).

This kind of turning is at the heart of all transformation. Turn to God, to your neighbor, and to a world in crisis and turmoil. Over and over again, turn to the Source of goodness and truth. Over and over again, turn to find the Nameless One we call Hope.

In our text, Jesus is offering an instruction to the disciples. But as it is the gospel of John, we know that it is about more than teaching. Jesus is offering himself, the incarnate word.

If you hold to my teaching... (NIV) says Jesus in the first verse. *If you walk in my footsteps and follow my teachings...* (First Nations). *If you continue in my word...* (NRSV).

Jesus in John is the word/teaching/logos embodied. Jesus is the *word made flesh, ... full of truth and grace*. For John, we don’t really *learn* the word/teaching/logos as much as we *remain* in it. *Meno* is an all-important word in this gospel, and it means *to abide, to remain, to shelter*. We abide in the word. We shelter in the word. We remain in the word. Jesus is encouraging his truth-seeking disciples to find their *place in him*.

Last weekend, when we baptized little Amelia, the daughter of students who graduated thirteen years ago from our university and came back to Berkeley for this celebration, we baptized her *into Christ*. Not into a teaching, or into an idea, but *into Christ*. With water, oil, and promise, we offered prayers of encouragement for her and her family that they might find shelter always in Christ, turning back again and again to the Source, daily as she grows, and during the times when her life is hard and she is weary. Turn to the Nameless One called hope, *our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear*. Jesus is encouraging us to find our place in him. This is a liberating truth.

Jeff Johnson

6. Wilda C. Gafney, *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church*. (Church Publishing Incorporated, Kindle Edition), 38.

7. Chaim Stern, *Gates of Repentance: The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe*. (revised, 1996), x.

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 30, 2022

Isaiah 1:10–18

Psalm 32:1–7

2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12

Luke 19:1–10

Engaging and Reflecting on the Texts

If you choose to forgo the Reformation texts, you have the prophet Isaiah reminding you about core values of Israelite faith, another *sheltering* reference in Psalm 32, and a *wee* story from Luke 19 about Zacchaeus.

Hospitality-justice, a core value of Israelite faith, finds expression in the action words of Isa. 1:17: *learn, seek, rescue, defend, plead* and their objects: *good, justice, oppressed, orphan, widow*. When you think about these neighbors in need, think about Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*—those whose *backs are up against the wall*. In Isaiah, you have as clear an action plan for neighbor-centered discipleship as you have with Micah 6:8—*do, love, walk...justice, kindness, humbly*.

While Psalm 32 doesn't refer to God as our refuge and strength as does Psalm 46, it speaks perhaps more intimately about God as a *hiding place where you preserve me from trouble* (Ps 32:7). The same word (hiding) shows up in Psalm 139, as a *secret place*, a safe place where *we are knit together in mother's womb...fearfully and wonderfully made...woven together in the depths of the earth* (Ps 139:15). Psalm 32 praises a sheltering God, a restoring God, a recreating God.

In reference to the gospel's story, I apologize for using the word *wee* in my opening lines. White, suburban, southern California churches of a bygone era taught a certain vacation Bible school song that forever altered the way I hear this story. However, while highlighting stature and sycamores, the song mostly misses the point of Luke's story. This sticky music has become something of a hindrance to my hearing with fresh and open ears about Zacchaeus and his encounter with Jesus. I hope it is easier for you!

To be sure, it is not just ear worms that mask the messages of ancient texts like this one. Society and culture trip us up as well all the time. For example, we might miss Isaiah's affirmation of the Israelite core value of hospitality-justice in verse 17 because we get stuck on an Anita Bryant style interpretation of the Sodom and Gomorrah reference earlier in verse 10. Or, more generally, we don't easily understand the core gospel message about the cross, because we are misguided by the ideology of optimism. As Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall reminds us, our understanding is *so easily co-opted by North American Christianity's always-eager market*

for happy messages.⁸ Think about the ways in which you get stuck and the ways in which the authentic message might be lost in your proclaiming.

In this gospel story, try climbing that tree with Zacchaeus who so desperately wants to see Jesus. And who in turn is seen by Jesus.

The poet and liturgist leader of the Corrymeela Community in Ireland, Pádraig ó Tuama, tells a story about a wee (!) boy in the introduction to his short book on daily prayer.

A few years ago, at Mass, I was sitting near a woman who had a small boy on her lap. He looked to be about three years old. It was an ordinary Sunday mass and the child seemed like an ordinary child. At the time of the consecration, the faithful were quiet, the bell was rung, the priest held up the sacrament and everything was as expected. Then the child, who had, up to now, been quiet, shouted out: "Hello, Jesus!"...It was a moment of delight. The priest looked shocked, blank, as if Jesus had turned up, in the actual flesh and bone...Theologically, of course, the child was deliciously correct!...It can be a shock to take Jesus seriously.⁹

It can be even more of a shock when Jesus takes you seriously enough to invite himself to your house for dinner. Especially if you are the village collaborator—a rich, collaborating tax collector—and universally despised by your neighbors. Jesus sees him, invites himself over for a meal, and then turns to remind those grumbling that Zacchaeus *too, is a child of Abraham. Zacchaeus also! A child of Abraham* just like the rest of you, and worthy of salvation. It can be an uncomfortable shock for the grumbling neighbors and restorative for Zacchaeus.

Consider for a moment the value of this affirmation on the life of this tax collector. Think of the value of affirmation, worth, and generosity in your life. Think of the re-creating that happens when people regard you in all your fullness and love you. Notice how easily the important work of restoration and transformation in your area can cause neighbors to grumble.

This collaborating neighbor is a child of Abraham and worth saving! Alongside the grumbling others, he is heir to the saving promises of God.

The apostle Paul would articulate this same conviction a bit differently in his letter to Ephesus. You are "no longer a stranger or alien; rather citizens with the saints and members

8. Douglas John Hall, "How my mind has changed," <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-08/cross-and-context>.

9. Pádraig ó Tuama, *Daily Prayer*, (Canterbury Press, 2017), ix-x.

of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

Professor Wil Gafney notices that this expansive imagery of household of God requires:

the inclusion of every sort of human believer, ...We are all the building blocks of God. In this imagery no bodies are excluded or disqualified due to age or gender or ability or culture of origin. Indeed, all human bodies are fit and worthy vessels for the habitation of God and God’s dwelling among us is incomplete with the exclusion of any human body.¹⁰

In visiting his home for dinner, Jesus includes Zacchaeus in the household of God. Ultimately, no one gets left out of God. *Hello Jesus!*

Jeff Johnson

All Saints Sunday November 6, 2022

Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1:11–23

Luke 6:20–31

[This commentary was written by Catherine Malotky for a previous issue of Currents.]

Engaging the Texts

On All Saints Sunday, we hover between this world and the next by remembering those who have died in the past year. This is the liturgical context for today’s readings that peer into liminal space in the life of faith.

Daniel is a wild ride, a nightmare let loose, complete with beasts and voices. Not unusual in apocalyptic literature, his visions are expressions of the chaos in which he was living, a chaos that clearly threatened his wellbeing and that of his community. The symbolic expression was a way of wrapping his mind and soul around it all. In his vision, the beasts rise up out of the sea, traditionally seen as a place of primordial chaos. Most scholars believe these beasts represented world powers of the time that were having their way with tiny Judah as they jockeyed for position among themselves. Daniel’s vision clearly illumines his powerlessness and lack of agency.

Reading straight through the text, including those verses excluded, introduces us to the Ancient One, who has astonishing power, impervious to fire and served by thousands. The Ancient One puts to death the fourth and scariest of the

beasts (interesting that the one with arrogant words is silenced), but the other three remain for a time though they no longer have dominion. Then we are introduced to “one like a human being,” or in Aramaic, “one like a son of man.” This familiar title has been leveraged in our tradition. This “Son of Man” is given dominion over all.

The final verses interpret the vision: in spite of the beasts, the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever and ever. (vs 18) Here is the promise to those living without power over their own lives—in the end (and for eternity) the holy ones will come home to their own once again.

Ephesians does not explicitly call out the imagery from Daniel, but similar themes are working in 1:20-23. From the description, it would be fair to say that this lines up with Daniel’s description of the Son of Man, and draws a circle around believers as the holy ones of the Most High.

Lest we get too secure in our election as holy ones, Jesus’ sermon on the plain in Luke lays out just what is true about those who are blessed and those who are warned.

Pastoral Reflections

The primordial chaos of the sea is a biblical metaphor. Check “leviathan” in a concordance. In more contemporary storytelling, recall the sea serpent that enslaves the Dark Island in the 2010 film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (based on C.S. Lewis’ book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, published in 1952). Remember that C.S. Lewis was writing with WWII fresh in his mind. I wonder if the power of the sea serpent, which took its shape from Edmund’s greatest fear in the story, was some way to embody what C.S. Lewis had seen happen in people’s souls as the war raged and lives were destroyed. Not so far from the apocalyptic drama we find in Daniel.

On All Saints Sunday, we can get lost in remembering those who have gone before, but this Sunday is as much a reminder of the saints who live, namely, us. Those of us who gather in Jesus’ name are, in baptism, recipients of this identity, not because of our merit, but because of his. We so easily get confused about this. Being elected can get distorted so quickly.

The apocalyptic visions of Daniel are directed at a besieged people who have suffered much, who have lost life and culture and hope. While it is true that Americans can find themselves besieged, in reality, we are closer to being conquering powers than powerless pawns. Ephesian’s assertion that Jesus Christ is Lord was politically risky because Caesar was considered lord. American exceptionalism can too easily lead us to see ourselves as lord. Jesus challenges us here, and may make us squirm if we are honest about our place in the global economy.

That said, it is also true that the relentless pace of our lives, the stresses under which we work, the fact that many

10. Wilda C. Gafney, *A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church*. (Church Publishing Incorporated, Kindle Edition), 540.

of us are being left behind as the wealth gap widens, the realities of racism and sexism, our persistent xenophobia, and a fragile sense of teetering on the edge of disaster, can produce perspectives that lead us to feel powerless and run over by an economy and social order that seem rigged.

What might it mean to invite a renewed focal point through the lens of faith? What might it mean for us to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, not as a weapon against others, but as a north star for ourselves, so that loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who abuse us is an invitation to correct the balance in our lives of faith? If we are people with means, we cease disparaging those who are poor for not putting forth the effort. If we are without means, we cease disparaging those who are wealthy for being greedy and self-centered. Instead, perhaps Jesus' invitation is to a genuine relationship, where we deal with each other first as children of God, then explore our differences and empathetically discern together how to do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Catherine Malotky

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost November 13, 2022

Malachi 4:1–2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

Luke 21:5–19

[This commentary was written by Patrick Caballo Hansel for a previous issue of Currents.]

Reflections on the Texts

“... the day that comes shall burn them up.”

“...there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues...”

“...they will arrest you and persecute you...they will put some of you to death.”

Not very cheerful words on the Sunday after midterm elections! William Stringfellow, the lawyer and theologian, told about being late for his plane. He couldn't find his keys or his ticket; he was rushing around, trying to finish packing and get to a waiting taxi, when a knock at the door announced two evangelists. “Do you know the world could end any day?” they asked him. “Yes!” he replied. “And I hope it's today!”

We seem to have a fascination with the end of the world. How many movies proclaim a future that is terrifying, cataclysmic, and violent? How many of us have members who ask us (or more likely, *tell* us) about the end times, often quoting *Left Behind* and other such books, chapter and verse?

I have travelled to other countries, and I haven't seen that same fascination with the end times that we see here. It seems strange that it is the richest nation on earth, the most powerful militarily, that is the one most eager to imagine the *teleos* of the world to be creation destroying rather than creation redeeming. Why is that? How do we preach in this context?

These texts give those who see God's final revelation as mass destruction plenty to point to. We could avoid them completely, I suppose—Thessalonians has some nice church order stuff. Or we can see them as God's final critique on a world of oppression and violence, a critique that leads to God's final act of destroying death.

Both Malachi and Jesus see that God's promised end is healing, justice, a renewal of the earth. We may have to dig to get to that promised end; but in God's time, it is waiting for us, watching for us, moving in us. Even in the midst of the machinery of death that sin has constructed, machinery that, unfortunately, has stood the test of human time. But it will not stand in God's time. The time of the end will reveal God's true power.

Thomas Merton, monk and poet, wrote a Christmas meditation called the “Time of the End Is the Time of No Room,” included in his book *Raids on the Unspeakable*. He connects the story of the Christ Child rejected from the inn with the end time:

We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quality, speed, number, price, power, and acceleration.¹¹

Merton wrote that in 1966! But it could sum up our current anxiety. Despite all our technology that “will bring the world closer together,” we are more divided than ever. We could see that division as God's separating the “good” from the “bad,” as many apocalyptic films and books do. Or we could see it as God's womb breaking open to a new life that encompasses all in the divide.

Here's an idea: What if the end time has already

11. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New Directions Press, 1966). <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2015/12/18/mysticism-the-time-is-the-time-of-no-room-by-thomas-merton/>

happened? What if Christ has already come back, and we've missed him again, just like we missed him almost 2000 years ago? Here's Merton again:

"Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it—because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it—his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated."¹²

So where is Christ hiding in our anxiety? Look at our border. Look at indigenous communities fighting for the earth in Brazil and Guatemala. Look at transgender women of color being murdered. There we will find the Christ, the suffering One. There we also will find the Sun of Righteousness, rising with healing in its wings. This is where the Spirit is birthing fierce faith. It may be that the faith of the poor and the marginalized is exactly what the church needs, as it struggles to be faithful.

These are hard texts to preach, and I struggle as a preacher with two extremes. One is minimizing the pain that ending injustice entails. The other is succumbing to my anger at how immigrants, the disabled, and poor are treated, so that I end up violent in my spirit, if not in my actions.

A couple of closing thoughts:

English versions translate *Tzedakah* in Malachi 4: 2 as "Sun of Righteousness." In every Spanish translation, conservative or liberal, it is translated "Sun of Justice." How would our preaching change if we saw justice as the promised healing?

I know many of us fight the losing battle about singing Christmas hymns during Advent. But maybe on this pre-Advent Sunday—we could sing this verse of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing":

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace,
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His Wings.
Now He lays His Glory by,
Born that we no more may die
Born to raise each child of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the New-born king!"

Patrick Cabello Hansel

12. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*.

Reign of Christ Sunday November 20, 2022

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11–20

Luke 23:33–43

Reflections on the Texts

Jesus was crucified as King of the Jews. This text causes me to think about the difference between waiting and anticipating. I am not very good at waiting; I think of waiting as a wasteful and often meaningless way to spend time. I do not do well waiting in lines or waiting for commercials to end. Anticipation stirs a very different response in me. I think about the difference between waiting and anticipation in Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross. Luke tells us that at Jesus' crucifixion there are two men who are labeled criminals. They are crucified beside him, one on his left, the other on his right. The picture is of three people dying on the cross. One man, waiting to die turns to Jesus mockingly and suggests to Jesus, "If you are king of the Jews, save yourself." I think of that man as someone who is simply waiting to die. The other man dying on the cross speaks up, holding Jesus in high regard. This man, too, is waiting to die. In the encounter on the cross Jesus says to that man, condemned as a criminal, "Today you will be with me in paradise." I think of how Jesus' promise turns that man's experience of waiting to die into a life of anticipation.

Today, I think of many people who, due to physical, social, emotional, and other limitations, are living lives of waiting. There are people of tremendous wealth and privilege who are living their lives waiting, too. This encounter with Jesus, even from the cross, is the invitation to turn our focus from ideal waiting to lives of anticipation.

This is the last Sunday of the church year. Next Sunday will be "New Year's Day," as we begin the season of Advent, a wonder-full time filled with anticipation. During the season of Advent, we light candles, read scripture, and sing songs in anticipation, remembering Jesus' promise from the cross to live our lives filled with anticipation.

Kelly Chatman

First Sunday of Advent November 27, 2022

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

People Get Ready

I grew up in Detroit during the renaissance of Motown and the wonder of gospel inspired music. The popular gospel song by Curtis Mayfield, “People Get Ready” was a song my siblings and I loved to sing together. The words were “People get ready, there’s a train a coming. You don’t need no ticket; you just get on board. All you need is faith to hear the diesels humming. Don’t need no ticket, you just get on board.”

The text for this First Sunday in Advent is a reminder to get ready. Matthew reminds the reader that there is a future beyond the here and now and challenges us to be alert and get ready. The gift Curtis Mayfield provides in his song is the witness during a time of civil unrest in the United States: there is life beyond the here and now. “You don’t need no ticket,” you are a child of God. The message on this First Sunday in Advent is to get ready, better days are coming, hold on. Matthew provides three examples, including inattentive people during Noah’s time partying, two people laboring in the fields, and women grinding in the fields—when suddenly one is taken away. Matthew’s final example is a homeowner who is cautioned that if she/he/they knew a thief was coming in the night they would have sought to be ready, right?

We are a busy people. We work hard. We shop hard. We play hard. Advent is the reminder that we would be wise to reflect, pray, and pay attention. We have not yet reached our final destination!

“People Get Ready” is a **“Conversation with Death”** that takes place indirectly and in code. The song’s coding makes it a nuanced conversation, but one that generates insight into how music involving “final judgment” need not always be ominous. It can instead be a resource to support people taking up struggles for freedom.

Thank you, Curtis Mayfield!

Kelly Chatman

Second Sunday of Advent December 4, 2022

Isaiah 11:1–10

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

Romans 15:4–13

Matthew 3:1–12

Engaging the Texts for Preaching (with a focus on Isaiah)

Year A of the lectionary cycle includes four wonderful readings from the prophet Isaiah. Each of the Sundays lifts up visual images that can be the focus of the sermon: swords into plowshares (Advent 1), a shoot growing from a stump (Advent 2), desert blossoming (Advent 3), and the sign of a child (Advent 4). Today is already the second Sunday of Advent, but consider preaching a series on Isaiah for the rest of this season.

We begin with the First Reading for this Sunday from Isaiah 11. “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...” These are the first words in this chapter and it’s tempting to rush on to the big vision—the peaceable kingdom where the wolf and lamb live together without fear. But what if we stopped? What if we dared to argue with Isaiah’s first words? I’ve seen that stump—the tree that stood in our yard on the farm, shading our parents and our grandparents before us. The tree was old. It had to go, cut down until nothing was left except the stump. We sat on the stump waiting for the school bus. But we did not expect the stump to grow and it didn’t—not even one tiny shoot. The stump was dead.

Isaiah had warned that it would be so earlier in this same book. “The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of the people” (Isa 3:14a), the prophet said. “What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” (Isa 3:15) This word had come from God: the tree must be cut down. The tree, the people. Both will be clean cut off, punished, carried away into exile.

And yet, another word comes from the very same prophet—“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...” Could Isaiah’s people believe such a promise? Can we dare to believe the prophet’s word as we sit on the stump? Sometimes, I have seen glimpses of such a promise—of something growing where nothing should. Perhaps you have seen it, too.

When I was a pastor in upper Manhattan a new police station was being built. Day after day workers pounded away with jackhammers big as city buses, often without making a dent in the hard Manhattan schist. This same rock is visible in Ft. Tryon Park near the church. Strong as iron that Manhattan schist—rock that makes a mockery of jackhammers. Yet, I

have seen something else: a tiny seedling pushing out into the sunlight. A tender shoot no bigger than my finger breaking through the rock without a jackhammer. There are, I know, scientific explanations why such a thing is possible, yet each time I see it, that tiny green shoot seems something of a miracle.

Perhaps you've seen it, too. Or maybe you have seen something more fragile still. There was a man in my neighborhood. We often met for coffee at the local newsstand. But after his wife of many years died he never came to the newsstand. I'd see him on the street but he didn't even look up. Then one day, he looked at me and tipped his hat. "Going for your paper?" he asked. We walked together to the newsstand. He seemed transformed. I couldn't know for certain what brought the change that seemed so sudden. Of course, for him, it wasn't sudden at all, but painfully slow. Like a seedling pushing through rock toward the sunlight. Whatever got him through those days, he seemed to me a miracle.

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse..." How could Isaiah's community believe that promise as they sat on the stump of utter despair, counting the rings of the past? How can people in our congregations believe this promise in the midst of their sorrow or despair, isolation or disappointment? There are signs of this small shoot growing where you live, too. Walk around the neighborhood and pay attention to what you see. Drive along country roads where only a driveway reminds you that once there was a house, a barn, a corn crib, and people. Where do you see the stump? Where do you see a fragile shoot growing?

BIG visions almost always begin with TINY signs. "A shoot shall grow from the stump of Jesse." It seems so fragile, yet this tender shoot is tenacious and stubborn, growing where nothing is expected to grow. It will grow in the heart of a man overwhelmed with loss until one morning he can look up again and tip his hat. The shoot will break through the places where jackhammers fail.

God's promise will grow in you, too, and in me—precisely in that place which seems cut off from hope. Oh, I would love a bigger sign, a mighty cedar instead of a tiny shoot. But what if we dare to believe that even the smallest sign is a miracle? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of unbelief. We may still want to sit on the stump awhile, but we will dare to see that a green shoot is springing up where nothing was supposed to grow. It is springing up in you and in me just when we thought hope was impossible.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Third Sunday of Advent December 11, 2022

Isaiah 35:1–10

Psalm 146:5–10

James 5:7–10

Matthew 11:2–11

Engaging the Texts for Preaching (with a focus on Isaiah)

This commentary continues a series on the Isaiah readings suggested last week. Today, we turn to Isaiah 35. These words are beautiful, but this text shouldn't be here. Amid war and desolation, Isaiah surprises us. An unidentified voice speaks without addressing anyone by name. This chapter is a poem rather than a narrative. It follows another poem filled with terrible destruction: "The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch..." (Isa 34:9). This was before anyone knew about climate change. But condemnation wasn't only for enemies; Isaiah also uttered harsh words of judgment against Jerusalem and Judah.

Then, without a break and without explanation, Isaiah 35 interrupts devastation and despair:

The wilderness and the dry
land shall be glad.
the desert shall rejoice and
blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom
abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and
singing...

Creation joins in singing as the ecological destruction of the previous poem is completely transformed. But why is Isaiah 35 here? Even the footnote in my Bible says the poem comes from another time, a different writer, perhaps from the more hopeful Second Isaiah. Others argue that it comes even later, surely after the exile. This poem comes too early. Who moved it? Could it be that the Spirit hovered over the text and over the scribes? "Put it here," breathed the Spirit, "before anyone is ready. Interrupt the narrative of despair."

Some people will hear the recitative from *The Messiah* in Isaiah's promise of restoration for those with disabilities: "Then shall the eyes of the blind be open-ed and the ears of the deaf unstop-ped..." How do these promises sound to people who live with disabilities? Perhaps you can create a Call to Worship or post-communion litany that offers a different vision:

Then the blind woman and her dog
shall process with the choir;
 the deaf man who sees what we often miss
shall paint the text on the sanctuary walls;
 the veteran in the wheelchair
shall break the bread of life,
 and the homeless man who cannot speak
shall sign the hymns for everyone to see.

For many years Chuck Campbell taught preaching at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He required students in one of his classes to lead worship and preach at the Open Door Shelter for homeless people in downtown Atlanta. One day he was leading worship in front of the shelter amid the noise of rush-hour traffic. After the call to worship and a song, Chuck's plans were interrupted.

"I noticed one homeless man waving to me and pointing to himself. I was surprised when I saw him for the man can neither hear nor speak and is normally very reserved. But there he was, eager to do something. He stepped into the middle of the circle, bowed his head in silence, and began to sign a hymn for us. It was beautiful, like a dance... In that moment our notions of 'abled' and 'disabled' were turned upside down. The rest of us had been shouting to be heard, but the noise was no problem for our friend... Our worship became a token of the resurrection in the midst of the powers of death, a glimpse of God's beloved community."¹³

Even Isaiah couldn't have imagined the glory of that moment in downtown Atlanta as the hands of the speechless were singing for joy!

Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place. A word that refused to wait until things improved. As Walter Brueggemann has reminded us, "Israel's doxologies are characteristically against the data." We see and hear the data every night on the news and every morning on the front page of the paper. Add to that the data of our own lives: waiting for the test results from the doctor, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we'll make it through the next round of lay-offs. We know the data all too well and we long for a word out of place.

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, often speaks a word out of place. She refuses to wait until the time is right and everyone is on her side. Years ago, after one more defeat of a gun control measure, she wrote: "I woke up the morning after the Senate

vote thinking about Sojourner Truth, one of my role models, a brilliant and indomitable slave woman who could neither read nor write but who was passionate about ending unjust slavery and second-class treatment of women. At the end of one of her antislavery talks in Ohio, a man came up to her and said, "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Do you suppose people care what you say? Why, I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea."

"Perhaps not," she answered, "but, the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching." Then Marian goes on in her own words: "Enough fleas biting strategically can make the biggest dog uncomfortable. And if they flick some of us off but even more of us keep coming back with our calls, emails, visits, nonviolent direct action protests, and votes—*we'll win*."¹⁴

Who will speak a word out of place? A homeless deaf man in downtown Atlanta. An advocate for children who will not be silent. A prophet who couldn't wait until hope was evident. He spoke a word out of place. This is exactly the word many people are yearning to hear.

O come now, living water, pour your grace,
 And bring new life to ev'ry withered place;
 Speak comfort to each trembling heart:
 "Be strong! Fear not, for I will ne'er depart."
**Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear,
 God's chosen one, Immanuel, draws near.**

Barbara K. Lundblad

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18, 2022

Isaiah 7:10–16

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

Romans 1:1–7

Matthew 1:18–25

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

The texts for the Fourth Sunday of Advent introduce us to people who are, to put it mildly, struggling: A king whose kingdom is being invaded by an enormous army (Isaiah); a divided community of believers living tenuously in their oppressor's capital city (Romans); a man who learns that his fiancée is pregnant—and not by him! (Matthew).

Each stands precariously on a threshold between life as they've known it and an unknown future. But suddenly, a messenger from God addresses them! God's prophet addresses

13. Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 123–124.

14. Marian Wright Edelman, "We Must Never Give Up," *Child Watch Column*, April 20, 2013.

King Ahaz with a hopeful sign—a child, who will be called Immanuel—even though Ahaz has refused to ask God for any sign at all. God’s apostle addresses “all God’s beloved in Rome” with God’s promise of grace and peace. Finally, God’s messenger addresses Joseph (“son of David”) in a dream the night before he planned to quietly separate from his pregnant fiancée.

Matthew’s nativity story exemplifies God’s sudden address in a moment of anguish, and Joseph is at the center of it. There are neither shepherds nor choirs of angels here, and Mary, like the birth of Jesus, is barely mentioned. Matthew’s nativity story is obviously different than the beloved Luke nativity, which we will hear next week. There’s no need to dwell on the *differences* between Matthew’s and Luke’s nativities, as this Joseph-focused story is a wonderful companion to Luke’s. It fills in some important gaps, such as “What was going on with Joseph through this entire ordeal?” Clearly, he was struggling.

In the Fall of 2011, the inimitable Rihanna dominated the Billboard charts with her earworm of a song, “We Found Love.” Most of the song is the chorus, and the music pulses with intensity and joy as she sings, over and over, “We found love in a hopeless place.” The story of Christmas is God’s love being born in a hopeless place—and here in Matthew’s gospel, we find Joseph in that hopeless place of shame and embarrassment, believing deeply that his loving partner has betrayed their intentions of growing a family together.

Joseph’s initial response to the threat of public shame is contrasted by King Herod’s in the very next chapter. Herod, like Joseph, is another man in a position of authority. Unlike Joseph, Herod rages against a perceived threat very publicly, and violently. Perhaps there is something in Joseph’s gentleness and care for Mary—even when he believes she has acted unfaithfully—that opens him to receiving a challenging and new word from God. If an angel came to Herod in a dream, would he even be capable of changing course, of acting differently?

In Matthew’s nativity story, so much happens in the dead of night. There is the angel in a dream, of course. Then there’s the necessary darkness which makes that star over Bethlehem so visible to the Magi. And only a few weeks later, after Jesus’ birth, Joseph will be visited again in the middle of the night by an angel. He’ll be told that Herod is looking for the child, to kill him. Joseph will once again obey, and flee with baby Jesus and Mary to Egypt, at night.

My first daughter, Lydia, was born on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. After laboring long and courageously, my partner was urgently rushed by a team of doctors into an operating room for emergency surgery, and I was left completely alone in a dark hospital room. I was scared. I was worried. I had no idea what was going on, no concept of what the risks were or what might be happening.

But then a midwife who was on the floor that night—whom I hadn’t seen before this moment of peril—came into my room and sat beside me. She could tell I was more than a little freaked out. She let me know what was happening, assuring me that everything (and everyone) would be okay. Her name, I learned later, was Grace.

Grace literally found me in this place of darkness, in the middle of the night, in a room of fear and isolation. She was for me what the angel was for Joseph as he dreamed: assurance that God was with me. She offered hope for what was coming, even though my own worry was blocking me from recognizing it. A few minutes later, I was holding my daughter.

In the quiet of night, in the shadowy parts of our story, and in the mysterious darkness of creation, there is surprising and amazing grace. Grace and new life are born in the dark. This final week of Advent (we get a full seven days of Advent 4 this year), we are invited by the Joseph story to resist rushing into the light of Christmas morning. We trust that God seeks us out in times of darkness and uncertainty as well, addressing us with grace and favor.

After all, darkness is God’s favorite thing to work from: darkness is all that’s present in Genesis 1, before the world is created. Darkness is not the enemy of light but the beautiful palette from which all else emerges. Then there’s the darkness of Mary’s womb, and let’s not forget what will happen to her baby, the one who will be called Emmanuel, “God with us.” He will die on a cross and be buried in a dark tomb. From that hopeless place, new life and love is promised for all.

John Schwehn

Christmas Eve December 24, 2022

Isaiah 9:2–7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11–14

Luke 2:1–20

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

Something always breaks in the lead-up to Christmas Eve. One year it was a favorite ornament, shattered to bits when it fell from my hands onto the hard floor. Last year it was the star on the top of our congregation’s Christmas tree. Its two halves came unglued, and the mechanism that keeps it upright on the tree was also wonky, leaving the star to flop over as if it had drunk too much eggnog. We finally taped the star back together and then rigged a way to keep it upright using Play-Doh nestled unseen in the upper branches. We joked that having to MacGyver that star so that it could shine without falling over seemed like the perfect metaphor

for 2021.

We did our best to hide it, but the star was broken. And it was also beautiful. That's the paradox: things can be both broken and beautiful.

Plenty of things were broken about that first Christmas too. The power of empire had broken people's spirits. Imagine having to travel miles upon miles to be counted by the Roman authorities so that you could then pay more taxes. Now imagine doing that while pregnant.

The whole set-up was broken. Those big names—Augustus and Quirinius and their ilk—were protected within their palaces, feasting on the labor of the poor. Meanwhile, the shepherds were out in the fields, risking their lives to protect their flock, waiting for the next wolf to leap out of the shadows. Mary's dreams of childbirth—in some place familiar, surrounded by the women in her family—were broken too. She's left to give birth in a strange place far from home.

The world was broken. And that world was populated by broken people.

Jesus breaks into that world. Jesus breaks into the world, and in doing so, he breaks the expectations of who the messiah would be. Emperor Augustus had proclaimed himself Lord and Savior, but Jesus shows up to say: *Not so fast.*

Most of us have felt broken at some point in the past year, probably more than once. Many people will be feeling broken on Christmas Eve. If so, they are in good company. Our world is broken too—in many of the same ways that the ancient world was broken. The gap widens between the privileged and the poor, the most vulnerable face the most danger, and our visions and hopes are often shattered like the Christmas ornament that slips from our hands.

But on that first Christmas night the angels break the silence of the sky with a message: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Don't miss that first part, which echoes across the ages: *Good news of great joy for all the people.* All the people. That includes us. This child breaking into the world comes to bring each of us the joyful promise that we don't have to have it all together in order to receive this gift of grace. That promise is echoed in Titus: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to *all.*"

This gift is for all of us, no matter how broken we are, no matter how much we worry that our faith isn't strong enough. Some people listening on Christmas Eve will protest: "But later the angels say, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!' What if I'm not among the favored?"

Here's the good news. God favors all of us. God sees us as

we are—both broken and beautiful. God doesn't always like what we do, but God is still on the side of love and mercy, a love and mercy that enfolds everyone: the tender mother bundling up her baby, the anxious father keeping an eye out for danger, the humble shepherds, and the holy angels. Even the despots of the world, though their evil is deep, are not beyond God's redemption.

God has been born in the midst of brokenness. God is with us tonight in the midst of our own brokenness. In our family conflicts over politics, God is with us. In all the hurt we have hurled at others, God is with us. In all the wounds we have received ourselves, God is with us.

Jesus is not afraid of brokenness. It's one of the reasons he is here—this body of Christ, broken for us on the cross, broken in the bread for the meal we share together. In all of it—in every bit of the brokenness—Jesus, Emmanuel, is with us, bringing healing and hope to the messiest corners of our lives.

To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, and you will not have to hide any of your brokenness because he is here to hold all of it. That's the good news of great joy for all people.

Christa Compton

Christmas Day December 25, 2022

Isaiah 62:6–12

Psalm 97

Titus 3:4–7

John 1:1–14

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

No one writes Christmas pageants about this gospel. It leaves out all our favorite characters—Mary and Joseph, shepherds and magi. In John there is no casting call for angels or donkeys. Instead, this gospel serves up an image that at first seems impenetrably abstract: the Word, before time and in time and beyond time. So, it's the perfect twist that John also names flesh: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth." It doesn't get more real and tangible than *flesh*.

By the time Christmas morning arrives, many of us have an uncomfortable relationship with flesh. Caregivers for the very young or the very old know the unceasing demands of the flesh—the diaper changes, the feedings, the cleaning and consoling.

Most of us by this point have indulged in weeks of holiday eating and drinking, embracing the Hallmark theology that there is nothing that hot cocoa can't fix. It's perfectly fine to delight in holiday baked goods, but because unhealthy messages about bodies prevail in our weight-obsessed culture, we are primed in late December for the new year's siren call of diet programs and gym memberships. Our flesh is easily commodified.

By Christmas Day at least some of the flesh-and-blood people we love have exasperated us with their politics or their thoughtlessness or their lack of gratitude for carefully selected gifts. And we will be missing those who are no longer here in the flesh. Their places at the Christmas table are empty.

It's into our fleshy, complicated lives that the Word enters, becoming flesh and living among us. The Word pulls up a chair to our family table and hosts a feast that never ends. And that Word is full of grace and truth, two gifts for which we hunger the most. We need that truth in a world that is fractured by lies and conspiracy theories. We need that grace in a world that pushes us to keep hustling to save ourselves. As Isaiah reminds us, our salvation has arrived in the flesh. We are now called holy people, redeemed, sought out—not because we have been virtuous, but because our Savior has come to live among us. That flesh-and-blood Savior has come to live and die and live again so that we might know what life really is. As Titus states so directly, our Savior “saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.” In that grace we have the hope of eternal life.

Early in the pandemic I was diagnosed with a frozen shoulder, which led to months of physical therapy and a painful progress back to full mobility. I don't recommend it under the best of circumstances, but it was especially difficult to layer on top of COVID fears and the rest. I couldn't help but think about those who were facing chemotherapy or awaiting transplants, far more difficult bodily challenges in a pandemic.

We have all felt the frailty of our bodies in a different way in recent years. We understand anew what it means to inhabit bodies that will at some point die. We've carried so much fear and grief, and it has taken its toll, not just on our bodies, but on our minds and hearts and spirits. The list of threats feels endless—new diseases, faithless leaders, conflict and confusion, racism and all the other “isms” that harm our bodies and souls. In a season of divisions, we are united by the frailty of flesh.

By being born in skin and blood and bone, Jesus shows us that bodies in all their forms are both vulnerable and holy, including his own. As John's gospel unfolds, Jesus will intercede on behalf of the woman caught in adultery, interrupting her execution at the hands of those who would rather attack

someone else's frail flesh than acknowledge their own. Jesus spends his life touching those who are despised and disabled and diseased. He brings healing with his touch—healing to bodies that society has deemed unworthy.

Jesus knows grief as he weeps for the death of his friend Lazarus. Jesus knows anger as he drives the moneychangers out of the temple. Jesus knows the pain of violent death. And hours before his death, Jesus will kneel and touch his disciples' feet, washing them in love. Even after the resurrection he shows up with scars on his body.

Jesus shows us that bodies are holy, worthy of care and protection. And Jesus doesn't show us these things from far away. He shows us right up close in a body of his own.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that, no matter how we feel about our bodies, we should try praying naked in front of a full-length mirror sometimes. That thought unsettles many of us, but she reminds us that God loves our flesh and blood, no matter what kind of shape it's in. Barbara says: “There comes a time when it is vitally important for your spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say, ‘Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul's address.’”¹⁵

Our bodies are holy because God fashioned us into who we are. Our bodies are holy because God became one of us, lived and laughed and loved and died and rose again as one of us. Knowing that God is with us, that God is *one of us*, changes how we see not only our own bodies, but every other body.

In a 1543 Christmas sermon, Martin Luther tells us not to think we are somehow better than human. He suggests that we are tempted to say: “If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen.” Luther adds: “You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor.”¹⁶

That's the crux of the matter. We have Christ in our neighbor. And when we see our neighbors in all their holiness, how can we help but do all we can to protect their lives and help them flourish?

The Word became flesh and lived among us—and lives among us still. That's good news for all of us. All the bodies. Your flesh and mine, wrapped in grace and truth that will never let us go.

Christa Compton

15. Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, (HarperOne, 2009), 38.

16. <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2020/12/the-humanity-of-the-nativity/>