

Preaching Helps

Sundays in Ordinary Time: July through September

Can Anything Interrupt Holy War?

As I write these words in May, over 35,000 people have been killed in Gaza, most of them Palestinians, though aid workers and journalists from other countries have also been killed. At least half of those killed are women and children, so many children we cannot bear to see the pictures. Not long after Hamas' vicious attack on Israeli citizens on October 7, 2023, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israelis were united in their fight against Hamas. "We are committed to completely eliminating this evil from the world," Netanyahu said in Hebrew. He then added: "You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible. And we do remember."...Others quickly filled in the story: God commanded King Saul in the first book of Samuel to kill every person in Amalek, a rival nation to ancient Israel. "This is what the Lord Almighty says," the prophet Samuel tells Saul. "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites, and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys" (1 Sam 15:2–3).

Of course, the Palestinians are not the Amalekites. Whatever the Amalekites did to ambush the Israelites happened a long time ago—when the people came up from Egypt! Is anyone alive now who was alive then? But the story had been passed down through generations. The desire for revenge lasts a very long time. That is also true for the Palestinians: they long for revenge against the Israelites they see as enemies who displaced generations who had lived in the land they call Palestine. Are there any biblical texts that can interrupt the cycles of revenge, texts that call for a different response than killing all the Amalekites from infants to elders?

Consider the often-forgotten stories of 2 Kings chapter 4, part of the Elijah-Elisha cycle. Two of the stories in this chapter echo earlier tales told about the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17: the widow of Zarephath is promised a never-ending supply of oil (1 Kgs 17:8–16) and Elijah raised her son to life by what appears to be artificial respiration (1 Kgs 17:17–24). No doubt many redactors took a hand in shaping 2 Kings 4 from stories in the oral tradition. But we miss a great deal if we don't pay attention to where this chapter now stands within the canon. In many ways this chapter interrupts the cycle of

holy war. Chapter 3 ends with the king of Moab sacrificing his firstborn son, desperate as the battle turned against him. Chapter 5 is the story of Naaman the Syrian warrior cured of his leprosy by the prophet Elisha. Between the war and the warrior, Chapter 4 presents stories of life and shalom.

Story One: (2 Kgs 4:1–7) A poor widow is confronted by creditors who threaten to enslave her children as payment for her debts. Elisha tells the children to borrow pots and pans from the neighbors, then to fill them with oil. But the widow has only one small cruet of oil. Mother and children begin to pour the oil until there are no more pots to be filled. "Go sell the oil and pay off your debts," said Elisha.

Story Two: (2 Kgs 4:8–37) Elisha promises a Shunammite woman that she will bear a child even though she had never asked for a child. When the child dies, his mother goes off to find the prophet on his holy mountain. Elisha tries to send his servant, but the woman says, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." Finally, Elisha went with her; he breathed life back into the boy and brought him to his mother.

Story Three: (2 Kgs 4:8–37) A servant of Elisha brought herbs and wild gourds from the field to make a stew. When people tasted the stew they shouted, "There's death in the pot!" Elisha threw some flour in the pot and said, "Serve the people and let them eat." The poison was gone, and they all were fed.

Story Four: (2 Kgs 4:42–44) A man from Baal-shal-i-shah brought a sack with twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain. Elisha told him to feed the people. But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" But Elisha told them what God had spoken: "They shall eat and have some left." This text is paired with John 6 on Pentecost 17. In John's text Jesus feeds 5000 people with a boy's lunch—five barley loaves and two fish. And there was plenty left over after all had eaten.

Story Two is the longest story in this chapter. In detail it tells the story of the Shunammite woman who stubbornly persisted to save the life of her son. In Jewish congregations this story is the *haf-tarah* reading paired with the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Earlier in Genesis, three strangers (angels?) visit Abraham and speak this promise: "I will surely return to you *in due season*, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Elisha speaks almost the same words to the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4. Indeed, the Hebrew *ka'et hayya* (in due season) is found only in these two places.¹ Miraculously, both

1. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.,

sons survive—one through the intervention of an angel, the other through the stubborn intervention of his mother. Abraham's obedience to God in offering his son is reckoned as righteousness. Was the Shunammite woman's stubborn cry for life and *shalom* also reckoned as righteousness?

Could this story in 2 Kings 4 be a midrash on the Isaac story, a mother's response to the near sacrifice of Sarah's only son in Genesis 22? Does the Shunammite woman's insistence on God's prophet saving her son from death fill in for Sarah's absence on Mt. Moriah?

We can ponder those questions for a long time. How might the canonical interruption of 2 Kings 4 present an alternate vision to the unending cycle of holy war in our world today? As we preach and teach, we must keep searching for texts that bring life and *shalom*. We cannot let avenging the Amalekites have the last word.

This summer issue of "Preaching Helps" is the gift of several writers: parish pastors, university teachers, state legislators, and retired people who miss preaching! I am grateful to each of them for their insights into the texts. **Ali Ferin** serves as one of the pastors for the good people at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Ali is a graduate of Iowa State University and Luther Seminary. When she's not at church causing a holy ruckus, she can be found clutching her coffee cup and soaking up the beautiful (and brutal) long days of parenting little ones with her spouse. **Brad Froslee** serves as co-pastor at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. In time away from church he enjoys traveling, singing, doing genealogy, writing poetry, and volunteering with local organizations and youth programs. Brad, his spouse, and their son live in Minneapolis, Minnesota. **Sarah Trone Garriott** is a 2008 graduate of LSTC and now serves as coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Network. She regularly preaches and presides at Christian congregations throughout Iowa. Each summer she coordinates a camp for high school youth and incoming Drake University students to explore the diverse religious communities of the Des Moines metro area and to create digital storytelling projects about their own faith (see www.iowainterfaithexchange.com for more about the camp). She was first elected to the Iowa Senate in 2020 and serves communities on the west side of the Des Moines metro area. **Mark S. Hanson**, a ELCA presiding bishop emeritus (2001-2013), also served as president of the Lutheran World Federation (2003-2010). Previously he served as bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod and was pastor at three different Minneapolis congregations. He currently serves as Senior Fellow with the Interfaith Institute at Augsburg University. His primary calling over the last several years was to support

his wife, Ione, in her journey with memory care; Ione died in January 2024. Mark and Ione have six children and eight grandchildren.

Elise Pokel grew up in the Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota, surrounded by love in a neighborhood filled with kids re-settled from around the world who protected her from bullies and boredom. She graduated from Oak Grove High School, Concordia College (where she made her parents extremely nervous by studying comparative religions), and Luther Seminary. She is married to Andy, who hails from the strange land of Wisconsin, and they are raising two hearty Viking babies named Fred and Leif. Elise serves as lead pastor at Transfiguration Lutheran in Bloomington, Minnesota. **Andrea Roske-Metcalf** serves as lead pastor alongside the people of Diamond Lake Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. In her spare time, she tends to a fairy garden, which came as an undisclosed obligation with the purchase of her house, and teaches workshops on the craft of storytelling. She makes a home together with her spouse, Luke, and their daughters, Clem and Oli. **Blake Scalet** is currently in his twelfth year serving as pastor of Saint John's Lutheran Church in Summit, New Jersey. He is also the Secretary of the ELCA New Jersey Synod. Originally from rural Illinois, he is a graduate of Valparaiso University, Yale Divinity School, and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. He has been a contributor to the annual worship resource *Sundays and Seasons*. **Peter Carlson Schattauer** is Associate Director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community at St. Olaf College. A graduate of Yale Divinity School and St. Olaf College, Peter's ministry focuses on working across areas of the academy and church to articulate a vision for a vibrant, twenty-first century Lutheranism as well as creating spaces for young adults to explore their faith and inquire after God. In his free time, he enjoys biking, cooking, and spending time with friends.

God bless your preaching on these Sundays in Ordinary Time.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

1988), 57.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 7, 2024

Ezekiel 2:1–5

Psalms 123

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

Mark 6:1–13

Engaging the Texts

The two scenes in this short pericope could stand alone, but they do work together. The trouble in Nazareth is that people think they know Jesus. But his words and actions are challenging their understanding of him and how he fits into the community. Instead of the familiar one, he has become a stranger. The insider becomes an outsider. Their awe quickly turns to outrage and he can no longer remain there. It's time to move on. Jesus' own rejection of Nazareth inspires a lesson for the disciples. It's time to send them out so they can learn some of these valuable lessons, too.

Pastoral Reflections

In my work for the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Network, I spend my days visiting a diversity of religious communities. Preaching, teaching, building relationships--so that we can all work together on big problems like hunger. On most weekends I have the opportunity to preach to any Christian community that will have a lady pastor in the pulpit. I like to say that I am a professional stranger.

Each time I visit a new community there is the risk that my words will sound strange to the community and that the community's ways will seem strange to me. And I am glad that in each visiting preacher gig we have this opportunity to be a little strange together. I have experienced being a stranger many times in my life, and I've found it to be the most valuable of experiences.

This is the most important lesson Jesus teaches his disciples before they begin their ministry together. He wants them to experience being a stranger. For that reason, Jesus sends them out with nothing: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; only one change of clothes, no plans. All this so that they must rely on the hospitality of strangers. By being welcomed they learn how best to welcome others. By needing help, they will know better how to help others.

And just after this lesson, as soon as they return, the people come to them. The hungry in crowds of thousands, the sick, those in need of healing, the outcasts. They will all soon be coming. And Jesus needs his disciples to know how to receive them.

Those who have been a stranger know what it is like to be welcomed. Strangers also know what it is like NOT to be

welcomed. When Jesus sends the disciples out with nothing to take care of themselves, they will also encounter people and places that do not welcome them. They need to be prepared for rejection. They will be going out into a world where their message will sound very strange when compared to the ways of this world. They will be refused. And they need to learn how to move on, keep going. They need to practice letting go so that they do not become bitter or vengeful. Jesus is sending them to share the good news with the world and he doesn't want anything to stand in their way or hold them back.

As Christians, as disciples, as followers, the first and most important lesson we can learn is how to be a stranger.

So how strange is your community? Maybe this Sunday it's time to practice being a little strange. After all, the ones who will be ready for the work of following Jesus are ones who can handle things getting a little strange.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 14, 2024

Amos 7:7–15

Psalms 85:8–13

Ephesians 1:3–14

Mark 6:14–29

Engaging the Texts

We've been given a horrifying story to deal with and there is no way around it. Mark is a fast-paced gospel, short and to the point, less talk and a lot more action. Yet this week we get fifteen whole verses devoted to the drama of John's gruesome death. It's an uncharacteristic amount of detail and dialogue for Mark. While we have rapidly skimmed over healings, teachings, and the growth of Jesus' entourage, Mark suddenly digs in for this episode. It's as if we've been bopping along through an enjoyable family-friendly movie montage scene (complete with upbeat music) and are dropped into a horrible moment in a Game of Thrones episode. The contrast is significant—and I think intentional. The author does not want us to miss it.

Matthew also features the deadly dinner party (Matt 14:1–12), while Luke just refers to the beheading after the fact (Luke 9:7). However, Mark heightens the cruelty by adding more detail to the exchange between daughter and mother. While we have no idea how old the daughter Herodias may be, it's easy to imagine the childish delight and pride as she skips back and forth between her parents. While the mother asks for John's head, it's the daughter's idea that it be presented on a "silver platter." Alongside a child's innocence and the

mother/daughter relationship, the brutality is even more jarring.

Everyone has their own motivation for taking part in the murder. It's a mistake to pin this death on any one person in the room—they all have a hand in it. Herod is insecure and deeply preoccupied with the opinions of others. The child is eager to please both parents. Herodias feels threatened in her identity as wife (the only position that can give a woman security) and has nurtured her grudge against John. The soldiers are just following orders. The dinner party guests may be scared into silence or voicing their amusement at the shocking spectacle. All of them together create the circumstances where a man can be murdered for the spectacle and the party doesn't stop.

If we peek ahead, another jarring contrast comes in the next passage: the feeding of the 5,000. No two feasts could be more different.

Pastoral Reflections

It could be tempting for the pastor to preach on something else. Maybe take a Sunday off and welcome in a guest speaker? This is a story of selfishness and excess, pride and fear, vengeance and manipulation, violence for entertainment. Herod's kingdom is one where a human life matters so little that executions are a dinner party feature. What good news could there be here? Jesus doesn't even make an appearance.

In this scene there are so many people who could have said something, done something, made a difference. A life could have been saved. But no one did anything. Not one person tried to stop it. So maybe we should not also turn away by avoiding the story in our worship.

This story could be an illustration of the "bystander effect." This is the phenomenon where the presence of others discourages one from intervening in an emergency situation, often not acting to assist a person in distress. According to *Psychology Today*:

Latané and Darley attributed the bystander effect to two factors: diffusion of responsibility and social influence. The perceived diffusion of responsibility means that the more onlookers there are, the less personal responsibility individuals will feel to take action. Social influence means that individuals monitor the behavior of those around them to determine how to act.²

It is also possible for the bystander effect to increase helping behaviors. A faith community can be a social influence group that cultivates an identity of positive action. There are tragedies taking place all around us all of the time. We've all averted our eyes when passing the person asking for spare change. Many

of us have scrolled past the disturbing headlines. It's usually because we don't know what we can do. And when we look around, we see no one else doing anything either. How could our community of faith help us to be different?

In my ministry I spend a lot of time with the diverse faith communities of the Des Moines metro area. Spending time with the Sikh community I have learned that many wear the turban to stand out in a crowd. Quite simply, there was a time when members of the community weren't standing up for others. Wearing a turban means they can't hide in the crowd, they are reminded of their values and held accountable to help. It is a key component of their identity, to help. Christians should not start wearing turbans, but is there a way this community can stand out in the crowd as someone who helps?

If we are brave enough to allow ourselves to be horrified, together, maybe that is the good news. If we are troubled by what we have seen, what we have heard, maybe that is God present in our midst. Perhaps it is the Spirit moving us to ask, "What would I, what could I have done?" While Jesus wasn't in this story, maybe it's because he's about to show up in the world through our actions.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost July 21, 2024

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Psalm 23

Ephesians 2:11–22

Mark 6:30–34, 53–56

Engaging the Texts

There's a hole in the middle of today's gospel. Something was left out, marked by the comma: Mark 6: 30-34 [COMMA] 53-56. Do people in the congregation ever wonder what the lectionary committee didn't want them to hear? Those who planned the lectionary readings for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost had good reasons for the hole in the gospel: the verses in the comma tell the story of Jesus feeding 5000 people. We'll hear that story from John's gospel next Sunday. They didn't want us to hear the same story two weeks in a row!

But even the beginning of this gospel passage has us wondering: "The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." Well, what had they done? In the early part of this chapter Jesus sent the twelve out in pairs. "Travel light," he said, "and take no money in your belt. Pack only one tunic! If people welcome you, stay. If they

2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/bystander-effect>

don't, shake the dust off your feet and move on." Wherever they went, the disciples called everyone to repent. They cast out demons, anointed many who were sick and cured them. That is, they went out doing what Jesus had been doing. They must have been amazed at their own power—or God's power within them. When they came back, they gathered around Jesus and told him all about it. That's where we come in today. They must have been ecstatic—like a group of children all trying to talk at once. They were also exhausted, and Jesus could see it in their faces. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves," Jesus said, "and rest for a while." So, they got into a boat and headed across the lake. But crowds of people saw them leave and followed them. They must have seemed desperate. Rather than scold them, Jesus had compassion on them for "They were like sheep without a shepherd" (vs 34). That verse connects with Jeremiah's image of the shepherd in the First Reading, as well as Psalm 23.

[Then, the part in the comma, the part we won't hear today. Jesus feeds 5000. Later he walks on water and calms a stormy sea. Jesus and his disciples have crossed the sea again.]

Today's gospel ends as they moor their boat on the other side of the lake in Gennesaret. Again, crowds, and desperate need. People rushed from all over the region to bring sick people on mats. They came from villages, cities, and farms. They laid sick relatives and friends in the marketplaces. They begged for healing—and those who touched even the fringe of Jesus' cloak were healed. Ah, that's what happened in the last chapter when the woman with the hemorrhage touched the hem of Jesus' cloak and she "...felt in her body that she was healed of her disease" (5:25-34).

Pastoral Reflections

Oh, Jesus, where are you when there are so many who are sick among us? Where are the disciples who were sent forth to cast out demons and heal the sick? Why are there so many stories of Jesus healing people in the gospels? Are these stories told and retold to prove Jesus' divine power? Or are these stories remembered as tangible signs of Jesus' great compassion—compassion not only to save souls but to heal bodies?

Is that same compassion—and passion—for healing people still present in Jesus' followers today? Are we sent out to share Jesus' ministry of healing? A seminary classmate of mine shouts, "YES!" Scott Morris, my classmate and dear friend, is a Methodist minister and a medical doctor. As a young man, his pastor said, "This boy is going to make a fine preacher one of these days."

Scott knew he had been called by God—but he wasn't sure about preaching. In seminary he often talked about a vision he'd had since high school: the church is called to heal people. He wasn't called to be a faith healer on TV or a preacher in the sanctuary. But he kept searching, reading, praying. He visited a clinic serving a poor neighborhood in

Washington, D.C. He traveled to Zimbabwe to meet with a *nyanga*—a witch doctor. After medical school Scott moved to Memphis, one of the poorest major cities in the United States. Working with a local Methodist church and one nurse, he started The Church Health Center in 1987. The day they opened Scott saw twelve patients. Today, he and his staff see at least 60,000 people a year: homeless people, elderly folks, lots of children, the working poor who aren't poor enough to receive Medicaid. In his book *Health Care You Can Live With*, Scott wrote these words:

A staff of 220 people shares our ministry of healing and wellness...A network of medical specialists makes certain the uninsured working poor receive the same quality of health care as anyone with a Cadillac insurance plan. Fees slide on a scale based on income and family size... We raise about \$13 million a year, but the value of the health care we deliver is \$100 million annually.³

Scott Morris resigned as CEO of the Church Health Center in May 2024. A new director has been named and Scott will continue to see patients. That's something he loves to do, but it's more than that. Dr. Morris believes that Jesus continues to send out disciples to be healers.

Barbara Lundblad

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost July 28, 2024

2 Kings 4:42–44

Psalm 145:10–18

Ephesians 3:14–21

John 6:1–21

Engaging John's Gospel for Preaching

This is one of very few stories found in all four gospels. I think John's story is our favorite for many reasons. Baby Boomers may recall Woodstock when they hear: "Now there was a great deal of grass in the place..." (Just kidding!) Most of us like John's story because of the boy and his lunch, a detail found only in John. Modern people who are skeptical of miracles, can use the boy's lunch to offer a reasonable explanation for why everyone was fed: when Jesus gave the blessing over the boy's lunch, all the people opened their satchels and shared what they had brought. It was a great big church potluck near the Sea of Tiberias.

3. Scott Morris. *Health Care You Can Live With* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Publishing, 2011).

The heart of the story is the same in all four gospels: hungry people were fed—5000 in Mark, Luke, and John, 5000—besides women and children—in Matthew. In each story Jesus calls the people to participate in the miracle. “You give them something to eat,” he says to his disciples in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John a boy steps up with his lunch and it’s blessed and passed to the crowd. When everyone had all they wanted to eat, Jesus said to his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” And there were twelve baskets of bread left over. (Evidently, they had eaten all the fish!) This is a wonderful story of an abundant feast.

In John’s gospel this bread will be passed out over the next fifty-six verses! For the next four Sundays—almost the whole month of August—the Gospel reading will be from John chapter 6. That is a lot of bread! This is probably why many ministers go on vacation during August.

Something happens in the rest of this chapter that can be dangerous, turning this abundant feast into an exclusionary meal. A bit later in the chapter Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” This is a wonderful promise connecting the barley loaves that sustain the body and Jesus’ very presence. But soon there is a turn in John’s text, and we read, “Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’” *The Jews?* All the Jews? Jesus was a Jew, the disciples as well, probably the little boy who brought his lunch and most of the crowd. This is the first time in John’s gospel that the term “the Jews” has been used outside of Jerusalem. Always, “the Jews” are opponents of Jesus—now they’re in Galilee as well as in the city. Farther along Jesus says, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they died.” *Your ancestors?* But weren’t those wilderness wanderers also Jesus’ ancestors? Well, of course, they were. Yet this chapter sets up a contrast between manna and life-giving bread. “The Jews” in this chapter will never have life without Jesus, the bread who came down from heaven.

Most scholars have discerned that John was writing at a time of conflict between Jews who believed in Jesus and those who did not. This tension leaked back into John’s story. Some readers change “Jews” to “Judeans” or “Jewish leaders,” but such changes cannot mask the testimony that something new and better has come. We now call this *supersessionism*: the belief that Christianity has replaced Judaism.

Some will argue that we can’t hold John accountable for twentieth and twenty-first century atrocities and horrors. But we can hold each other accountable. We do not stand in John’s moment of history; we stand in our own. Words written centuries ago careen down the corridors of history, bouncing off the walls of burning synagogues. John’s words

sound different now. “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they died”—but we are better, and we will never die! John should have stopped with his wonderful story of hungry people fed with five barley loaves and two fish. Or perhaps Jesus could have sat down with his disciples and the people who had been fed. He could have said, “Remember the teaching we received in ancient days? Remember what is written in the Torah when God said, ‘one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.’”

God’s bread is still being passed out. There is enough bread for all of us, enough words from God to cover the earth. For us as Christians, Jesus is the bread of life but that does not exhaust the bread of God. Remember what Jesus said, “Gather up the fragments left over so that nothing will be lost.” Some pieces of God’s truth are in other holy writings. We do not need to demean Judaism to be faithful to Christianity. As Krister Stendahl once said, “I do not need to put other women down to prove I love my wife.” Perhaps we can begin by remembering that Jesus always pointed us to God. Ethicist Larry Rasmussen nudges Christians to shift our way of thinking and speaking, “...to move from a Christocentric theology to a theocentric Christology. Which is to say: God, not Jesus, is the power at the center of things, and a God-centered life is precisely what we see in Jesus.”⁴

In our time when antisemitism is on the rise throughout the world, we need to listen once more to Jewish holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. He recalls an anecdote Martin Buber shared with a group of priests:

What is the difference between Jews and Christians? We all await the Messiah. You believe He has already come and gone, while we do not. I therefore propose that we await Him together. And when He appears, we can ask Him: “Were you here before?” Then he paused and added: “And I hope that at that moment I will be close enough to whisper in His ear, “For the love of heaven, don’t answer.”⁵

Barbara Lundblad

4. Larry Rasmussen, “New Dynamics in Theology,” in *Ethics in the Present Tense*, (Friendship Press, 2023), 62.

5. Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 354-355.

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 4, 2024

Exodus 16:2–4, 9–15

Psalm 78:23–29

Ephesians 4:1–16

John 6:24–35

Engaging the Texts

The readings assigned for this early August Sunday draw our attention to gifts of the earth, God's part in providing these gifts, and our responses to these gifts. In the Exodus story and the Gospel reading from John, the action of the story happens within the context of the reception of good gifts from God. In Exodus, this reception happens within the text we will hear in worship, but in the gospel, the literal gift-giving occurs prior to the story and we hear explication on this gift-giving. Earlier in John 6, Jesus has fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus references this miracle as one of the signs that those following him have seen. However, it seems that, similar to the story in Exodus, the experience of these signs is not immediately understood by those who witness it. Jesus suggests, in fact, that the crowd seeks Jesus because they ate their fill rather than because they witnessed a sign of Jesus' identity.

This distinction Jesus makes highlights another resonance with the Exodus text because in both stories what the people crave (borrowing from the words of the psalmist) and what God provides differ. God's gift-giving in Exodus is a response to the complaining of the people about their situation in the desert. Even as God explains to Moses how God will respond, and Aaron explains to all the people that they will eat meat and bread provided by God, the people's response to the gift of manna is incredulity. It seems that the people have not fully understood the nature of God's gift-giving in the wilderness. Similarly, Jesus suggests in the Gospel that the crowd fails to comprehend the nature of what they have witnessed in the feeding of the five thousand. The desire for people to understand the type of gifts that God gives and the way in which they are given is a focus of the reading from Ephesians as well. The author of Ephesians references Psalm 68 to assert the gift-giving action of God before explicating what these gifts are. Rather than manna in the wilderness or the bread of life, the gifts that the author of Ephesians names are the roles individuals may play within the community of the early church. In each of these stories, the author emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature of God's gift-giving so that they can understand who God is. In Exodus, the manna shows the people that the LORD is the God of the people. In the Gospel, Jesus announces that he is the bread of life, the

place to receive the full gifts of God. And in Ephesians, the gifts of each person's role in the community function to build up the body of Christ, pointing people toward God revealed in the world.

Pastoral Reflections

The thread running through these stories that immediately captured my imagination as a preacher is the gulf between God's gift-giving and the understanding of those gifts. While the psalmist suggests in verse 29 that the people have received what they crave, the three stories we hear seem to suggest differently. The Israelites in Exodus seem confused about this flaky, dewy substance on the ground. The crowd in John seems initially more amazed by actual bread than the bread of life. And the author of Ephesians encourages the hearers of the letter to grow up and live into the gifts of the callings that God has given. This gulf, between what God gives us and how we receive that gift, seems a fruitful place to start in preparing a sermon. With these texts being read at the beginning of August as our farms and gardens hopefully provide us with good gifts of harvest, I am especially aware of the gulf between God's good gift of creation and our stewardship of that good gift. In times of extreme weather, we are especially aware of the ways in which our failed stewardship of the earth contributes to climate change making it harder to receive the bounty of God's good gifts from the land. There is also an opportunity to reflect with the gathered assembly on the things that they "crave" and whether those things provide life for them. Any reflection on this topic can and should balance the societal as well as individual ways we fail to desire the things that are good for us.

I am also interested in the ways that God's gift-giving in these stories occurs within reciprocal relationships between God and the people. This reminds me of the "bread of life" we receive each week in worship, the body and blood of Christ present in the elements of communion. This regular gift reception occurs within our ongoing relationship with God and also elicits a response from us to God's free gift of grace in the living out of our lives. Our response resonates with the author of Ephesians' exhortation to the hearers of the letter to live out the gifts that God has given them. The sacramental loop of gift given, received, and responded to is closed through our vocations. These lessons present an opportunity to encourage people to reflect on the ways in which God's presence and faithfulness in their lives has nourished them for their lives in the world. As you prepare to receive communion this week, a gesture toward the gift-giving at the table may enhance the proclamation of the word; there may be examples specific to your community of the ways in which the good gifts of God call us to respond in faithful living.

Peter Carlson Schattauer

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 11, 2024

1 Kings 19:4–8

Psalm 34:1–8

Ephesians 4:25–5:2

John 6:35, 41–51

Engaging the Texts

For this second Sunday in August, our lectionary continues to explore the theme of God's gifts to God's people, centering that exploration in the bread of life passages from the Gospel of John. This week the texts focus on the persistence of God's responses to God's people throughout time. The psalmist seems to most succinctly describe the persistence of God's provision, describing time after time when they sought the Lord and were answered, when they cried and were heard. And in the story from 1 Kings and the Gospel reading from John, we find the angel of the Lord and Jesus, respectively, continually showing God's desire to provide for God's people, despite resistance. In 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah dramatically announces that he would like God to take his life after a day's journey into the wilderness. Instead, the angel of the Lord comes to provide food and water. When Elijah again lays down, waiting for death to come, the angel provides food and drink for Elijah two more times. In the Gospel reading from John, Jesus' description of himself as the bread of life who provides life continues as people in the crowd doubt his identity. Like last week's Gospel, the crowd's understanding of Jesus' description focuses on a literal understanding of the "bread of life come down from heaven." Whereas last week the focus was on literal bread, the people now focus on the mechanics of Jesus' assertion that he came down from heaven. Despite the resistance to Jesus' explanation of how he provides life, he continues to explain who he is. In both of these instances, despite doubts about God's ability to provide life, God persists in showing the people the life God desires for them. The persistence shown in both of these situations has a purpose; namely, that God's people may know the presence of God. Following the angel of the Lord's persistence in providing for Elijah in the wilderness, Elijah travels to Mt. Horeb where he experiences the presence of God. In the Gospel, Jesus continues to explain his identity as the bread of life who nourishes the world for all eternity so that those who know him might know God. The author of Ephesians, then, sets down rules for the ways that communities who know God's presence through God's persistence will be seen. The rules the author sets down are ambitious and meant to build up the community so that those who know these people might know the God they worship. As imitators of God, this community is to live in love, showing persistence with one

another as God has persisted with them so that they may be witnesses to abundant life for all.

Pastoral Reflections

As you head into the second of four sermons on the "bread of life" texts, persistence might be a good outlook for your own preparation! But, then, how lucky to know that God persists with you! Unsurprisingly, the theme of God's persistence toward the people of God throughout time immediately draws my attention as a generative topic from these texts. Persistence is a virtue often valorized when witnessed in humans. We hear of the great obstacles that people face to achieve goals or fight for justice in the world. This might be a good week to explore some ways in which you have witnessed persistence in your life and community. However, it is important that in any examples of persistence you speak of, that persistence is attributed to God. The stories this week are not finally about our persistence, but about the persistence of God toward us. The author of Ephesians provides a good example of the balance between calling a community to persistence as imitators of the God who has persisted with them rather than out of their own power. Further, it is important to note the end that your examples of persistence hope to reach. In our lessons, God's persistence with us is always to promote a full and good life for all people. Our examples of persistence should strive—as closely as a human example can—to this goal as well.

Another interesting aspect of these lectionary texts for me is that they point toward the truth of God's presence in our lives. This might be another theme to explore in your preaching this week. Elijah goes to Mt. Horeb to be in the presence of God directly after this story in 1 Kings; the psalmist speaks of those who take refuge in the Lord; Jesus speaks of people being drawn to him by God, and the author of Ephesians imagines a community that witnesses to the presence of God as imitators of God. A preacher might do well to examine the conditions in which we are able to know the presence of God in our midst. The theme of persistence—God's and ours—could show up again here although there may be other orientations that speak better to your community. Alternatively, this move of the texts toward experiences of the presence of God might inspire you to reflect on the ways we know God to be present in our worship—through the Word and sacraments. These places where God's grace and presence are promised to be made known to us can be a starting place for our communities to see all the ways in which God is present in our lives. Perhaps then it is our persistence in encountering the places where we know God is—alongside our siblings in Christ—that opens us to see the presence of God throughout creation.

Peter Carlson Schattauer

[August 15th is the feast day of Mary, Mother of Our Lord. This year it falls on a Thursday, but some preachers may choose to mark her day on the previous or following Sunday. Since there are very few women in the appointed texts, consider the option to honor Mary on a Sunday. This entry includes new lyrics to a familiar hymn tune inviting us to imagine Mary's point of view.]

Mary, Mother of Our Lord August 15, 2024

Isaiah 61:7–11

Psalm 34:1–9

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 1:46–55 (Magnificat)

Remembering Mary

Before I became a mother myself, I didn't give much thought to Mary. She pops up in the Gospels here or there throughout the church year, encouraging Jesus to turn water into wine (normal thing for a mom to do!), anxiously checking in on Jesus' well-being (only to hear him say that anyone who follows Jesus is his mother! So rude!), and then watching from a distance as he dies.

When I had my firstborn son, Fred, after we had suffered a series of pregnancy losses, I started to realize that Mary is a figure I had so much to learn from. She sings her glorious, dangerous Magnificat. She says "yes" to God. She says "yes" to carrying this miracle boy into the world, knowing he will not be just hers from day one. Fred was born at the beginning of the pandemic and we were so isolated and scared. We weren't grateful for this Covid season, but we had an uninterrupted time with our newborn as he grew into an infant and then a toddler. We think about Mary giving birth to Jesus and then suddenly, he's a grown-up performing miracles and she's out of the picture. But she was the one who held him all night when our God was teething. She was there for every tiny milestone. She was the one who tenderly lifted God to her cheek as the prophet Hosea said God does for us.

She was the one who kissed away his hurts and taught him how to walk and be a little boy of faith. She gave him his biblical imagination and tenderness for the outcast and downtrodden. It's all there in her song! (Luke 1:46-55)

In the eastern church, she is *Theotokos*—the God-bearer. She gives him birth of course. But that wasn't the end of it. She bears him up throughout every stage of his life to ensure that he can bear us up through the power of his resurrecting love. Thanks be to God for the faithfulness of Mary!

This version of "Were You There?" is part of *Holy Mother, Holy Child*, our Lenten Vespers service.

Were you there?⁶

Were you there when she dreamed about her son,
And how those feet in her ribs would someday run
Over the hills, and into the troubled world?
She trembled, trembled, trembled.
Were you there when she dreamed about her son?

Were you there when he would not sleep at all,
Cutting teeth, growing bones and trying to crawl?
All through the night, she held him against the
world—

He trembled, trembled, trembled.

Were you there when he would not sleep at all.

Were you there when he cried out from the pain?
Mary held him in her heart and in her gaze.
"Here is your son"—"Here is your mother."
They trembled, trembled, trembled.

Were you there when he cried out from the pain?

Were you there when she went to see the tomb?
Folded hands, folded linens, empty room.
She fell to her knees and lifted her hands to God,
She trembled, trembled, trembled.

Were you there when she went to see the tomb?⁷

Elise Pokel

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 18, 2024

Proverbs 9:1–6

Psalm 34:9–14

Ephesians 5:15–20

John 6:51–58

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Socrates is purported to have said, "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." Surely, this is sobering and solid advice for a preacher.

This is the third consecutive week that the gospel has centered on bread from heaven, and the fourth week more generally dealing with Jesus and bread. You may be growing weary with finding something new to say about this bread of life. While the most ardent church-goer may commiserate

6. The audio and lyrics for "Were You There?" and the other songs Elise created can be found at [Were You There?](#), [Magnificat](#), and [Hannah's Song](#).

7. *Foundry Hymnal* (Andy and Elise Pokel). Reprinted with permission from the authors. The tune WERE YOU THERE is an African-American Spiritual in the public domain.

with you, it is more likely that given summer worship attendance, biblical literacy, and modern memory that those in the assembly will find this bread of life fresh even if you are starting to find it old and stale. That said, perhaps a key to this week is the idea of wisdom--a means to hear the bread metaphor anew and a thread weaving through all of the scripture texts.

It is Wisdom herself that we meet in the Proverbs reading. Wisdom has been busy--building her house, slaughtering livestock, mixing wine, setting the table, and sending servant girls to the city heights announcing her invitation. This is some feast Wisdom has made ready. And to invite all "that are simple" and "those without sense," she must be planning on quite a party with that guest list! Are there any among us who wouldn't be in that crowd whether we like to admit it or not?

We are invited to "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight." Without denying the ancient and original intent of the writer of Proverbs, it is hard not to hear eucharistic overtones in this passage from our Christian standpoint. The bread and wine, and the Word of God, hold wisdom and insight. They teach us, form us, shape us, and mold us.

In the Psalm, we hear another invitation: "Come, children, and listen to me; I will teach you reverence for the Lord," echoing Proverbs 9:10, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The wisdom we learn is what it means to follow God faithfully and do what is right, "Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from lying words. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

The refrain is repeated yet again in the reading from Ephesians, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Be wise with your ways, your words, your time--seek God's will, God's wisdom, and God's way. And at least here in Ephesians, part of that wisdom work is worship--singing psalms and hymns, make melody to the Lord, and give thanks to God at all times and for everything. Giving thanks, *εὐχαριστοῦντες* (eucharistountes), is the same root word as eucharist. To have wisdom is to give thanks in every circumstance and situation, to lift up hearts and hands to God.

But what about the bread? "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." This is no ordinary bread. There is everlasting life in this bread. Yet, this bread is also flesh? Of Jesus? Those gathered are shocked by Jesus' words. Who can blame them? How can Jesus, who is speaking before them, give them his flesh to eat? And even if he could, isn't that painful, prohibited by the Torah, and frankly disgusting? We

bear in mind that early Christians were accused of nothing less than cannibalism, and still to this day by more than one first communion student.

Alas, where is the wisdom in this week three of Jesus' ramblings and ruminations on the bread of life? "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." In the eating and the drinking comes the abiding, the dwelling, the uniting of Jesus with all who dine. This is the promise given by Christ, which was handed down to Paul, and passed on through the church to you: This is my body given for you; this is my blood. For you! What an indescribable gift! Calling to mind the words of St. Augustine, "We become what we receive." We receive the body of Christ, broken for our salvation, and thereby become the body of Christ, broken for the sake of the world.

The wisdom is the reality hidden in the mystery. We eat bread at this table, and we receive the very body of Christ. We drink wine, and we receive the true blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. A fool would scoff, or question how, or underestimate the gift. One who is wise grasps by faith the extravagance of God's mercy, the miracle of the meal, and the wonder in our midst.

Wisdom calls us to her feast: come all you who are confused, who struggle to understand, who seek peace, who strive to give thanks in every situation. We come empty, simple, and foolish. Wisdom makes us welcome and teaches us day by day what is good. Eat the mystery. Drink deeply of Jesus' crucified-upside down-folly that is true wisdom indeed. Come to the table, come to the feast.

Blake Scalet

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost August 25, 2024

Joshua 24:1–2a, 14–18

Psalm 34:15–22

Ephesians 6:10–20

John 6:56–69

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

This Sunday we reach our fifth and final Sunday in the summer of bread. For five weeks the lectionary has fed us a constant meal of bread from the gospel of John. Preachers and congregations alike may be feeling a little bloated at the idea of yet another sermon on the bread of life. The image comes to mind of endless breadsticks at an Olive Garden, which at first arrival at the table are met with delight by hungry diners but by the second or third or even fourth round have certainly lost their initial appeal. "Enough!" we may be

tempted to cry and yet the lectionary urges us to take one more helping of this bread.

Both the first and second reading, each in turn, present unique material for a sermon that is low-carb. **Joshua 24** is the last chapter of that book. The entry into the Promised Land and the conquest of Canaan are now well-over. They are exhorted by Joshua to remain faithful to the covenantal law of the Torah, echoing the final proclamations of Moses. It is here that we get the most well-known verse from the book of Joshua and one of the best remembered of all Bible verses: “choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” This often printed, painted, and embroidered verse would make for a fine jumping off point for a sermon that more fully explains the context and story of the book of Joshua, that discusses and wrestles with the account of the conquest of Canaan in light of post-colonial theology and the current situation in the Holy Land, and/or a sermon that wrestles with what true allegiance to God over and above our many other allegiances (national, political, ideological, etc.) actually looks like in the life of a faithful Christian.

Turning to **Ephesians**, a preacher looking to avoid bread would do well to unpack and explain the metaphor of the whole armor of God. The metaphor so beloved in many conservative Christian communities has been largely ignored, if not outright disdained, by mainline communities in an attempt to reject the imagery of warfare and violence. However, reclaiming this text and turning it on its head may indeed be salutary. Christians are called to stand firm against evil and to do so with gifts of the Spirit--by truth, righteousness, and the gospel of peace; with faith, salvation, and the very Word of God. Pray and persevere and stand firm in the gospel. The epistle’s urgent call to resolute commitment to Christ and his gospel in the face of adversity and the myriad voices that would seek to turn us from Christ is as relevant today as in the two millennia past of its authorship.

And yet, there is still **the gospel of bread**, entreating us to savor one more morsel. Jesus, in fact, finishes his teaching on this bread of life that is come down from heaven in this week’s pericope. We have spent four Sundays listening to this teaching piece-by-piece, when, in fact, Jesus delivers the whole loaf all at once. We finally get the response of those gathered--and they are frustrated and confused. The teaching is altogether too difficult, and in response many of his initial group of disciples leave the movement. Jesus’ teachings *are* difficult. They *are* hard to understand, let alone follow. They require leaps of faith, endurance through seasons of doubt and struggle, and commitment to follow even when we do not know the way.

The gospel lesson actually begins by repeating the last two verses from the week prior, “Those who eat my flesh and

drink my blood abide in me, and I in them...This is the bread that came down from heaven...the one who eats this bread will live forever.” The sacramentality of the text is abundant, and while the preacher has likely already alluded or even drilled down the connections between these Johannine bread passages and the communion table, it still bears one more serving this Sunday.

Jesus offers the bread of life, and many turn away. When the twelve are confronted about whether they too wish to desert Jesus, Peter replies, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Peter puts to words that which our minds cannot comprehend but our hearts by faith know well: Jesus is the way to life and life abundant. Jesus is the Word who gives us the words that we may know life. Jesus the Word is the bread at our table--his body renewing and sustaining our weary bodies, salvation for our souls. The grace offered in the Word and in the sacraments is abundant, radical, and open to all; even so, the call to commitment spoken through the Word and sealed in the sacraments is an all-consuming one. This life offered will demand of us our lives.

Here may well be the place that the crumbs of this Sunday’s readings come together. They are an invitation to know life through Christ and they are a charge to a life of commitment. Who else could we serve, how else can we persevere, and where else can we go but to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God?

Blake Scalet

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 1, 2024

Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 6–9

Psalm 15

James 1:17–27

Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

“People will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’”

I’m writing this reflection mere days after Donald Trump was found guilty of 34 felony charges. My writing will be published in the same month as both his sentencing and (only a few days later) the Republican National Convention. If you preach according to the RCL, then this sermon will land barely a month before the presidential election.

You know your own preaching contexts better than

anyone else, but I will find it hard not to at least mention these things in my own.

As a nation, at least politically, we are not currently “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger,” as the text from James would encourage us (James 1:19). Rather, we seem quite obsessed with the law, with rules and regulations as interpreted by [insert your favorite cable news talking head]. We are not ones—at the moment, anyway—to “bridle our tongues” as James suggests, which seems to call into question the worth of our religion (James 1:26).

And yet. If that which comes out of us is that with the potential to defile (Mark 7:15), then that which comes out of us also has the potential to be about the co-creation of the kingdom of God, does it not?

What a hinge-point this feels like in the church—no one has to be here, for one thing. It’s no longer socially unacceptable to be atheist or agnostic, or simply to sleep in on Sunday morning. The people in our pews are making a choice; they are there of their own volition. How, then, shall we encourage them this week?

How should we invite them to talk with their adult siblings, the ones who disagree about their parents’ long-term care?

How should we invite them to interact with their next-door neighbor, the one whose campaign yard sign they find abhorrent?

How should we invite them to discern the next steps in their own lives—for school, for work, for relationship?

How should we invite them to consider questions of their own health and well-being—the daily choices they make, the wills and medical forms and estate planning they have yet to come to terms with?

And what of the children in the midst of all of this? I often wonder what this childhood must be like, when so much of what they hear coming out of people’s mouths is such garbage.

How will we talk with them during the children’s sermon, on the steps of the chancel? Would it benefit the grown-ups at least as much as the kids to reflect on these texts alongside the schoolyard taunt “sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” assuming, of course, that you discuss together the ways in which words can sting more than any stick or stone?

“Surely this community of faith is a wise and discerning people!”

Would that this were the goal for every congregation—to be known by our neighbors as a wise and discerning people, more eager to listen than to speak, open to hearing new ways of thinking, taking up each weighty decision as if it were actually up for real consideration, and not just decided by some ideological foregone conclusion!

I wonder what that would even look like—neighborhood listening sessions, perhaps, forums making space for those without communal spaces of their own, meals shared among people who might never eat together otherwise, elders who make space for the inherent understanding of young people, and young ones eager to listen to the experience of those who have asked similar questions for decades.

No such things are being fostered right now in the national discourse. And while it’s easy to get sucked in to all that, it’s not where God is calling us.

Blessings, then, as you invite your people into so much more.

Andrea Roske-Mercalfe

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 8, 2024

Isaiah 35:4–7a

Psalm 146

James 2:1–10, (11–13), 14–17

Mark 7:24–37

Engaging the Gospel for Preaching

I’ve preached risky sermons before, but a sermon on this particular Gospel text is the only one to ever result in the possibility of hiring private security for my family. This is not to say you should avoid it; quite the contrary, at least in my opinion. It’s merely to say that people have all kinds of feelings about Jesus and women, especially if you tell them that Jesus was wrong and a woman is the one who told him so.

But isn’t that the power of this text? If we, as Christians, believe that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, then what’s our hangup in considering the possibility that he made mistakes from time to time?

It’s nice to have a fully divine Jesus to be my savior, but at the end of the day what I really need is a fully human Jesus I can relate to. I have screwed up—in big ways and small. I will screw up again—in big ways and small. I need a fully human Jesus who knows what it is to screw up—in big ways and small. Who knows what it is to pause and say, “Wow, I was way off there. What do I do now?” and who models humility in his next steps. Who changes course rather than doubling down, even—no, *especially*—when someone considered several rungs down from him on the social ladder is the one who calls him out?

She does so in glorious fashion, doesn’t she? She isn’t showy about it. She doesn’t get angry when he calls her a dog (or worse, most likely). She receives his insult, takes a beat to sit with it, and then hands it right back to him, repackaged.

“Yes, but even the dogs...”

She could’ve walked away, we would forgive her for that. She could’ve told him off, but her daughter hangs in the balance. Instead, she practices the art of improv—the “yes/and” is what gets Jesus to stop and think about what she’s saying, rather than dismissing her out of hand.

Most of our parishioners likely have an understanding of Jesus as one who never screwed up, which means they have an understanding of him as one who never had to change his mind. How much more powerful might he be, then—especially for this particular moment in the church, in the country, in the world—if we offered them Jesus as a model of humility? As a model of stopping to reassess his assumptions about an entire group of people? This story holds power for me not in spite of the fact that Jesus is wrong, but rather because of it.

Likewise, the Syrophenician woman is a model of courage under fire. I will admit wishing she didn’t have to be, but her composure is what makes Jesus’ change of heart possible, I think. How often are we quick to write off those who dismiss or underestimate us? It will never be our job to contort ourselves to fit their assumptions, but when we have the energy for it, we can show up in ways that make room for the kind of transformation that happens for Jesus in this story.

This story is full of tension.

I wonder what kind of tensions our parishioners are living with right now, in their own homes...in their own extended family systems...in their own bodies. I wonder what kinds of tensions exist in our own congregations—the push and pull of old traditions vs. new ideas, this type of worship music vs. that other one over there, this response to the community crisis that would allow for more safety vs. the one over there that requires an uncomfortable level of vulnerability.

I wonder how many of our congregations understand getting it wrong as a part of showing up in the world, how many of them are willing to take risks on what’s regular, willing to try new things without any guarantee of success.

I wonder what kind of freedom this story might offer—to us as preachers, to our parishioners, as people, to our communities of faith, doing their imperfect but level best to bring about God’s kingdom.

It’s a tricky one, for sure. It could even be dangerous! But I think it’s worth it, just the same.

Andrea Roske-Metcalf

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost September 15, 2024

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 116:1–9

James 3:1–12

Mark 8:27–38

Engaging the Texts

Reading through these texts I was struck by how they begin to draw in my whole self—voice, eyes, feet, tongue, back, mind, mouth. As I listen to students on a university campus and to my adult children, I hear the yearning for religious rituals/worship/preaching in which we can be fully alive in our bodies. In the readings, it is clear that God is embodied/incarnate. Do we too quickly dismiss those images as being anthropomorphic rather than descriptions of God’s intimate, incarnational engagement in our lives, communities of faith, and world? Najeeba Sayeed, El Hibri chair and executive director of the Augsburg University Interfaith Institute, talks about embodied religious pluralism as a way to experience, explore and express our religious diversity. Although I did not develop this theme in my pastoral reflections that follow, I hope that you are finding creative ways for the rich understanding and creative experiences of being fully alive in our bodies—embodiment—to inform your life of faith, your ministry and your proclaiming and embodying the incarnational gospel.

Pastoral Reflections: Mark 8:27-38

“Questions for followers of Jesus as we are on the way”

It was on the way to Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his disciples two questions that led to a troubling and transforming conversation. “Who do people say that I am?” “But who do you say that I am?”

On this Sunday you will be preaching in person and virtually to people who are on their way. Your proclamation will interrupt them on their way, inviting them to ponder and respond to Jesus’ questions and those questions that emerge from them. Therefore, I think this is a sermon in which inviting the congregation to engage in conversation with one another is essential. For if in our worship spaces—sanctuaries—we do not practice and struggle with one another as we form our responses to these questions, how will we have the courage to share the gospel with others and live into its transformative implications for our personal and communal lives?

- 1) **“Who do people say that I am?”** Ask your hearers to share with someone how they hear Jesus being described—if at all—in their families and communities, in media and political campaigns.
- 2) **“Who do you say that I am?”** Peter responded “You

are the Messiah”. Invite worshipers to share with someone their response—who is Jesus for you? To Peter’s seemingly appropriate answer Jesus gave a bewildering response. “Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.” (Sometimes I wonder if this is the only verse in scripture still taken literally by many who identify as Christian.) Why would Jesus order silence? Because Peter did not understand that declaring who Jesus is—the Messiah—cannot be separated from what Jesus does. Jesus instructed the disciples, and us, that for Jesus to be the Messiah, the Anointed One, it will mean great suffering, rejection, being killed and rising again. The Messiah will be put to death on a cross—the Roman Empire’s deadliest punishment for those deemed a threat to the Empire. Peter wanted nothing to do with such a Messiah. Do we?

- 3) **“Jesus said all this quite openly.” What is the “this” that we as the church, followers of Jesus, are saying quite openly these days?** Ask worshipers to imagine how family members, neighbors, co-workers, the wider society might answer the question about what they hear the Church, followers of Jesus, saying quite openly today. Edwin Searcy wrote

“The cruciform pattern of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday provides the coherent narrative that is rehearsed in sermon, in liturgy, and in all aspects of the congregation’s life together. This movement from aching loss (Friday) through forsaken absence (Saturday) to astonishing newness (Sunday) stands in stark contrast to the dominant figural narratives provided by a culture of satiation and self-reliant success.”⁸

- 4) **Is this the cruciform gospel people hear us proclaiming and embodying quite openly?** Or is it the rebuking coming from those who evidently see no conflict between being a follower of Jesus and rebuking people because of who they are, whom they love, their immigration status? The rebuking between Peter and Jesus occurred “aside” in the context of their relationship and with the other disciples. Is there a place for rebuking in our lives, communities of faith and public witness?
- 5) **What is so disrupting and dislocating about Jesus’ words to us as we are on our way?** Are they disrupting because Jesus is absolutely clear that to follow Jesus on the way of the cross will cost us everything—our

assets and self-serving aspirations, our preoccupation with consuming and preserving privilege. God’s love in Christ lives in us and through us as justice making, creation honoring, peace building, neighbor serving, self-respecting love. It is dislocating because following Jesus necessitates displacement. Those who are marginalized, oppressed, forced to flee because of war, famine and our climate crises become the center, the locus for our participation in God’s work of liberation, restoration and reconciliation.

With the impending U.S. elections a compelling case can be made for the preacher to deconstruct and rebuke Christian Nationalism using the Mark 8 reading.

Mark S. Hanson

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 22, 2024

Jeremiah 11:18–20

Psalms 54

James 3:13–4:3, 7–8a

Mark 9:30–37

Engaging the Texts

These four readings are addressed to audiences living with intensely adversarial relationships. Their conflicts—political, ecclesial, social, political—have mirror reflections in our day. “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?” (James 3:13) The readings locate the experience of conflict in the audience’s relationship to God. In some way God is involved, not removed, though not necessarily the cause of or partisan in them. The disputes are in the presence of God (“*coram deo*”) who is attentive and engaged. They would be different if God were disinterested, detached.

What gets transformed by virtue of God’s presence? The plea then and often now is for God to change the situation. “Let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause” (Jer 11:20). “God will repay my enemies for their evil. In your faithfulness put an end to them” (Ps. 54:5).

What is transformed by virtue of God’s engagement are the people—us!! The “first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:18). God’s vindication and deliverance do not always conform to human expectations or pleas. Just witness the disciples’ inability to accept what Jesus told them a second time. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him,

8. *The Gospel and Our Culture Network*, vol.15, nos.1 and 2, 2003.

and three days after being killed, he will rise again” (Mark 9:31).

God is faithful (Ps. 54:5) and on account of God’s faithfulness, human beings can entrust themselves to God (Jer 11:20), draw near and submit (James 4:7-8). God is in the midst of it all, even its betrayal and death, bringing new life in Christ into being. In this new creation those deemed unworthy and excluded (i.e., children in Jesus’ day) have a place of honor and welcome (Mark 9:35-37). The Good News is the “wisdom from above” that God enacts in Christ is “full of mercy and good fruits...a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17-18).

Pastoral Reflections

“Bitter fruits or a harvest of righteousness sown in peace?”

We know the realities of scheming, conflicts, disputes, and resentments. It is tempting to echo Jeremiah’s prayer, “Let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.” We hear calls for revenge like that of the psalmist today. In times of discord and division, where anger and resentments yield bitter fruit, it is tempting to think of God as absent, that we live in a spiritual desert, a moral wasteland.

There is good news this day. God is not absent. God has not forgotten God’s promises nor forsaken God’s people or God’s creation. It is in contexts such as ours that God chose to be present in Jesus. Jesus did not succumb to cries for revenge and retribution. In the midst of the hatred of powerful adversaries, the threat of judgment and death, in the midst of ridicule, betrayal, pain, and crucifixion, Jesus was sowing seeds for “a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18).

Jesus sowed those seeds when Jesus took a child in his arms, a child without status or worth, and said “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” Jesus sowed the seeds of a harvest of righteousness when he spoke in defense of the despised, sat at table with those deemed unworthy, healed those regarded as untouchable. Jesus sowed those seeds when from the cross he prayed “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Into Jesus’ death and resurrection we are baptized, marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever. We are sent in the power of the Holy Spirit with the promise of the gospel to sow seeds in peace for a harvest of righteousness. “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” Jonathan Strandjord, a former colleague, said wisdom usually comes in one of two flavors—the wisdom we seek in order to satisfy our cravings or wisdom to reduce our pain and suffering. Neither are wrong but they are not the wisdom described in James. For the wisdom borne of the Spirit takes us out of our preoccupation with ourselves and places us before the neighbor making us

“other-wise”. As followers of Jesus the neighbor with whom we stand will be the one feared, despised, kept out, oppressed. We will not “other” that neighbor but together build communities of restorative justice, equity and peace.

In a sermon “Peace as Rest and as Movement” Joseph Sittler wrote, “The peace of God as rest in God’s acceptance of humanity is not a knowledge the world can deliver, is not in fact concerned with the world at all. But this same peace matures to turn upon the world with a deep constructive joy, knows that the peaceless world is precisely the place for working out God’s will for truth, justice, purity and beauty.”

Mark S. Hanson

[My gratitude to my former colleague Dr. Marcus Kuns for his insightful unpublished reflections on these readings.]

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 29, 2024

Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29

Psalm 19:7–14

James 5:13–20

Mark 9:38–50

Pastoral Reflections and Engaging the Texts

The first time I remember hearing a pastor preach on the dynamic duo of Eldad and Medad from the book of Numbers was at St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. That congregation was moving through the process of calling Anita Hill “extraordinarily” to serve as one of their pastors as an out gay and partnered woman. It was a powerful sermon that highlighted how the spirit moves and

9. Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth* (Fortress Press, 1964), 39.

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calls people who may not fit the mold or expectations of some who claim authority. That day the sermon was a challenge to the larger church as it struggled to see how God might be at work outside the *Vision and Expectations* document that had been assembled by a group of church leaders. Could we imagine God's spirit moving to call church leaders in new ways beyond parameters that had been put in place?

This sermon resonated as I reflected on my own upbringing in a small town in west-central Minnesota, where, as I was preparing to enter confirmation, the congregation called a husband and wife clergy team to serve our four-point parish. Pastor Rachel would be one of the first few women to serve in the synod. There were skeptics in our congregation who weren't sure of calling a "woman pastor." Yet, it became clear in short order that Pastor Rachel was gifted in the pulpit, skilled in teaching, and a caring presence within the community. There was no doubt that the spirit had called her into ministry, and she embodied a passion for God and God's people.

In today's first lesson, the people of Israel were grumbling in the wilderness. There wasn't enough food, the way was hard, the world wasn't what they imagined when they set out from Egypt. Today there is grumbling. There aren't enough rostered leaders, COVID-19 has ruined things, sports and extracurriculars interfere with Sunday mornings and Wednesday confirmation, life used to be so much easier. We can come up with a litany about why things aren't working; we can be like Moses who throws his hands up to God and reminds God that he didn't choose to be the leader and that God needs to know these people are God's people...not HIS!

The reality is that complaining, finger-pointing, or even trying to hand it all back to God isn't the answer. The answer lies in sharing leadership, collaboration, and allowing the spirit to lead and equip people (even those we may not expect or select on our own). The spirit breaks down who "the other" is and changes a community to meet the new circumstances and needs.

Even the names Eldad and Medad call us back into relationship with God and community with one another. In Hebrew Eldad means, "God is my father's brother," and Medad means "(one who is) of my father's brother." The spirit rests on two who might be thought of as "God's nephew" and as "a child of God." They are not outsiders, but relatives and intimately connected with the Holy One of Israel. As part of God's family, are not all called to serve?

The gospel picks up this thread as Jesus' followers are worked up about others performing miracles in Jesus' name. The approach Jesus takes is one of inclusion, expanding ministry, and seeing God at work in others who are on the periphery. It is a vision of building up those who are still learning (the little ones), of connecting them to a larger

ministry, and creating a space for new possibilities. God works outside the expectations of the disciples; God continues to work through people we may not anticipate.

I was serving as pastor of a very progressive church in south Minneapolis, when unexpected visitors came by. Two church leaders from a more fundamentalist evangelical tradition showed up at my door. They wanted to talk, to get to know about our church and about me as a pastor. I was busy, I was annoyed to be "wasting" my time with people who clearly were in a very different place theologically. Yet I sat and listened, we conversed and ultimately had a really good time talking. At the end they asked if they could pray for me and the congregation. To this day I still get goosebumps thinking about this prayer. It was heartfelt, sincere, and a word of strength and encouragement for each of us and our calls to ministry.

The prayer was not about theology (or theological differences), it was not about where we stood socially or politically, rather it was a prayer that God continue to call and equip God's people and send them into the world to love and to serve. I had been so ready to brush off others who weren't in "my camp." Yet somehow the Spirit moved me... moved them...and called us beyond our comfort zones into new possibilities.

Have flavor and fullness in what you do, and be at peace with one another. The texts for today invite us to reflect on the ways the Spirit is at work around us and within us, and how this same Spirit is at work in and through others. It is a charge and a hope that all might come to be prophets, healers, and a people filled with a taste of the expansive vision of what God is doing in ways we've not yet imagined.

Brad Froslee

St. Michael and All Angels September 29, 2024

Daniel 10:10–14, 12:1–3

Psalm 103:1–5, 20–22

Revelation 12:7–12

Luke 10:17–20

What reasons might a preacher need to abandon the assigned lectionary text in favor of centering on a "lesser" festival of the church? As a pastor of St. Michael's Lutheran Church, the invitation to celebrate St. Michael and All Angels (or Michaelmas) is always enticing. But even in our congregation named after the archangel, there is uncertainty on what this day means. In all honesty, we don't spend much time dwelling on the mystery of angelic beings, and Satan

and demons aren't often the topic of choice in the pulpit or Bible studies. Perhaps this engrained hesitancy that I sense in other progressive-leaning congregations is the primary reason to bring this lesser known festival to the forefront and engage in these texts!

The Feast of St. Michael and All Angels seldom falls on a Sunday, so for this year that may be reason number two to take up these texts. The opportunity won't strike again until 2030, so why not make something out of this year's calendar coincidence? Additionally, interrupting the typically scheduled congregational programming at this point in fall could spark creative opportunities for worship, fellowship, and faith formation as we head into the autumn months. (Reason number three!) Take some inspiration from Waldorf Schools, a non-religiously affiliated network of schools that celebrate this feast day every year with an all-grades play, highlighting the values and lessons the feast day holds:

The Michaelmas play depicts a terrifying and destructive dragon that is tamed by the people of a town who look to St. Michael for guidance and courage. This story is relatable to all people—we all face difficulties in life, both internal and external, and somehow we must find the courage and strength to prevail. We celebrate Michaelmas in the Waldorf tradition to remind ourselves of this universal truth.¹⁰

Any universal truths of Michaelmas that the children of Waldorf schools are able to find are buried under the complex scripture passages assigned for this day. There is enough in any of the assigned readings to work through: a preacher could dive deep into the visions and prophecy from Daniel, play with the Psalm's defining words of God's angels, unpack the rich metaphor of Revelation, or attempt to expound on Jesus' words of Satan and spirits in Luke. The most convincing reason *not* to celebrate St. Michael and All Angels are the texts themselves; they demand a level of engagement and carefulness that is not easily achieved in a single sermon. An option is to focus in worship on one of the texts, and allow it to be in conversation with the feast day itself.

St. Michael and All Angels is a day for us to remember God's faithful protection over people, and the ways in which that protection is necessary for us. Take time to reflect on and name the forces that are in play in your context or community that are death-dealing, and what God's protection looks like and feels like. Dig up some congregational history through the lens of St. Michael and All Angels, and share stories of how God guided and guarded the congregation in the past, and promises to do so in the future. Michaelmas falls just

after the autumnal equinox, offering a seasonal reminder that as we enter many months of shadows and cold (for those of us in the North), God's heavenly hosts shield us from the long nights of winter. For preachers in the United States, it also falls just before another contentious and crucial election season. It would be a very powerful time to recognize the forces that are against the Kingdom of God, to commit to standing against them, and to see ourselves under the wing of God's protection. (This, I believe, is the most important reason of all to celebrate this feast day.)

When you enter the doors of our congregation, a large painting of how one artist imagined St. Michael looms in the corner of the narthex, a nod to our namesake. Despite the logos on the bulletin and the large lettering on the building, I am often asked who the figure is and why it greets them every week—its wings, sword, and chilling glare evoke all sorts of questions from people of every age. I tell them that we are named after one of God's messengers, the protector, who guards the hurting and vulnerable from evil. For adults, this sparks all sorts of good questions, many of which don't have easy answers—and that unsettles them. Do they want to attend a church named for a supernatural being they cannot comprehend? But I don't have to say much more to the children who inquire about this painting, for they seem to understand intuitively that everyone needs a protector, and at times that protection comes from beyond our understanding.

“We all face difficulties in life, both internal and external, and somehow we must find the courage and strength to prevail.”

Ali Ferin



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10. <https://www.waldorfnola.org/post/what-is-michaelmas-and-why-do-waldorf-school-celebrate-it>