

Preaching Helps

Epiphany through Easter 2024

He Never Prayed for Nineveh: Jonah in a Year of Conflicts

Jonah is coming in Epiphany. We hear only a part of the story from chapter three on January 21. You probably remember how the story began. God called Jonah to go to Nineveh: “Cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” Not only was Nineveh a large city, it was the capital of Israel’s dreaded enemy Assyria. Jonah wanted no part of this assignment, so he boarded a ship and headed for Tarshish—exactly in the opposite direction. There was a great storm. The sailors cast lots and the lot fell to Jonah who admitted he was fleeing the God of heaven and earth. “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he said. The sailors prayed to God: “O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood...” Then they tossed Jonah into the sea and the sea grew calm.

That would have been the end of the story—except God appointed a large fish to swallow Jonah. Was this good news? Evidently, for Jonah was swallowed whole and did not die. He was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Then he prayed to the Lord. I guess it took Jonah a long time to think of what to say. Many scholars say this prayer is a later addition to the text for the story could go on without it. But here it is, and we learn something about Jonah. He sounds so pious and sincere: “I called to the Lord out of my distress, and the Lord answered me.” But Jonah hadn’t called to the Lord; Jonah ran away when the Lord called. **His prayer is all about himself**...and he never prays for the sailors or the people of Nineveh:

“I called to the Lord...
out of the belly of Sheol I cried...
I went down to the deep...
I remembered the Lord...
I will sacrifice to you...
What I have vowed I will pay...
I, I, I, I – I, Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi!

God had heard enough and told the fish to vomit Jonah out upon the dry land. “The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city...” **Though Jonah had forgotten Nineveh, God remembered.** So, Jonah picked himself up and made his way to the great city. He walked for a day into the heart of the city and shouted, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be over-

thrown!” It was a very **short sermon**, but it was very successful! The people of Nineveh repented of their evil ways. When word reached the king, he covered himself with sackcloth and called everyone to fast—from the king to the cattle. Not only that, but everyone dressed in sackcloth—the king, the people and all the animals. It must have been quite a sight all those cattle, sheep, and goats dressed in sackcloth! God was moved by the people of Nineveh and repented of the calamity God had said would come upon them.

But is Jonah pleased with his success as a preacher? Oh no. He’s furious. He gets out of town as fast as he can, perhaps hoping God would still destroy the city. Once more he prays to God. “O Lord! Isn’t this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish...for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishment...” Jonah knew that God wasn’t fair. That’s why Jonah ran away in the first place—not out of fear but because he couldn’t stand the possibility of God forgiving the people of Nineveh. Jonah knows that God will spare the city and it makes him so mad he wants to die. Then God appoints a bush—even as God had appointed a large fish—and Jonah is happy again. He’s safe—safe in the shade of the leafy bush, safe as he felt in the belly of the fish. But God appoints a worm to attack the bush, so it withers and dies. Jonah wants to die, too—not only because the sun is hot and the shade is gone, but because God refuses to destroy Nineveh! There is no justice in this world so let me die!

God has the last word in the story: “You’re concerned about the bush for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” Who are those 120,000 people who don’t know their right hand from their left? Babies, toddlers, those too young to know their left hand from their right. God is asking Jonah, should I not be concerned about this whole city, including these little ones?

Jonah never answers God’s question. That question has been hanging in the air, waiting for an answer in every generation. I was teaching at Union Seminary in New York City on 9/11/2001. Scared and shaken, we gathered with others in the city and prayed “God bless America” from a place of deep grief and fear. We sang for our beloved, broken city, our traumatized country. I don’t know when the prayer turned, when the words began to sound different. The date is no more exact than the dating of the book of Jonah. We wrapped the prayer around us and shut out the rest of the world. **“God bless America,” we sang and we didn’t mention Nineveh.** The ruins of Nineveh are now encompassed by the city of

Mosul in northern Iraq. The Mosque of Younis (that is Jonah) is there on the left bank of the Tigris River. According to one military website, there is a room inside the mosque that is the shrine of the prophet Younis. The website says: “On the walls of the room one can see the whale bones.” But this isn’t a story about a whale. Or a large fish. It’s about God who is gracious and merciful, who crosses over borders and bids us pray for people of every land. Prayer shapes us even as we shape our prayers. Can we pray for Palestinians and Israelis? Can we pray for the people of Gaza and the people of Tel Aviv? As we enter into this election year in a nation so deeply divided, can we pray for one another across the chasms that keep us apart? Jonah might have been changed if he had prayed for Nineveh as fervently as he prayed for himself. Maybe we will be changed if we are willing to add another verse to “God, Bless America.”

God bless the world we love,
Stranger and friend;
Go before us, restore us
With a hope that despair cannot end.
Ev’ry people, ev’ry nation,
Mighty ocean, heaven’s dome.
God bless the world we love,
Our fragile home.
God bless the world You love,
Our fragile home.

In this issue of “Preaching Helps” we move from the Feast of Epiphany to the Great Feast of Easter. I am grateful to writers for this issue who share their insights on the texts we’ll encounter along the way. **Karri L. Alldredge** is the assistant professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Her research focuses on the ways in which trauma and violence shape biblical texts and how these texts continue to perpetuate violence even as they also provide hope today. Her writing and advocacy work centers around issues of queer and trans rights, anti-racism, and gender justice. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is assistant professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. An ordained Lutheran pastor, she received her MDiv from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and PhD from Vanderbilt University. **Liv Larson Andrews** is the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) of the Northwest Intermountain Synod of the ELCA. She lives in Spokane with her husband and two sons with whom she takes long hikes and bakes bread. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** is a retired ELCA pastor, who served for thirty-five years in urban, bilingual congregations in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. His poetry collections are *The Devouring Land* (Main Street Rag Publishing) *Quitting Time* (Atmosphere Press) and *Breathing in Minneapolis* (Finishing Line Press) which deals with the challenges

that city faced in 2020-2022. He has published poems and prose in over eighty-five 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 newspaper. His website is: www.artecabellohansel.com. **Eric I. Hansen** serves as pastor of East Koshkonong Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Wisconsin. His wife, Carina Schiltz, is serving as pastor of Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Watertown, 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 has also made several previous contributions to “Preaching Helps.” He is passionate about faith-based advocacy and is actively involved with the Midwest Chapter of Bread for the World and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services.

Justin Lind-Ayres is co-pastor at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Justin and his sister recently published a family Advent devotional titled, *Eye on the Magi*. He gives thanks for you all, the creative and courageous preachers called to proclaim Christ’s radical love. **Joseph Schattauer Paillé** is the pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey. He serves as board president of Cross Roads Camp and Retreat Center, organizes mental health education and advocacy in the community, and has previously served as president of a non-profit that provides emergency financial assistance. He wrote the essay “A House Divided? Reconsidering Newbigin’s *The Household of God*, Six Decades Later” for the Vol. 44, No. 2 (2017) issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* and contributed to “Preaching Helps” for Vol. 49, No. 3 (2022). For twenty-five years **M. Susan Peterson** served as pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul. She was the first woman in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to be called as senior pastor to a large Lutheran congregation. Originally from Minnesota, she attended Gustavus Adolphus College and graduated from Bradley University (Peoria, Illinois) with a degree in Speech and Theatre Arts. Her Master of Divinity degree was granted in 1982 from Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Prior to returning to Minnesota, Susan served a congregation in the Philadelphia suburb of Havertown. Following her retirement in 2010 she was called to St. Ann’s Lutheran Church in London, England, where she served for a brief time. **Benjamin M. Stewart** serves as Distinguished Affiliate Faculty at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and as pastor to Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Two Harbors, Minnesota. A recent migrant to Duluth, Minnesota, Ben is a member of the North American Academy of Liturgy and contributes to its Ecology and Liturgy Seminar. He is author of *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth’s Ecology* (2011). **Matthew Stuhlmuller** serves as campus pastor

at Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park and Lutheran Campus Ministry at The University of Chicago. Prior to his call at Augustana, he served as the pastor/mission developer at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Chicago. Matthew has a BA in economics from the University of California, Los Angeles; an MDiv from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago; and an MA in religious studies from The University of Chicago Divinity School. When he is not pastoring or parenting, he is most likely riding his bike around Chicagoland.

Many thanks to each of these writers for sharing the journey from Epiphany to Easter. God bless your preaching and those who will be listening. Don't forget to pray for Nineveh.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Epiphany of Our Lord Saturday, January 6, 2024

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

Engaging the Texts

I sense that the story of the Epiphany has grown dull for many Christians. Year after year, we tell the story of these gift givers from the east, but as with many familiar stories that we have heard countless times, the Epiphany narrative has lost its edge. In many of our nativity scenes, these Magi stand right next to the shepherds, as if they belong there right from the very start. When we allow the Magi to move into the crèche too quickly, we lose sight of the startling realization that Magi were, in fact, strange visitors and unlikely guests in the house of our Lord, and thus, we miss the good news that their presence in Bethlehem portends.

As the Apostle Paul so eloquently describes in Ephesians 3, God's grace in Jesus Christ knows no bounds. These Magi are graciously drawn to Bethlehem to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews. Their extraordinary journey from afar is a sign that Jews and Gentiles alike are included within the boundless scope of God's grace. Coming from the unlikelyst of places, the unlikelyst of people recognize the reign of Israel's king, signaling that God's covenantal promises are now being fulfilled through Jesus of Nazareth.

God's faithfulness to the covenantal promises is made clear when we consider who these Magi really are. Although tradition has often referred to them as three kings from the east, Matthew's gospel gives no indication that these Magi are of royal descent. The idea of royal lineage likely comes from

a conflation of the Epiphany story with prophetic oracles from the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah 60, which prophesies, "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Is 60:3). Furthermore, we are not even clear that there were only *three* Magi. The number three is likely inferred from the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Magi give to the child Jesus.

We are probably mistaken even to refer to the Magi as *wise* men. These Magi are astrologers, what you might call sorcerers or practitioners of the dark arts. From the perspective of the original Jewish audience of Matthew's gospel, these Magi would have been regarded as foolish pagan outsiders, hardly the embodiment of divine wisdom as revealed through Moses and the prophets.

The Magi further prove their foolishness by their questionable actions on the way to Bethlehem. They first head to Jerusalem, presumably because they are looking for the king of the Jews. They could be forgiven for thinking that the new sovereign would be in the royal city, but in a not-very-wise move, they announce their intentions to Herod, telling the Roman client king that there is a new ruler in town. Not only would one be wise to avoid telling a king about a potential rival, but one should not tell a *murderous* king about a potential rival. Wise these men are not.

Despite their foolishness, a star graciously leads them to Bethlehem, where they find Jesus and his mother. As they are preparing for their journey home, they are graciously warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem, where they would be sure to meet the murderous rage of Herod. Instead, they return home by a different road.

Perhaps it is fitting that these Magi return home by a different road because their lives have forever been changed by Jesus. Their presence in Bethlehem and their worship of Jesus indicates the boundless scope of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus and his encounter with the Magi, God's covenantal promises are being fulfilled. When God made the covenant with Abraham, God promised that through the nation Israel, all the nations of the world would be blessed. Now through Jesus, this promise is being fulfilled, as both Jews and Gentiles gather around the newborn king. As Isaiah so beautifully prophesied, the journey of the Magi is nothing less than the nations of the world coming to the divine light. In Jesus, they have seen the brightness of a new day dawning.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul expounds upon the covenantal significance of Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles who are literally and figuratively embodied in the Magi. Paul puts it well: "[T]he gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6). God's grace transcends human boundaries to include all people and all places, and it was only a matter of time before the full width and depth of this grace

would be revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Although the original audience of Matthew's gospel may have been surprised at the arrival of these pagan guests, they would have realized that this is exactly what they had been praying for all along. As the psalmist declares: "May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service" (Ps 72:11).

As preachers, we would be wise to help our Christian audience feel this surprise, too. Indeed, from a human perspective, there is nothing ordinary about shepherds and Magi gathering together around a newborn Jewish king, but from a divine perspective, this scene reveals the mysterious wisdom of God, once hidden for ages, and now made known. This is the promise that we are given to proclaim. As far as the east is from the west, all nations and authorities will kneel before the gracious One.

Matthew Stuhlmuller

Baptism of Our Lord January 7, 2024

Genesis 1:1–5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1–7

Mark 1:4–11

Engaging the Texts

Over the years, several parishioners have asked me variations on a question: "Why did Jesus need to be baptized?" It is a fair question. After all, if Jesus is God incarnate and the savior of the world, why should he need to undergo baptism? As the assigned gospel text for this Sunday makes clear, John the baptizer was administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Does Jesus have something from which he needs to repent? What sins does he need to confess?

I initially viewed my parishioners' question as an exegetical puzzle. None of the canonical gospels offer much detail as to why Jesus receives baptism. Furthermore, any attempt to answer this question could lead the preacher into complicated christological categories. After preaching on these texts several times, I have come to see my parishioners' question as an occasion rich with proclamatory possibility. This proclamatory possibility becomes apparent when we attend to the narrative structure of Mark's account. Read narratively, the baptism of Jesus is the very first story that Mark tells us about Jesus. As such, we are wise to note this episode's central importance for establishing the identity of the character of Jesus at the outset of Mark's gospel.

Unlike the other canonical gospels, Mark does not tell us about Jesus' early years: his birth, his family's flight to Egypt,

his visit to the temple as a young child, and certainly not his preexistence as the Word at creation. Our very first encounter with Jesus in Mark's gospel is when he is baptized by John. As Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan River, he sees the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit descends upon him like a dove, with a heavenly voice declaring, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The text is unclear whether this divine disclosure is made to many people or Jesus alone, but regardless, Jesus receives an anointing, a mark of distinction, that sets him apart. That is to say, he receives an identity, conferred upon him from heaven above.

Herein lies the rich proclamatory possibility. To answer my parishioners' question, Jesus needs to be baptized because baptism is fundamentally a matter of identity. Whatever we can say about baptism (and we can say many things!), baptism is about identity. Identity is no less important to Jesus than it is to you and me. In these waters, Jesus is given his identity as the beloved Son of God.

Jesus' reception of baptism is a sign of his preparation for this moment, as he embarks upon a new season of public ministry. Although Nicene Christianity would posit that Jesus had no sins from which he needed to repent, his participation in this baptism of repentance (from the Greek *metanoia*, literally a turning around from the world) is a sign of his participation in the new kingdom which he has come to herald. Just as the heavens are opened and the Spirit descends upon him, this man is now the one in whom we glimpse heaven. In Jesus, we glimpse the kingdom of God.

The descent of the Spirit echoes the creation narrative in Genesis 1. The same Spirit that swept over the waters and brought order to the primordial chaos now descends upon Jesus. As the beloved Son and savior of the world, Jesus is the one who will organize the sinful chaos of earthly life into the beautiful order of the heavenly kingdom of God. Through the gift of his baptism, Jesus will proclaim a different way which reveals the emergence of God's kingdom from the chaos.

As the baptized followers of Jesus, we too are invited into the same way. Like Jesus, we receive a new identity as we follow Jesus into the baptismal waters. The apostle Paul witnesses in Acts 19 that the baptized followers of Jesus receive the same Spirit, offering them spiritual gifts which testify mightily to the power of God at work in their lives and in the world. Just as Jesus was baptized to inaugurate a new season of public ministry, we too have been baptized so that God's reign may be made manifest through us.

Unlike Jesus, we receive this baptism of repentance because we most certainly need the forgiveness that God offers. But like Jesus, this spiritual movement of repentance and forgiveness is indicative of what is most fundamental about baptism: the conferral of a new identity as beloved children of God. Jesus and his followers receive baptism for the

same reason: we need to know our identity. Amid the chaos which threatens the ordered flourishing of earthly life, God declares our identity at the start of every human story. In baptism, God sends us the Spirit, whose ongoing presence in our lives is forever the seal of our new identity. In this Spirit, we discover *who* we most truly are. In this spirit, we discover *for whom* we most truly live.

Matthew Stuhlmuller

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 14, 2024

1 Samuel 3:1–10 [11–20]

Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18

1 Corinthians 6:12–20

John 1:43–51

Reflections on the Texts

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.*

So speaks Macbeth near the end of Shakespeare’s famous play. The end is inevitable, and though it may be slow and plodding, what was prophesied and set in motion many yesterdays ago will inexorably lead to a brutal, meaningless death. I suppose many people have had these “tomorrow and tomorrow...” kind of days. When it seems like the same old stuff at work, the same boring lectures at school, the same struggles with health and finances and relationships. When it seems like nothing will ever change, when we ask ourselves, perhaps not as bitterly as Macbeth: What difference does it make what I do?

I am writing this during a “pause” in the Israel/Hamas war. While the bloodshed continues unabated in Ukraine. While there is growing antisemitism, Islamophobia and right wing nationalism here and abroad. It makes me wonder if we are living out these words from 1 Samuel 3: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread” (v. 1). Where is the vision to lead us out of this tragedy?

But the call of God does not abide despair. It is earth shattering and demands response. Even if we have to hear it again and again and again, like Samuel. Even if we wonder about its origin, like Nathanael. David reminds us that the call of God has been with us, indeed in us, since before our birth. (In the middle part of his beautiful psalm, David imagines the fruitlessness of fleeing from God’s knowledge of us,

and the blessed burden that call lays on us.)

The passage about the boy Samuel starts with a straightforward claim: “Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli” (v. 1). Maybe he was a seminary intern, or given his age, an acolyte. He was on night duty in the Temple when the LORD called him. Then this strange line, given that first verse: “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him” (v. 7). How can Samuel be ministering to the LORD when he doesn’t know the LORD? Good question!

I think we and our people all know the days when we perform the actions of ministry, but without the fire, without the power. Many Januarys have felt like that to me! After the beauty and wonder of the Christmas season, it’s down to a long winter’s slog for us in the northern hemisphere.

That’s when we need to lean even more into the promise! It took Samuel four times to understand that God was calling him, but as he grew, the writer reminds us that “the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel...knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD” (vv. 19-20).

Nathanael catches on quicker, once he gets over his belief that God couldn’t possibly work out our glorious liberation from a backward place like Nazareth. Thank God for a friend like Phillip. And thank God, literally, that Jesus’ ability to *see* Nathanael enables Nathanael to *hear* his call.

John has his own version of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Three times in chapter one, he starts a scene with “the next day” (vv. 29, 35, 43). There is an inevitability to the movement of God in Jesus, the Word made flesh. What was prophesied and set in motion many, many yesterdays ago will now be fulfilled in Jesus. Not an ending of bitterness and meaningless, not a death that signifies nothing, but a death and resurrection that signifies nothing less than the restoration of the entire cosmos.

This Sunday, we honor Martin Luther King Jr. We tend to celebrate his courage and his inspiring speeches, as we should. But it may be appropriate with these lessons to also speak of his doubt and his struggles, as well as the divisions and heartaches of the movement and how they were overcome. (If you haven’t seen the film “Rustin,” it’s worth a view.) Their struggles were real, and at times seemed insurmountable. For Martin Luther King Jr. and the thousands who marched and sang and were beaten, it was the promise of God’s liberation that led them through. That promise still holds.

May our words not fall to the ground!

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 21, 2024

Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Psalm 62:5–12

1 Corinthians 7:29–31

Mark 1:14–20

Reflections on the Texts

We continue the theme of calling in these lessons. Jonah has done his best to reject God's call to preach repentance to the mighty and evil Nineveh, but God, with the help of a storm and a big fish, has made it clear that Jonah's mission is in the place he least wants to go. (What might that mean for our parishes' calling? More on this later.) We know that Jonah is not a happy preacher, but his words have an almost immediate effect! The Ninevites changed, and so did God! No calamity, but repentance, forgiveness, and a new day.

In Mark, the call to discipleship comes right in the first chapter. No infancy narrative or cosmic poem. We've quickly seen who Jesus is (the one announced by the prophets, the Beloved Child, the tempted one). Now we see what he means to do, and like all of Mark, the gospel gets right to the point: The time is fulfilled *now*. The kingdom of heaven has come here *now*. It is time to follow Jesus, *right now*. What has been hoped for, longed for, perhaps despaired of ever seeing has now come true. But there is a surprise, one of many in Mark.

Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man* notes that "the great apocalyptic *novum*, which invades the world at Jesus' baptism and sets salvation history in motion again, does not occur at the center of the social order, but at its peripheries." (p. 131) Backwater Galilee, common fishermen casting or mending their nets. There is no priestly lineage to these people, no extraordinary genealogy. Most of the world has never taken note of them.

And Jesus' call takes place in the context not of triumph but persecution. Jesus proclaims the good news after John is arrested. By verse 14 of the first chapter, Mark lets us know that the good news will be resisted, violently.

Jesus' call to discipleship is unequivocal and demands immediate action. And for the first four who hear it, it is based solely on Jesus' word. Unlike in Luke, the four disciples do not get to witness Jesus' teaching or mighty deeds of healing and casting out demons. It is just his simple word to follow. Whether it was a command or an invitation, the response from the first disciples shows that it was irresistible.

Who hasn't felt that we need to act now, to make a difference, to confront the injustice in the world? And yet there is not a sense of desperation in Jesus' call and the disciples' response. There is joy, anticipation, and hope along with

urgency. Even Paul, with his call to change everything tells us why in his letter to the Corinthians: "the present form of this world is passing away" (7:31). That's really good news!

I'm not sure when congregational annual meetings are held these days—the churches I served always met the last Sunday of January. We tried—with success a few times—to get the focus off budget and elections and onto the question of where God was calling us in mission. Given these lessons, it might be worth asking ourselves these two questions: Where are the last places we would want to go, where God may be calling us to go? Where is the periphery in our context where there may be disciples we have overlooked who are eager to hear the call?

There is a great play between the immediacy of the three lessons and the psalm, where waiting and trust are the theme: I shall not be shaken (v. 6) because I wait—in silence—on the one who is my hope, my rock and salvation (vv. 5-6). It is this quiet faith that can get us and our people through very challenging times.

A couple of words about Jesus' first sermon, which is just one sentence, and yet contains multitudes (thank you, Walt Whitman, for that phrase). First, the two declarations of God's promise coming true: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (v.15). All three of our human senses of time are redeemed in that phrase: 1) "Fulfilled" refers to the promise given and sustained in the past; 2) The kingdom of God has come near implies that there is a future that will be different; and 3) The immediacy of the language puts God's salvation right in the moment. All done with the word "Kairos," which we know transcends any of our understandings of time.

And then the two commands, or invitations, in the last part of the sentence: repent and believe. Unlike in Jonah, it is not spelled out what we are to repent from. There is no statement of evil or judgment, only the word to turn around completely. There is no distinction between those who have grossly sinned, and those who may just be going about their business, mending their nets or whatever. The second command, to believe or trust, tells us what to trust in. Not Jesus, not even God, but the good news. The good news itself is so contagious and powerful, it can lead us to a profound and radical transformation.

Good luck getting all that in one sentence!

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 28, 2024

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Mark 1:21–28

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Just prior to the start of this passage, the Israelites were given a series of prohibitions to follow for entering the Promised Land (vv. 9-14). This pericope for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany builds from there, with Moses declaring to the Israelites that “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people” (v. 15)¹. Further, יהוה (Yahweh) “will put [Yahweh’s] words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak...everything that [Yahweh] command(s)” (v. 18). “Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet” (v. 19) speaks will be held “accountable” (v. 19). Finally, “any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in [Yahweh’s] name” (v. 20) things that were not commanded by Yahweh “shall die” (v. 20). The concluding verses provide clarification for how to discern when a prophet speaks the word of Yahweh (vv. 21-22).

Though the time of The Prophets has passed, preachers still have an opportunity to point toward those following the prophetic tradition today. Further, preachers should also be cautious of how some of the language used to describe Yahweh and Yahweh’s work in this passage might be heard, i.e., saying some will “die” (v. 20), holding people “accountable” (v. 19), and so on.

Psalm 111

This psalm begins declaring, “Praise the Lord (v. 1)”. The following verses continue this thread of praise by describing the work of יהוה (Yahweh), who “provides food for those who fear him” (v. 5) and “is ever mindful of his covenant” (v. 5). The psalm concludes with the hopeful invitation that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding” (v. 10). Preachers can use this psalm to proclaim God’s good work among us today, offering praise and thanksgiving.

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

This pericope is part of a larger discussion in 1 Corinthians pertaining to “whether it is appropriate for Christians to eat

food that was dedicated to idols.”² Much of Paul’s audience struggled with this particular issue because “Almost all of the meat sold in the Roman markets came from animals slaughtered in homage to some god.”³ Paul declares here that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one” (v. 4). However, Paul also acknowledges the tension that “some have become so accustomed to idols...they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (v. 7). Paul concludes that “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (v. 8), yet he also cautions that the actions of his audience “not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak” (v. 9). Paul declares for himself “if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (v. 13).

The ethical dilemmas facing me as well as the various communities I have served, which have all been in North America, are vastly different than whether it is permissible to eat meat that was sacrificed to idols. However, the instructions Paul offers about Christian freedom and community, and more specifically the importance of not only considering how something impacts ourselves but also how it impacts our neighbors, is pertinent to many of the challenges facing our community and world, which preachers can utilize.

Some special consideration pertains to the word translated “weak” (vv. 4, 9). In twenty-first century North America, I have frequently heard “weak” used with negative connotations to highlight the perceived inferiority of a person or group. Further, there is also often an either implicit or explicit attempt to award superiority to other people or groups that comes when labeling someone as “weak.” The original Greek was ἀσθενής (asthenés), which refers to “a weakness in faith...through lack of advanced knowledge.”⁴ Considering this along with the context of Paul’s usage of the word here, it is evident that his usage does not have the same connotations as are often attached to usage of the word “weak” today. Preachers should be mindful of this dynamic and how it might show up within their preaching.

Mark 1:21–28

One of my favorite movies is *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, featuring Steve Martin who plays Neal Page and John Candy who plays Del Griffith. Throughout the film, Page is annoyed by Griffith’s constant chatter, and implores Griffith to get to the point more efficiently. Of the canonical gospels, the gospel of Mark is the antithesis of how Page perceives Griffith’s

2. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 286.

3. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 287.

4. BDAG, s.v. “ἀσθενής”.

1. Unless otherwise noted, translations cited from biblical texts in my articles come from the NRSV.

character, telling its account of the good news of Jesus by rapidly moving from story to story. This pericope for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany is a wonderful example of Mark's efficiency, taking place right after Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee (1:14-15) and calls his disciples (1:16-20).

This passage begins with Jesus and his disciples traveling to Capernaum on the sabbath, at which point “[Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught” (v. 21). The people “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority” (v. 22). However, “there was...a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God’” (vv. 23-24). This declaration that Jesus is “the Holy One of God” (v. 24) actually stands as a stronger confession than what the rest of those in the synagogue ascribe to Jesus, who merely regard him as having “authority” (v. 22). But “Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit...came out” (vv. 25-26). Narratively, this is the first time in Mark's gospel when Jesus has publicly “rebuked” (v. 25) anyone or anything. Thus, Jesus’ “fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee” (v. 28).

It is important to consider how this “unclean spirit” would have created stigma around this man, and much of the rest of his community would have likely alienated him “Since normal human beings keep their distance from uncleanness.”⁵ Jesus rebuking the unclean spirit would have removed some of that alienation and allowed this man to gain a new standing within his community once again. Preachers can highlight similar stories of how others have been alienated, and how the grace of Jesus cuts across that alienation, perhaps also lifting up the great faith which those who have been alienated have shown before, like the man in this passage did.

Another exegetical consideration relates to the word translated “unclean,” which comes from the Greek word ἀκάθαρτος (akathartos), which pertains to “moral impurity.”⁶ Preachers should be mindful of how the word “unclean” may be heard, especially by those who have tragically been regarded as “unclean” either explicitly or implicitly. It is important for preachers to not perpetuate these injustices and instead differentiate what “unclean” meant in Mark's context and also clarify how many of the ways that others have been considered “unclean” and unjustly alienated as a result is antithetical to the good news of this story.

Eric Hansen

5. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 192.

6. BDAG, s.v. “ἀκάθαρτος”

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 4, 2024

Isaiah 40:21–31

Psalms 147:1–11, 20c

1 Corinthians 9:16–23

Mark 1:29–39

Reflections on the Texts

Isaiah 40:21–31

Chapter 40 is often considered the start of the second section of Isaiah, in which יהוה (Yahweh) breaks the long silence Isaiah's audience had been living under during their exile with these words,⁷ “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God” (v. 1). The pericope for the Fifth Sunday of Epiphany occurs shortly after this and is a hymn of praise directed toward Yahweh who “is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth” (v. 28). Further, Yahweh “gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless” (v. 29), which would have been good news for those exiled. The reading concludes with a hopeful proclamation that “those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (v. 31). Notice that this concluding declaration is cast ahead in the future, using the language of “shall” four times, offering no timeline regarding when this vision shall come to fruition, reflecting the tension in which those exiled were living as they trusted in Yahweh while waiting for Yahweh's promises to unfold at an unknown time.

As I am writing these words many other communities around the world are living through similar kinds of tensions to those who were living in exile long ago. Preachers should be mindful of these very real tensions impacting the communities we serve as well as our neighbors. We have an opportunity to draw upon the similar dynamic presented in this Isaiah passage. Further, this is also reminiscent of the tension that all Christians experience around the inbreaking of God's Kingdom. As one of my seminary professors used to explain, “God's Kingdom is already, but also not yet,” meaning that while the inbreaking of the Kingdom has begun and bears fruit, it is also still unfolding. While preaching this tension and promise of Isaiah as well as the Christian faith is important, it is also challenging, and preachers should be cautious of how this tension can easily overwhelm or even devastate those hearing the sermon. One way preachers can try to avoid this is by pointing toward specific signs of the inbreaking of the Kingdom today. However, preachers should also use some

7. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 16.

caution so as not to minimize all that the world is facing in this tension, and avoid sharing the promise in a way that comes across as what I have often heard described as a “Jesus band-aid,” when sermons try to engage great challenges and injustices but either intentionally or unintentionally undercut those challenges and injustices with the overly simplified message that Jesus will make them better. Preachers can study how this Isaiah passage did not ignore the plight of those living in exile, yet also proclaimed the good news of God’s promise in a manner that was not superficial or minimizing toward the situation as a great example of how to accomplish this task.

Psalm 147:1–11, 20c

Psalm 147 is considered a *Hymn of Praise*, which is a specific kind of psalm that “characterizes a public (as distinct from personal or intimate) song...sung...in praise to God for...the nature of God’s creating and liberating actions.”⁸ The words of this psalmist embody this description, declaring “Praise the Lord! How good it is to sing praises to our God” (v. 1). The psalm also names specific reasons for this praise declaring, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem...gathers the outcasts of Israel” (v. 2), “heals the broken-hearted” (v. 3), “lifts up the downtrodden” (v. 6), and “casts the wicked to the ground” (v. 6). Thus, the community shall “Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving” (v. 7). Preachers can draw parallels to the many ways that God is actively bringing good news in the world today, for which we still sing praises.

1 Corinthians 9:16–23

In this pericope Paul proclaims his obligation “to God (9:16–17), so he goes to great lengths to reach people with the Gospel, even making himself a slave for others, becoming like one under the Law in order to reach Jews and like one who is Law-free to reach Gentiles (9:19–22).” Paul concludes, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (v. 23). This offers preachers the opportunity to highlight those who have shared the gospel with us over the years. Perhaps consider inviting other parishioners from the congregation to share stories and memories they have of the power of proclamation of the same gospel which drove Paul’s ministry.

Mark 1:29–39

The band *Talking Heads* have a song titled *What a Day That Was* in which they repeat that exact phrase during each chorus. It would be appropriate accompaniment music for this

8. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 158.

9. Stephen Finlan, *The Apostle Paul and the Pauline Tradition* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 44.

pericope from Mark’s gospel which is taking place on the same day as last week’s assigned Mark passage. This is noted in the introductory phrase, “As soon as they left the synagogue” (v. 29), which you may recall Jesus entered back in verse 21. Here Jesus and his disciples “entered the house of Simon and Andrew” (v. 29). However, “Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever” (v. 30), so Jesus “came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her” (v. 31). As if all of that was not enough for one day, “That evening, at sunset” (v. 32) Jesus “cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons” (v. 34). Mark specifically notes that these demons “knew [Jesus]” (v. 34). The next morning, “while it was still very dark, [Jesus] got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (v. 35). The disciples find him, saying “Everyone is searching for you” (v. 37). Jesus responds, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do” (v. 38). Jesus then “went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons” (v. 39).

Preachers have an opportunity to highlight the various kinds of healing Jesus did with individuals and communities living in vulnerable circumstances, i.e., people living with “demons” (vv. 34, 39) and people “who were sick with various diseases” (v. 34). Preachers also have the opportunity to highlight how during these busy couple of days of Jesus’ ministry, Jesus still took time to retreat, rest, and pray. Throughout my ministry, I have heard from countless people, both clergy and lay people alike, who feel burned out by the constant demands of both life and ministry in twenty-first-century North American culture. Many people would be well served to hear scripture highlighting how seeking solitude and rest was just as much a part of Jesus’ earthly ministry as healing the sick and casting out demons.

Eric Hansen

The Transfiguration of Our Lord February 11, 2024

2 Kings 2:1–2

Psalm 50:1–6

2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Mark 9:2–9

Engaging the Texts

The biblical recounting of the story of the Transfiguration is meant to be an attention grabber. It breaks into the tender season of Epiphany where we have basked in the light of Christ bringing hope into dark places. But in the life of the hapless disciples that hope was struck a blow as Jesus began to

teach them the harsh reality of what lay ahead. Change is at hand and the Transfiguration will be the bridge into what happens next. “Six days later...” is how the Gospel writer of Mark sets the context for this foray onto the mountain top and the divine pyrotechnics that will occur there. It is a story-telling device that invites us into recalling what has gone before in order to illuminate what is about to happen next. Six days earlier Jesus had stunned the disciples by revealing to them the next part of his story—the journey to Jerusalem, rejection, crucifixion, and rising—a story too impossible for them to accept, leaving only confusion and doubt among them. Only something of startling proportions could move them beyond their disillusionment. Only a theophany will do.

Contrasts play an essential role in some of the texts for today—before and after, light and dark, hidden and revealed, even mountain-tops and lowlands add to this startling revelation of Jesus’ identity while words like “whirlwind” and “dazzling white” suggest something far beyond the ordinary is happening when all things divine converge. And suddenly it is the “six days later” moment! God pulls out all the stops to get the disciples’ attention and to assure them that this is the new order of things. Jesus is God’s own Son, “Listen to him.” What will come after this is far different from what the disciples might have imagined but surely such a spectacular moment has begun preparing them for what must come next.

Soon the dazzling white returns to ordinary and the company of the revered prophets disappears from sight. Filled with the zeal of those who have seen and heard and want to share the news, the disciples return down the mountain with Jesus. However, there is no brass band at the foot of the hill waiting to welcome them, no sitting around the fire re-telling the miraculous story of how Jesus, for a glorious moment, shone like the sun and God spoke to them out of the cloud. Only the simple order from Jesus, “Tell no one.” What a come-down from such a high. Before and after once again set the stage for what is to come. The journey to Jerusalem will not be about power and might or even whirlwinds and dazzling white light but about love and humility and sacrifice. And that is how the glory of God will be revealed.

Pastoral Reflections

One of my favorite Saturday afternoon escapes is to turn on Minnesota Public Radio and listen to The Moth Radio Hour, a weekly series featuring true stories told live on stage without scripts, notes, props, or accompaniment. Some of the storytellers are so good I am invited right along with them into the story, and they often leave me wanting for more. What is it about those stories that are so well told we are left wanting to know what happens “after”?

Beginning with the words “Six days later” ... the Gospel writer of Mark cleverly draws us into a story that has already

begun. What have we missed? What happened six days before and why is it so important for the storyteller to include it? For the three disciples, those six days were filled with confusion, anger, and doubt as Jesus revealed to them what comes next—Jerusalem and all that awaited him there. All of that was far beyond the capacity of the disciples to take in or believe—until six days later when that amazing revelation with all of its special effects happens before their very eyes, and God speaks to them saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.”

Strangely enough the startling events on the mountain top are not what draws us into this wanting to know more. We can read about it, imagine it, even recall our own mountain-top experiences, but in the end, none of that really draws us into the very story itself and what might happen next. Instead, like the disciples we may well want to stay right there, keep it just a story about a miraculous event. Full stop, end of story. But not so.

You see, in the end, Jesus is the master storyteller. He brings us right to the edge and exposes our own vulnerability, making room for us to join him on the trip back down the mountain. And for us, doubting, confused, pilgrims on the way, that is where we find out what happens next. That is where we, along with those disciples, are called to flesh out how light can shine in the darkest places, how hope can be restored amid the doubt and confusion, and how life can overcome even death. I don’t know of a better story than that one.

M. Susan Peterson

Ash Wednesday February 14, 2024

Joel 2:1–2;12–17

Psalm 51:1–7

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6;16–21

Engaging the Texts

The texts for this day all seem to converge around an urgent message that the present situation is not acceptable and the need for change is at hand! This is a day of coming up short and face-to-face with the challenges of being a follower. It is hard not to read present-day concerns into these texts as each of the authors lays out deep convictions that the people of God are in need of a cosmic course correction. From the Prophet Joel’s radical call to “rend your hearts and not your garments” to Matthew’s stark reality check that “where your treasure is there will your heart be also” the focus of this Ash Wednesday observance is going to be about taking a good look in the mirror and preparing to turn around,

change directions—repent.

The contradiction between looking faithful and being faithful is the challenge to followers to consider deeply in the texts for today. We experience that challenge ourselves the moment we hear Matthew’s critique of public piety and at the same time, come forward to wear the visible signs of our penitential hearts, the ashes, on our foreheads. To wrestle with that challenge, the Prophet Joel suggests we must turn inward and “rend our hearts,” meaning tear them open, expose what lies there. It is radical language for a radical season of self-examination. Whether it’s the psalmist asking “Create in me a clean heart...” or Matthew reminding us to name and claim what we consider the real treasure of our lives, the effort that lies ahead is about opening and examining our hearts. And now is the “acceptable time” time to attend to this. There is an urgency to this challenge and a reality about what it will require as enumerated in the 2 Corinthians text.

It is Ash Wednesday and so we enter into this penitential season with our faces disfigured as the sign of our vulnerability for all the world to see and hear the call to examine the priorities in our lives. The challenge before us is to go deep, to see for ourselves what we consider treasure. It may well be painful to come face-to-face with what has mattered too much or not enough, but in this season of 40 days we are invited to turn—to return—to the treasure that offers steadfast love, forgiveness, and mercy... back to the One who sees us and saves us.

Pastoral Reflections

As I suggested above, it is hard to look at these texts and not consider the tumultuous world in which we currently live. Daily, in all corners of the world, there are people in the streets shouting for change—change in regimes, change in attitude, change in priorities, and, as in most cases, a change of heart. Matthew’s admonition that “...where you treasure is, there will your heart be also” touches a nerve and sets us off on a season of self-examination and introspection.

Discovering where our heart lies and what we value most asks us to take a hard look at how we live and what are our priorities. For some, treasure lies in material things—something we can point to and quantify. But for others, treasure lies in non-material things like reputation, or popularity or skills. There are many things we value and consider important. However, in this season that is upon us now, we are being called to consider whether any of those things we treasure have gotten in the way of our relationship with God.

What does it take to consider a change of heart? Simply carrying a placard around in the streets and shouting about what is wrong probably will not move the heart to change though it may well get another’s attention. And ultimately perhaps that is what Ash Wednesday is all about: getting our

attention! A radical call to tear open, go deep and discover what is at the heart of who we are. It announces the beginning of a 40-day journey that begins with “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” And yes, there is some urgency in this invitation to seek the treasure for there is nothing to gain by waiting and much to lose in not getting to the heart of the matter.

With any luck and a lot of hope we humbly enter this season of Lent through the Ash Wednesday call to stop, make a turn, go deep. Without doubt, coming face-to-face with our own need for change requires a good dose of humility and some courage too. But we are dressed for this journey wearing the cross traced in ashes upon us. So, we begin these 40 days of Lent reminded of our vulnerability—dust to dust—and we are challenged to stay focused, be patient and look for the light. Easter lies just ahead.

M. Susan Peterson

First Sunday in Lent February 18, 2024

Genesis 9:8–17

Psalm 25:1–10

1 Peter 3:18–22

Mark 1:9–15

Engaging the Texts

While the Prayer of the Day may focus our attention on the deliverance of Noah and his family, we might start by asking what our Genesis reading conveys about God’s character. How does God address the corruption present in creation? One option would be for God to do nothing. Another option would be for God to start over wherever things get out of hand. In today’s reading, God promises to find a third way to deal with evil without ignoring it or repeatedly starting over. This commitment is symbolized in the hanging of the archer’s bow or *qeset* in the sky. Even listeners who have heard this story for decades may be startled to realize that this symbol is meant to remind both Noah and God of this commitment.

For Christians, the new way God deals with evil is by transforming it from the inside out through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Sure enough, Jesus himself will refer to his crucifixion and resurrection as a baptism later in Mark’s gospel. Bear this connection in mind when Jesus begins his ministry by announcing that “the time is fulfilled.” Mark returns to this fulfillment image twice during Jesus’ passion, both in reference to fulfilling the scriptures. While fulfillment of the scriptures can sound like Jesus is simply completing a checklist of prerequisites, the fulfillment of time refocuses our

attention on the ways the prophets such as John the Baptist have prepared the people's hearts for the Messiah. While the forces of sin and death still tempt us away from loving God and neighbor, Mark reminds his first readers—and us—that God has prepared us to receive the news of the kingdom and for this new creation to be manifested through our discipleship.

Our preparation and ability to resist evil are also picked up in our reading from 1 Peter. Our lectionary omits the beginning of this paragraph where the author encourages us to “repay [evil] with a blessing.” When met with opposition to his ministry, Jesus did not respond in kind or curtail his mission but continued it. In so doing, he was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” When the author tells us that our baptism “saves” us, they are not suggesting that evil has no hold on us or our communities. They are encouraging us to see how—having been joined to Christ's crucified and risen body—we now grow into his pattern of life.

Pastoral Reflections

Our lectionary does not typically lend itself to a sermon series. Even preachers who start with the best of intentions may find themselves coming up with increasingly creative (or desperate) ways to make texts fit their chosen theme a few weeks in. However, the Hebrew Bible texts for Lent set up a cohesive series on the role of covenants.

Two features of these covenants merit particular attention. The first is the role of tangible objects or embodied practices that remind us of God's promises. In today's reading from Genesis, for example, God declares that the bow is “the sign of the covenant that I have established.” Focusing on these signs could be a way to reflect not only on the “capital S” sacraments but also on the sacramentality of our lives and the ways that we remind one another of God's promises. Such tangible signs are not necessary for God, but they are helpful for us.

Second, these covenants become increasingly narrow throughout the Lenten season. Today's promise is made to “all flesh,” while the final week's promise will be made to those returning from exile. Such narrowing could tip into exclusivism were it not for the remarkable shift that happens during the Easter season. In these fifty days, our texts from Acts show the promises of God expanding dramatically in their scope and reception. Taken together, these two movements form a dramatic and energetic picture of God's redemption.

Since Lent was a season of baptismal preparation in the early church, it may be fitting to explore the role baptism plays in our congregations. The reading from 1 Peter may provide some unexpected opportunities for reflection, especially since we heard Mark's telling of Jesus' baptism just a few weeks prior. One possibility is to explore the author's invocation of the flood story. Like Noah, we are both taken *from* the powers

of death and empowered *to* seek life. In our baptisms, we are given a new vocation to love and serve God's creation.

Another possibility is to explore the transference of relationships Peter alludes to. In our baptisms, we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. Having been united with Christ, we are now brought to God (v. 18). To be “made alive in the Spirit” is simply to share in Jesus' relationship with God the Father. Through our baptisms, we can now pray to, trust in, and love God the way Jesus does.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé

Second Sunday in Lent February 25, 2024

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

Psalm 22:23–31

Romans 4:13–25

Mark 8:31–38

Engaging the Texts

Peter should get at least partial credit. He correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah. Unfortunately, he and Jesus thought that title meant vastly different things. Unlike Peter's messiah—a triumphalist leader who can take charge—Jesus views messiahship as an openness to following the Spirit of God that he received in his baptism. As such, Jesus' passion prediction is less a hypothetical guess about what might happen in the future than a recognition of what following the Spirit will lead to. When Jesus says that his passion is “necessary”—an image that gets picked up repeatedly in the passion narratives—he is not trying to get himself killed. He is proclaiming his intent to follow the Spirit wherever it takes him. A Spirit-filled love holds nothing back in the interest of its own protection.

As Peter reevaluates what kind of Messiah he is following, Paul begins to reconsider what it means to be a descendant of Abraham. In verse 13, he refers to a common belief that Abraham's descendants exist “through the law.” If that's true, Abraham is important mostly because he was where the line of heirs started. By shifting the emphasis from the law to God's promise, Abraham becomes an archetype of faith (*pistis*). In verse 24 Paul connects Abraham's faith in God's promise to his contemporaries' faith in the risen Christ. Even Gentiles who are not Abraham's descendants by blood or by religious practice have become inheritors of God's promise by faith. His story has become our story.

The day's selection from Genesis focuses on God's covenant to Abraham. The lectionary omits God's promise of land, presumably to focus our attention on the promise of descendants that Paul develops in Romans. Two features in

particular are worth noting. First, God tells Abram to “walk before me, and be blameless.” This formulation affirms Abram’s agency as an active participant in this covenant. The focus on blamelessness as a virtue is similar to how Noah is described in Genesis 6:9. Second, while this story is reminiscent of prior encounters in Genesis 12 and 15, this story explicitly involves Sarai as an active character. God gives Abram and Sarai new names. While some commentators play this up as an important change, others suggest that these are relatively minor dialectical variants.¹⁰ What matters may be less the new names than the fact of the change itself.

Pastoral Reflections

Whose cross is it, exactly? In today’s gospel reading, Jesus declares that those who would be his followers should “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” We may interpret “their cross” to mean the various difficulties we experience such as family discord, financial uncertainty, and health issues. But there is nothing inherently redemptive about our own personal experiences of suffering. Trying to get closer to Jesus by courting suffering is like pushing on a string. It works the other way around. Instead, Jesus warns us that following him inevitably leads to frustration, rejection, and disorientation. It will also cause us to reevaluate the stories we tell about ourselves, a lesson Peter will learn soon enough. To carry our cross is really to carry his cross, giving up our own self-righteousness and self-sufficiency so that we can receive his new life.

In Teju Cole’s novel *Tremor*, the protagonist writes that “if we were aware of the full extent of shipwrecks on the sea floor we would never set out in our boats.”¹¹ For Abraham and Sarah—as well as Jesus’ disciples—the decision to enter into this covenant with God involves an element of risk and uncertainty. While the risk to Jesus’ disciples is the threat of physical suffering and exclusion, the risk to Abraham and Sarah is that they will get their hopes up for nothing. While the promises of land and descendants may not resonate for listeners in our assemblies, we might explore our own hopes for our ministries. When have we found it easier to settle for an unsatisfying status quo rather than trying new ideas and opening ourselves up to real disappointment?

Paul’s emphasis on the faith of Abraham and Sarah may help us further explore this question in our own context. In a time in which movies can be streamed within seconds and online purchases delivered across the country in a day, we may struggle with the patience that discipleship and mission

entails. To have faith in God’s promises necessitates a posture of openness and reciprocity beyond immediate results. Even small shifts of language can help shift our thinking. For example, “It hasn’t worked *yet*.” Or, “It didn’t go *the way I thought it would*.” Those of us privileged to preach may be able to remind our assemblies of ways in which God has been faithful in unexpected ways beyond our vision, beyond our expectations, and beyond our lifetimes.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé

Third Sunday in Lent March 3, 2024

Exodus 20:1–17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18–25

John 2:13–22

Engaging the Texts

Psalm 19 describes one day telling its tale to another, one night imparting knowledge to the coming night. Perhaps we can move through the Sundays in Lent engaging in a similar conversation with each other, telling an unfolding tale, imparting knowledge to us week to week, bringing us ever closer to the drama of Christ’s passion and the promised new life of Easter. Yet even on this Third Sunday in Lent, we already hear about Christ’s resurrection in John 2:22, when the text references the way the disciples remember the story that was just told to us and the character of Jesus’ behavior. Day to day, story to story, the Living Word reveals himself.

Of course, unless you have already “read to the end” of the gospel, or heard it told to you, you might not know anything about Jesus being raised from the dead. Wait a sec, this guy dies at the end? Wait, and then he’s raised?! There are a handful of moments in John’s gospel where the narrative flow folds in on itself this way, revealing an expectation in the writing that the audience is already in on the big plot twists. In the story of the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11 we are told that Mary of Bethany was the one who washed Jesus’ feet and dried them with her hair. Which happens in chapter 12. What is John hinting at with these narrative folds? Can we enter into the gospel story more deeply by noticing them? How does it change our reading of the text to realize that the audience is already expected to know most of the story?

In contrast, you could argue that Exodus 20 is a teaching that is designed to carry the people into a future unknown. Here are your guard rails, people, for when things get really wild and you nearly lose your way. It’s the wilderness, after all. But these teachings also keep an old story alive as sustenance for the journey ahead. Rest on the seventh day. Remember?

10. See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary (Vol. Three-Volume Set)* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 54.

11. Teju Cole, *Tremor: A Novel* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2023), 215.

Our God rested too. This traveling people may not know the plot twists of their story that are about to unfold. But they have ten cords of storied practices tethering them to the life-giving story of their God who creates, delivers, and keeps them.

Whatever form the narrative takes, this story of God is always surprising. Foolish, even, if you ask Paul. Take care, preachers, not to stumble into equating the Jews who desire signs in 1 Corinthians with those who are in dialogue with Jesus in John 2. For in Christ, we find both signs and wisdom, the very things desired by the factions in Corinth. In Christ, God's wisdom is pleased to dwell. In the gospel of John, the final sign performed is the one that remakes creation and gives us our peculiar calling: to preach Christ crucified.

Pastoral Reflections

The church invented Lent to help people prepare for baptism. In this week of Lent, we are met with our own foolishness in the face of God's perfect law. We are met with our own greed in the face of Christ's cleansing zeal. We are met with a mid-Lenten collection of texts inviting us more deeply into contemplation, discipline, and faith. Thankfully, the cleansing we experience at the font involves no whip of cords! Rather, our bodies, precious temples fashioned by our Creator, are gently washed in waters of grace and reminded of their God-given sacredness.

In baptism, we find the kind of washing that enables us to examine the commandments of God with fresh hearts. These laws we encounter in Exodus 20 are not only condemnations. They are invitations into deeper life with God. They are stated in the negative, "you shall not..." But behind every "no" is a life-giving "yes." When we are brought to the font, we, or our sponsors, speak renunciations. We turn away from things that will deplete life for us, for our neighbors, and for creation. We turn toward the water and its challenging, gracious call.

Perhaps Jesus hoped the temple would provide that kind of washing, that kind of prayer. When he speaks of the temple of his own body, perhaps we can hear an invitation to consider our own bodies, individual and collective. The body of Christ. Where and how have we been made a marketplace? How does baptism set us free?

Luther was fond of reminding us of how we are cleansed each day when we wash our face, a way to remember our baptism. Perhaps the psalmist would simply point outside to the coming of the new day and the course that the sun will run across the sky and into its tent like a joyful, eager bridegroom. It is another reminder of how we are renewed. Even in Lent, we are renewed by God's presence when we gather in our holy places around sacred signs of baptism and communion, and wherever we gather around the living Word. Even in the wild places, it will find us.

Finally, confronted by the folly of our sacred story and the cross that continues to perplex us as it gives us life, consider speaking or silently praying the final verse of Psalm 19 the moment before you preach. "Let the words of my mouth..."

Liv Larson Andrews

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 10, 2024

Numbers 21:4–9

Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22

Ephesians 2:1–10

John 3:14–21

Engaging the Texts

“You were dead.” Well, that would be an evocative way to begin a sermon! This is how Paul addresses the Ephesians in the Second Reading on this Fourth Sunday in Lent. We were dead in sin but have been made alive in Christ Jesus, the embodiment of God's rich mercies. If the other readings perplex us with images of serpent and disobedient people, we can return to this pure gem of good news that wraps up Paul's words to the Ephesians: We are what God has made us.

This stunning proclamation of grace in the face of our sin strikes a dramatic chord change from the scene in Numbers 21. The people complain; God sends snakes to punish them. Ouch. And yet a refrain we hear repeated in Psalm 107 describes things accurately, “they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.” Put the thing that afflicts you on a pole and lift it up to be seen by all who are suffering. Face it. And be healed.

Nicodemus is being called to face a reality so gracious and so different that he needs to come at it from the side at first. By night, he seeks Jesus out for conversation. And to him, to this seeker, Jesus offers the image of the serpent on a pole as a metaphor for his own saving death. And this lifting up will be an act of great love for the whole world. By the conclusion of chapter 3, we don't know how this new proclamation has been received by Nicodemus. But before the end of the gospel, we do know. Nicodemus is among the faithful handful of followers who comes to take down the One who was lifted up. Nicodemus assists with the burial of Jesus, drawing near to his afflicted body, anointing it with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. Consider exploring the longer trajectory of Nicodemus in John's gospel and how it brings meaning to the conversation in chapter 3. Like so many moments of proclamation in our daily ministry, this nighttime conversation planted seeds of faithfulness that would grow and bear the fruit of loving deeds.

We were dead in sin, but the only death that matters is the saving death of Jesus. In Lent, we draw near this challenging truth in order that we too might proclaim God's love in word and deed.

Pastoral Reflections

Darkness aids germination. Good theology can take you by surprise, like instructions on the back of a packet of seeds. Keep the planted seeds in darkness, says the packet, otherwise they won't grow. Darkness aids germination. Indeed, darkness allows Nicodemus to come by night with all of his curiosity. Darkness allows him to draw near and to ask the big questions. Darkness doesn't get much praise in John's gospel, frequently contrasted with the "light that was coming into the world." Be mindful of the play of dark and light in this gospel and be wary of always equating dark with sin and light with grace. But without a little dark, Nicodemus may never have ventured toward the new light and life of Christ.

The Israelites were a bit more desperate. Dying from snakebites, they didn't wait for nightfall. They cried to the Lord. And with a terrible, beautiful irony, God asked them to look at the very thing that was killing them. Maybe there's a lesson here. In the summer of 2020, I sent out a mailing to everyone in the congregation using a stamp that featured a brightly colored chrysanthemum bloom. It looked exactly like a drawing of the Corona virus. My people cried, "Too soon, Pastor!" It's funny now, but then it was indicative of how deep our fears were of this terrible, mysterious, deadly thing in our midst. That would be something like what the Israelites experienced in the desert: Here, look at this thing that has been fatally afflicting you. It's your route to life! And now, we are left with the lingering invitation to look, really look, at what the horrors of the pandemic made more visible about our society. Have we done this hard looking?

For the gospel of John, this is also how Jesus is glorified: lifted up, for all the world to see and to believe by seeing. Not in the empty tomb, witnessed by just a few pairs of eyes, but on the cross Jesus is lifted up as a route of healing and salvation for the whole cosmos. Behold!

Lent is a season in which we prepare for baptism. At the end of Lent, when we gather for Good Friday worship, we will cry, "Behold, the life-giving cross on which was hung the savior of the whole world." "Behold" might be a good one-word summary of these texts on the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Behold, Jesus says to Nicodemus during this late-night catechism. Behold, the Lord answers when we cry out. Behold, the immeasurable riches of God's grace are here, in this water, on this table, reminding us of who God has made us to be.

Liv Larson Andrews

[Editor's Note: Amy Lindeman Allen wrote this commentary for the Fifth Sunday of Lent in 2018; she has graciously allowed us to reprint it in this issue of "Preaching Helps." Of course, her children are now six years older.]

Fifth Sunday in Lent March 17, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalm 51:1–12

Hebrews 5:5–10

John 12:20–33

Engaging the Texts

My kindergartener is learning about the number line at school. Certain numbers come before, others after, in a logical succession. Time works the same way with one event following after another. Jeremiah gives us a taste of this in the first reading: God brings the people out of Egypt, God gives a covenant, the people sin and break the covenant, the people teach one another to "Know the Lord," and in time, God will forgive the people's sins and give them a new covenant.

Each event follows logically after the other. Except that it's poor logic to give a new covenant to a people who have a history of breaking the old one. At least it's poor logic in human terms. But God doesn't operate within the human parameters of time and logic. So God doesn't just offer the people of Israel a "second chance" at covenant keeping. God promises a new covenant that will be written on their very hearts (Jer 31:33) and promises to "remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:34).

My older child is in fifth grade and is also working with the number line in school. This child would likely label God's promise to the people of Israel as an *infinite* promise—a covenant that begins at a particular point in time and has no end. It's a beautiful promise. But God's covenant is actually bigger than even that. Because God doesn't operate within human categories or orderly timelines. The reading from Hebrews offers this sort of alternate picture: Jesus is begotten; God declares "Today I have begotten you," Jesus is eternal, Jesus takes on flesh, Jesus submits to God, Jesus offers eternal salvation to all who believe in him, God appoints Jesus a high priest. If we had a timeline we could move any one of those pieces around (and, in fact, some of the New Testament writers, including the author of the book of Hebrews, do) and it would still make as much sense in that order as it does in any other order.

This is the confounding blessing of an eternal God. God (and Christ) did not begin in one time and become everlasting. God and Christ as God have existed throughout

all time—in eternity, a period that has no beginning or ending. And so God promises eternal life (Heb 5:9; John 12:25), which is not the same as life everlasting. Eternal life, rather, is life with God that knows no beginning and no end. Eternal salvation is the experience of having God’s covenant written into the very sinews of your heart (Jer 31:33) so that you are inseparable from it.

This is the promise we have from God in Christ Jesus—that outside even the bounds of time and logic, outside our own ability to comprehend and so control, God loves us, God forgives us, and God gives us *life*.

Pastoral Reflections

The prayer, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Ps 51:10) has long been a part of Lutheran worship. Frequently put to music as an offertory song, the most recent *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides four different arrangements. Preaching on this text offers the opportunity to reflect on the biblical roots of the liturgy and the timelessness of God’s words in Scripture.

Part of this timelessness, however, flows from the living nature of the texts and their ability to speak to people differently across time and circumstance. The psalms are particularly suited for such flexible interpretation. In today’s lectionary, the author of the letter to the Hebrews appropriates Psalm 110:4, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,” to describe Jesus’ priesthood. Rooted in the Jewish community, the author of Hebrews in attributing the acclamation to Jesus would have also been aware that the psalm’s acclamation is most commonly attributed to David. David was a righteous king of Jerusalem and the literal translation of the Hebrew “*Melchizedek*” is “righteous king.” This does not mean that it is wrong, from a Christian perspective, to attribute the acclamation to Jesus. It simply means that there may be more than one righteous king to whom the psalmist’s words can be applied.

Another opportunity to see the diversity of interpretation of the psalms occurs with the history of interpretation of Psalm 51 itself. Linguistically, there are two Hebrew verbs in verse 10—“to renew” and “to establish,” or “to put.” The hymn texts follow the more common NKJV interpretation of these verbs in which the emphasis is upon the prayer to “renew a right spirit within me.” Yet, the NRSV translation attempts to make sense of these dual verbs by rendering the prayer “put a new and right spirit within me.”

Returning to the concept of eternity in our relationship with the divine, the question can be raised as to which translation better describes the Christian experience of God’s grace? Is our prayer for God to establish something new within us? Is our prayer for God to renew the upright spirit that God has already established within us? Can or should our prayer be

some combination of both? Pastorally, it is helpful to consider what each person we serve brings into community that can be celebrated and renewed as a gift of the divine—before we seek to establish in them something new of our own human engineering.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday March 24, 2024

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Mark 14:1–15:47 (or 15:1–39)

Mark 11:1–11

Engaging the Texts

The textual breadth of this day is rightly overwhelming for us preachers, but it is more than the weightiness and expanse of scripture this week that is daunting. Mark is sometimes called “a passion narrative with an extended introduction.” It is ironic, then, that in this year devoted to Mark’s Gospel there is only this one occasion that includes a reading from Mark’s passion narrative. All other weeks of the year are reading the introduction, so to speak, with Easter Sunday reading the epilogue of the empty tomb. Indeed, this Sunday is the only liturgical occasion in the entire three-year lectionary in which any text from the Markan passion is appointed to be read. The same is true for the processional Gospel of Mark 11:1–11. If the lectionary preacher is to engage these key texts homiletically, this is the Sunday to do it.

What are some ways to make use of this preaching occasion? Given the unique panorama of the gospel text this week, consider connecting some meaningful landmarks on the wide Markan landscape.

Royal imagery bookends Mark in a few ways. The first verse in Mark identifies itself as “gospel” – the only canonical gospel to label itself with the term. Some historical research on the term “gospel” suggests that its cultural origins are related to royal proclamations. The Priene calendar inscription heralds the birth of Caesar Augustus as the beginning of the gospel for the world. With this connection in view, we can see foreshadowing of Christ’s regal entry into the city in the first verse of Mark’s Gospel. Only a few verses later, the first proclamation on the lips of Jesus (1:14–15) similarly evokes Palm Sunday motifs: Mark situates Jesus’ proclamation in the context of imperial violence (a foreshadowing of the passion) as Jesus announces a sort of royal procession of the gospel: “*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the*

kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Indeed, the crowds later welcoming Jesus into the city seem to echo the earlier text: “*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*” (11:10).

Of course, there are several signals in the text of the reversal of royal expectations. Thinking of the experience of people living under imperial power with soldiers and rulers who notoriously requisition property, the detail in 11:3 about Jesus instructing the disciples to reassure the owner of the processional colt – that the colt will be immediately returned – is subtly poignant: “*If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’*”

The royal and messianic dimensions of the passion naturally evoke expectations of an anointing. And indeed, Mark’s passion narrative is bookended by anointings, though the expected image is (literally!) shattered. Only three verses into the passion narrative, Jesus is anointed, though the messianic anointing takes place in the house of a man with leprosy and is led by an unnamed woman who is scolded by others. Jesus then frames her anointing as being a preparation for burial and places the act within a royal gospel to be proclaimed to the whole cosmos: “*wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her*” (14:9). With the upending of so many royal expectations, it is fitting that in Christ’s anointing she shatters the vessel (14:3). (The imagery is consonant with the torn-open heavens above Jesus in his baptism, and the rending of the temple veil at his death.) Of course, the passion narrative that begins with a shattering anointing concludes when three other women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – arrive to anoint Jesus’ body but have their plans shattered by the empty tomb (16:1–6).

The Philippians reading for today is beautifully cosmic in scale and panoramic in perspective, with everything “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” joining to praise Christ who is exalted because he serves creation from the lowest place. The final verse of the processional gospel offers another panoramic perspective. In 11:11, following the procession into the city, Jesus “went into the temple” and “looked around at everything.” What does Mark mean to evoke in this “everything” at which Jesus is looking? What do preachers imagine is the theological significance of what Jesus perceives as he looks around at “everything”?

Mark’s six uses of this verb “look around” (*periblepō*) offer a poignant tableau of what Jesus sees in “everything”:

- When people go silent and disapprove of his healing on the sabbath Jesus “looked around at them with anger” (3:5).
- Jesus sees a new community early in his ministry, “looking around at those who sat around him, Jesus said, “Here are

my mother and my brothers!” (3:34).

- When he traveled through the crowd and they closed in around him, Jesus “looked all around” to find the woman with the flow of blood (5:32).
- After the transfiguration “suddenly when [the disciples] looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus” (9:8).
- And after the rich man ran away grieving at his many possessions, Jesus “looked around” at his disciples and said, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (10:23).

Preachers should take good courage to “look around at everything” in the Gospel of Mark this week, helping our people welcome the sovereign who rules from below, the anointed one who shatters the old oppressive structures.

Ben Stewart

Maundy Thursday March 28, 2024

Exodus 12:1–4 [5–10] 11–14

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Engaging the Texts

The texts of Maundy Thursday invite communities to explore what it means to embody love through liberative action. The Exodus narrative reminds readers of how God’s liberation marks a time of new beginnings and a space of remembrance. The Passover meal invites Israelites and their descendants into a collective ritualized action that serves as a reminder not only of their liberation, but also its entangled relationship to cycles of violence and trauma. Bitter herbs and blood, the deaths of those Israelites killed by enslavement and of Egyptian firstborns, mix to remind us of the messiness of liberation in the midst of hegemonic systems. As the readings continue, focus shifts to another ritual of remembrance and liberation at the communion table. We find Jesus’ words of institution, not in the gospel, but in Paul’s letter to the Corinthian community. These familiar words serve as a reminder of the centrality of gathering at the table to collectively share in Christ’s death and resurrection. However, these words are part of a larger dialogue about what it means to come together as a community. Paul critiques community members for caring for their own needs over that of their siblings in Christ (11:17–22). Those with privilege and means arrive early, eat everything, and become drunk. This leaves the marginalized,

less fortunate, and enslaved community members who arrive at the meal later to go hungry. Paul reminds the Corinthians that being the body of Christ requires more than gathering and performing rituals of faith and remembrance. For Paul, being the body of Christ requires an intentionality concerning how the community enacts equity and justice through their gathering and rituals (11:33-34).

So too, John's depiction of Jesus at the meal focuses on actions rather than words. Jesus' gathering with his disciples is not for Passover nor to institute the Lord's Supper. Instead, it is a meal shared among friends. In the midst of the meal, Jesus removes his outer robe, takes a towel, and begins to wash the disciples' feet. This action is often interpreted in terms of servant leadership and humility, but John's depiction provides us with another focus. This action is about love, a raw and embodied love, which Jesus has for his disciples. Jesus' love becomes a model for his followers to actively seek right relation and justice with others as friends and equals.

Jesus' radical modeling of love is witnessed from the beginning of this pericope. John 13:1 states, "Having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end." Jesus' love (*agape*) is not a duty-bound or paternalistic love, but rather a love shared among friends. This love stems from a space of shared mutuality and care for one another across socio-economic, ethnic, and gender boundaries. It challenges the economic and hierarchical concept of love that the Roman Empire used to maintain social order. Roman understandings of friendship were rooted in upholding constructs of masculinity and a concern that friendships only form among those with equal social standing preserving social hierarchies. Jesus' understanding and actions expanded the concepts of love and friendship beyond his male companions to include women, enslaved individuals, and socially marginalized outsiders. At the meal and throughout his ministry, Jesus interacted with diverse embodiments of the *imago dei* as friends whom he loved, honoring their diverse genders, ages, and life circumstances.

The love that Jesus displays is not conditional or time bound, instead it continues until the end, the *telos* (13:1). It is a love that signals that Jesus will care for his community and model how they should care for one another until his final breath (19:30). Even as Peter struggles to understand Jesus' actions, Jesus continues to model love for him. Love becomes central to one's identity as a follower of Jesus (11:35). So too, Jesus' command is that they emulate the love of God shown to them.

As we reflect on loving others as Jesus commanded, we must consider how we come together to wash one another's feet on this day and to care for others until Christ's return. In a time when Christian nationalism actively seeks to claim power over the lives, bodies, and agency of trans youth, preg-

nant individuals, migrants, and others, Jesus' charge calls us to embody and enact justice. This is not a sentimental public performance of humility or charity. It is an *agape* love, which signals an earnest desire for the welfare of others, who we view as equals, not as inferiors. This love is a call to remember the liberative actions that God has carried out throughout history and to collectively enact this liberation today. As Carter Heyward explains, "...love is justice. Love does not come first, justice later. Love is not a 'feeling' that precedes right-relation... We do not feel our way into doing what is just. We act our way into feeling."¹² Love asks how we, as Jesus' followers, will put our bodies on the line for one another, just as Jesus did for us. Washing one another's feet becomes a model and invitation to disrupt exploitation, marginalization, and erasure through loving engagements. It is embodiment of what Emilie Townes calls "bone-deep love," a love that invites possibilities through ever-growing compassion and understanding.¹³

Karri L. Alldredge

Good Friday March 29, 2024

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16–25

John 18:1–19:42

Engaging the Texts

The sheer volume of the Good Friday texts mirrors the overwhelming nature of this day. The time required to read these texts slows us, asking us to bear witness to the violence, trauma, and fear that fill the verses. Bearing witness is an active, embodied practice. As Kali Tal explains, "Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to a seductive pull of revision and repression. Its goal is change."¹⁴ Today's texts call those who read them to actively witness to Jesus' suffering, alongside the collective pain and trauma of those unjustly marginalized, brutalized, and dehumanized throughout history.

Today's First Testament texts are traditionally lifted up

12. Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 85-86.

13. Emilie M. Townes, "The Nature and Necessity of Bone-Deep Love." Vanderbilt Divinity School Reflection. May 2022. <https://divinity.vanderbilt.edu/the-nature-and-necessity-of-bone-deep-love/>.

14. Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, 7.

as a lens to reflect on Jesus' blameless suffering and death. We image Jesus as Isaiah's "lamb that is led to the slaughter" (53:7). We hear Jesus' voice in the psalmist's cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" even though these words are absent from John's passion account (Ps 22:1). But these texts contain a multitude of voices and experiences of suffering. The passage from Isaiah speaks to the collective experience of exiled Israel. Israel experienced the crushing oppression of the Babylonian Empire that "cut [it] off from the land of the living" (53:8), though Israel "had done no violence" (53:9). The text captures the trauma of imperial occupation that ruptured the community for generations, while Psalm 22 offers an individual prayer for deliverance in the midst of violence. The psalmist's cry to God is echoed by so many who experience being mocked, bullied, and threatened with violence. These collective and individual experiences of trauma and suffering provide context for and connection to the violence depicted in the gospel reading.

John's account of Jesus' arrest and trial contrasts how Rome maintained society by othering and dehumanizing while Jesus forms a counter-image of society through love. This counter image is depicted from the beginning of the text. At his arrest, Jesus wields no weapon and critiques Peter for enacting violence (18:10-11). No names are provided for those who have the power to arrest Jesus (police, soldiers, officers). But Malchus, the enslaved person wounded by Peter and exploited by systems of oppression is named. The text continues detailing that Jesus is bound and brutalized. At the hands of police and Roman soldiers, Jesus is struck, flogged, and stripped, and psychologically humiliated. David Tombs suggests that the terror Jesus endured also likely involved sexual abuse and possibly assault.¹⁵ Tombs notes that the Roman Empire regularly displayed its might and virility through not only the domination, but also the emasculation of its enemies, including those who were crucified. Great discomfort arises from viewing Jesus as a victim of sexual violence. Yet acknowledging this reality, asks us to see in Jesus' suffering the all too often silenced experiences of sexual violence and human trafficking victims. It requires that we follow the model of the gospel, learning the names of these individuals and witnessing to their experiences, rather than allowing them to be erased by systems of oppression or our discomfort.

Refusing to sanitize the violence that Jesus endured calls us not only to witness to victims, but to actively challenge the systemic injustices that crucify them. It refuses to allow the cross to be, as James Cone puts it, "detached from any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human

beings."¹⁶ For Cone, the cross cannot be read apart from the lynching tree. Christian identity in America cannot be understood without its role in the "brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy."¹⁷ Jesus' experience on the cross cannot be distanced from the disproportionate numbers of black trans women murdered in this country or the pipelines that traffic indigenous children across this country or the environmental degradation that poisons and pollutes low-income communities. Engaging the cross also requires acknowledging the ways in which this very gospel reading has perpetuated hate crimes and anti-semitism when used to disparage all Jewish people rather than witnessing to the complexity of the use of "the Jews" in this gospel. The cross becomes a messy, intersectional space to resist the ways that institutionalized racism, transphobia, homophobia, sexism, ableism, anti-semitism, etc. continue to crucify innocent people who fall outside of the white, cisgender heteronormativity.

Jesus' final moments on the cross gesture toward how we are called not only to actively witness to and resist injustice, but to offer counter images of community based in love. In yesterday's texts, Jesus modeled a love that disrupts social boundaries and promotes justice. He commanded his followers to love others in the same way. Jesus' final interaction from the cross not only demonstrates how he loved his beloveds to the *telos*, but how this love is meant to live on through them – and us. In John 19:25b-27, Jesus binds his beloved friend and his mother to one another through the love they have both shared with him. Much as John shows us that cosmic and political powers cannot bind Jesus, neither can normative understandings of family create boundaries around the love that Jesus has modeled. Crucifixion was not only meant to kill Jesus, but to deaden the connections of those close to him and replace them with fear. Instead, those witnessing his death are invited into a new vision of family. Akin to queer chosen or found families that provide love, safety, and support amid loss and trauma, Jesus models a family centered on love rather than blood. As we witness Jesus' death, we also witness the beginnings of new life, new relationality through the love he modeled.

Karri L. Alldredge

15. David Tombs. "Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 53:1-2 (1999), 89-109. See also, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: Torture, Sexual Abuse, and the Scandal of the Cross*. (New York: Routledge, 2023.)

16. James Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2012), xiv.

17. Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xv.

Vigil of Easter March 30, 2024

A rich smorgasbord of 12 Hebrew scripture passages
to choose from

Romans 6:3–11

John 20:1–18

Reflections on Vigil Texts

“This is the night...” This ancient refrain punctuates the Vigil of Easter liturgy as God’s salvation story for the world stretches out before God’s people. In the holy dark, the divine, deliberative work of resurrection mysteriously and miraculously happens. Thus, the church gathers to remember, anticipate, and proclaim that *this is the night*. Love has risen so that “we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

The smorgasbord of scripture readings – and in particular the appointed twelve Hebrew texts – provide an accounting of the wondrous narratives that shape our imagination about God’s power and presence. *This is the night* to retell the creation story or Jonah’s journey into the belly of the fish, the flood story or the exodus through the Red Sea, Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones or Daniel’s fiery furnace. There are countless creative ways to read and enact these stories together as a community of faith. With movement and props and a bit of flair, the stories come to life in the telling, resulting in a liturgy often beloved by children and adults alike. And the darkness of evening hours holds it all.

For many worshipping communities, the gospel acclamation is the time to turn up the lights in the worshipping space and sing out the Easter alleluias. This preparatory moment makes way for the gathered to hear John’s telling of the resurrection. It becomes the crescendo of the word section that points, finally, to God’s salvific work in the resurrected Christ. The sacraments of baptism and holy communion will sustain the crescendo in the light of Easter joy. But I wonder: if *this is the night* of mystery and miracle, perhaps the Vigil of Easter liturgy asks those assembled to hold the darkness longer, closer? And if not the liturgy, then the gospel itself and Mary Magdalene’s journey to the tomb?

John 20:1 is clear on the details: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” These simple yet significant specifics tell us that resurrection did indeed happen under the blanket of night, for the tomb was empty upon Mary’s starlit approach. What might it mean to preach this gospel with the lights kept dimmed enabling the “still dark” to linger in the hearts of the hearers? Could the setting of Mary Magdalene’s solo venture say more about the salvation of our God at work in the darkness? The

appointed Vigil readings already offered up some of the biblical stories of God’s fondness of the dark: the darkness of the deep at creation (Genesis 1), the stormy cloud-cover during the forty days of the flood (Genesis 7–9), the divine cloud of darkness that enabled the Israelites’ water-crossing (Exodus 14), and Jonah’s God-moment whilst three-days in the inky gut of a fish. Perhaps *this is the night* the church experiences the truth of God’s holy darkness most clearly? And a sermon that speaks into the “still dark” of Mary Magdalene’s journey may help us to know more fully the beautiful mystery of resurrection promise.

I offer a few ideas for your consideration that may assist in this sermonic angle. First, the gospel acclamation, though anticipatory of the Easter proclamation, may provide a more subdued moment with its celebratory song. Namely, with lights kept low, the moment may call for less organ and brass and more antiphon and acapella. For *this is the night* to savor the “still dark” of God’s working out our salvation. Some musical ideas include simple chants from the resource *Singing our Prayer*, including “In Silence We Wait” (17), “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” (18), “Laudate Omnes Gentes” (22), or “Light and Darkness” (24). These sort of pieces or others like them of your choosing will provide an acclamation of quiet praise that honors the quiet dark.

Another idea involves candles. With a preaching focus on the resurrection of Jesus that is discovered in the darkness, one may seek to kindle the light of Christ while extending the shadows of night. Traditionally, the Vigil of Easter liturgy begins with the lighting of the new fire and the blessing of a new pascal candle amid the declaration that Jesus is the one who gives the light of life to all the world. In the midst of the sermon, the light from the pascal candle could be passed among worshipers as Jesus is revealed to Mary Magdalene and, through her testimony, to us. Once the candles are lit, the assembly sings together then moves (carefully) to the baptismal font for a baptism or an affirmation of baptism. There the light of Christ burns bright, and Romans 6 is experienced in real time for *this is the night* the waters of promise shimmer in shadow and light.

And finally, the hymn of the day following the sermon can provide an emphasis on God’s work in the darkness experienced in the stories of faith. Brian Wren’s text in “Joyful is the Dark” (*All Creation Sings*, 1096) is an exemplary iteration on the theme. Imagine the flickering of the handheld candles as the assembly sings, “Joyful is the dark, coolness of the tomb, waiting for the wonder of the morning; never was that midnight touched by dread and gloom: darkness was the cradle of the dawning” (stanza 4). These words together with whole liturgy of the Vigil of Easter preach God’s salvation for us, for indeed *this is the night*.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Easter Sunday March 31, 2024

Isaiah 25:6–9 or Acts 10:34–43

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Mark 16:1–8

Standing with the Women: A Meditation on Mark's Easter Gospel

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome got up very early on the first day of the week and went out together after the sun had risen. Perhaps they had stayed with friends or at a guest house in Jerusalem. Mark has already told us that they were among the women who followed Jesus in Galilee. They had come with him to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. They never left him, not even at the moment of his death. When the Sabbath was over, they found a shop that was open so they could buy spices. They had no reason to bring them from home, for they did not expect the week to end as it had.

Now the sun had risen and it was safer for women to walk on the city streets. It was that morning time when the birds sing in fullest chorus, when light begins to color the grey shadows. They knew exactly where the grave was for Mary Magdalene was there when Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' broken body in linen cloths and laid him in the tomb. Who knows what they talked about in those hours just after dawn—memories, little things, Galilee, the strangeness of their lives over the past three days. Perhaps they couldn't speak at all and there was no sound except the chorus of birds.

The narrator tells us only that they had been asking each other, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back. It was as large as Mary Magdalene remembered. Everything happened quickly then. They entered the tomb and were startled by a young man in a white robe: “Do not be alarmed,” he said—but they were alarmed! They had never read an Easter gospel. They knew only that Jesus had died and they had come to anoint his body. They had done such things before. They knew what to do about death, but they did not know what to do about this.

It is very hard for us to stand with them for long. We assume the young man was an angel (though Mark doesn't say that). We assume they will soon see Jesus (but that doesn't happen). Stay with them a bit longer. Let them hold onto their fear. Do not fill it in too soon with stories of Jesus appearing to others. You may know other stories—Jesus calling Mary Magdalene by name or Jesus breaking bread with two disciples in Emmaus or inviting Thomas to touch his wounded hands. But in this oldest of the Gospels, Jesus is missing. Let these women be afraid and perhaps we will allow ourselves to be afraid also. We are closer to these three women than to any other gospel story. The empty tomb proved nothing except that Jesus was gone. They fled from that place, glad not to be alone.

But there was something else. “Galilee.” That's what the man in white said: “Go back to Galilee.” The young man had been quite specific. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” But the women fled, filled with terror and amazement. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And that's where Mark's story ends.

Now the text doesn't say it, but they headed for Galilee. They headed for home. Something happened to them in Galilee as it had happened before. Oh, we can argue that they went out believing because they had seen the tomb empty. But what sort of evidence is that? The empty tomb could only be the source of endless speculation, never the source of faith. These women went to Galilee and Jesus met them there. How? What did he look like? What did he say? Mark tells us none of these things. But it was more than the memory of an empty tomb that broke their silence. Here's another question: why would anybody remember the testimony of these three women? There was no reason under the sun to remember those whose voices had absolutely no authority. Their testimony was next to worthless in verifying anything, let alone resurrection. Only something deeper than terror could break their silence. It happened in Galilee. It always does.

For Galilee is the place Jesus is going—ahead of us, just as Jesus went ahead of them. Easter morning moves us out of the graveyard toward Galilee, the place Jesus has promised

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to meet us. We always want more evidence than we have. If we are honest, we, too, are filled with terror and amazement. “Who will roll the stone away for us?” is not an old question. Who will roll away the stone of doubt? Who will give us trustworthy proof? What will finally assure us that the good news of resurrection is not preposterous—or even if it is preposterous, it is true?

We stand today with these three women. They didn’t know the answers either. But they headed toward Galilee. They knew without saying a word that this was the direction faith was taking them. As pastor/novelist Frederick Buechner said, “We want to know who Jesus is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is” (*The Magnificent Defeat*, 98).

The sun has risen higher now, above the trees, and the early-morning song of birds is more subdued. A very large stone sits silently beside the empty tomb as three women hurry off, carrying unopened spices in their hands. They are scared to death, filled with terror and amazement. They are headed for Galilee. Why don’t you come, too?

Barbara K. Lundblad



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