Preaching Helps

October through December 2024: Pentecost, Advent, and Christmas

"Mind the Gap"

This issue of Preaching Helps takes us from the first Sunday in October through the last Sunday in December, from Ordinary Time to Advent and the beginning of a new Church Year. We will mark Reformation and All Saints Sundays, and a non-liturgical day, November 5, the election of the president of the United States. No matter what biblical texts are appointed for October and early November, that non-liturgical day will hover over the preacher and the congregation. How do we preach on these Sundays leading up to the election? There are some preachers who will endorse particular candidates by name. Others will refuse to name names, believing such partisan support betrays the separation of church and state. Still other preachers will describe the consequences of electing certain candidates without saying their names (but making clear whose names would fill in the blank).

I'm grateful to a preacher I heard this summer for urging me to "mind the gap." Elaine Hewes is an ELCA pastor serving St. Brendan the Navigator Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine. She is a regular writer for "Preaching Helps" and often infuses her sermons with her poetic gifts. Her sermon preached this past July recalls a sermon she heard in Berlin earlier this year on the anniversary of the Barmen Declaration.[1] I share portions of that sermon here:

> The Sunday Michael and I attended worship in Berlin was the 90th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, and so the Bishop of the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Bishop Christian Staeblein gave the sermon…in German, of course…which means neither Michael nor I could understand a word of what he said.
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> But we listened anyway, and as Bishop Staeblein's sermon went on, I kept hearing something that sounded to my ears very much like the English phrase, "mind the gap," which is the phrase used in the UK to warn rail passengers to take caution while crossing the spatial gap between the train doorway and the station platform edge…
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> Again and again in Bishop Staeblein's sermon I kept hearing what sounded like "mind the gap," and so, when worship was over, I asked my German Lutheran pastor friend Christiane, who was with us that morning, what the German word was that the bishop kept using in his sermon that sounded like the English phrase, "mind the gap," and she laughed, and said it wasn't a German word at all, but was exactly what I thought I had heard, in English.
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> A warning, my friend said, issued by Bishop Christian Staeblein in this day, to those of us who profess to be Christian, to "mind the gap" between the faith we profess and the allegiances and the decisions we make…Recalling the way the "German Christians" in the 1930's so easily accommodated their faith to Hitler's agenda. Bishop Staeblein was cautioning all those in worship that morning, some 90 years later, to be mindful of the gap that can so easily form between the faith we claim to be central to our lives and the accommodations we make to the cultural and political forces around us…Sometimes even using the images, language and teachings of our faith tradition to further the cause of those same cultural and political forces…
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> As my friend explained to us after worship, Bishop Staeblein was indeed using the English phrase, "mind the gap" to caution all of us that morning to pay attention, "because," as he warned, "we have seen what can happen when we don't."

Bishop Staeblein was speaking in Berlin to people who had known the horror of Nazism in their own country. They had indeed seen "what can happen" if we don't mind the gap in our own lives and in the life of our country. While our country is different from Germany, "Mind the Gap" could be a worthy theme for the Sundays leading up to the election. We can pay attention to "the gap that can so easily form between the faith we claim to be central to our lives and the accommodations we make to the cultural and political forces around us." This gap is present in each of our lives—it's not out there somewhere, but in here where we each make decisions. But this gap is also "out there" in the public space where elections happen.

As Christian people, it is possible to "mind the gaps" between the faith we profess and the values of political

1. The Barmen Declaration was written by Reformed theologian Karl Barth and Lutheran pastor Hans Asmussen and adopted in 1934. After Nazis seized power, Protestant Christians faced pressure to expel Jewish Christians from the ordained ministry and adopt the Nazi "Führer Principle" as the organizing principle of church government. The pro-Nazi "German Christian" movement glorified Adolf Hitler as a "German prophet" and preached that racial consciousness was a source of revelation alongside the Bible. At Barmen, this emerging "Confessing Church" adopted a declaration of resistance that expressly repudiated the claim that other powers apart from Christ could be sources of God's revelation.

platforms and candidates. As preachers we can lift up the central teachings and values of our faith—almost as confirmation teachers reminding people what we profess to be true. We can remind people of the promises in the service of Holy Baptism (ELW p. 227) and Affirmation of Baptism (ELW p. 234).

The lectionary readings for the season can remind people of core biblical values and teachings. When we hear these readings, where are the gaps in our own lives? What gaps do we see between these teachings and the political positions of candidates? What does Jesus say about divorce, about children, about wealth, about seeking places of honor, about truth? Of course, some people in the congregation will find "minding the gap" to be too political. I turn to the end of Pastor Hewes' sermon to say a word about that:

> I know there is an unwritten rule in the Church that says, "Thou shalt not speak of politics." And if that means "Thou shalt not preference Democrats over Republicans or Red States over Blue States, I totally agree…
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> But if speaking truth to power is political, then Jesus was political. If advocating for the marginalized and the disenfranchised was political, then Jesus was political. If challenging the leadership in both religious and civic life was political, then Jesus was political. If insisting that all people, no matter their ethnic background, their sexual orientation, their religious beliefs, or their skin color are worthy of respect and dignity, then Jesus was political.
>
> It's just that he wasn't partisan. He didn't hitch his star to any political party, but invited everyone to the table, and there, fed them all, and then said, "Now let me tell you about the kingdom, the kin-dom of God. Let me tell you about the dream, the vision of God.
>
> "And then, let me tell you how you might share this dream and live this dream in a world that won't take to it kindly. Let me tell you how you might be sustained for the work that has a cruciform shape, as you go down into the complexities, the ambiguities, and the animosities of the day with your hands, your eyes, and your heart wide open…"
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> This is the invitation extended to us every day of our lives…in the context of our family, our community, our nation, and our world…The invitation to participate in the unfolding of the kingdom of God, where a shepherd king is Lord and where compassion is at the heart of it all.
>
> Compassion—just as he has for us—even as we acknowledge the gap that keeps showing up between the faith we profess and the allegiances and decisions we make in our everyday lives…Even there, in the gap, Jesus extends the love of God, and says, "Fear not. I have called you by name. You are mine…Now follow me."
>
> May we do so, dear ones. Gaps and all. May we follow Jesus into the suffering, the darkness, and the hatred brewing all around us in this fragile, beautiful world, and may we bear the love of God as best we can as if the world depends upon it, because, as I so often say, it does.

As always, I am grateful to writers of "Preaching Helps" who volunteer their time and wisdom to comment on the lectionary texts. Writers for this issue include pastors from California to New Jersey, with many stops in between. **Erik Christensen** is Pastor to the Community and Director of Worship at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago (LSTC). Before coming to LSTC, Erik was pastor with St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Logan Square in Chicago. After ten years of intentional redevelopment, the congregation sold its century-old building and relocated to a nearby storefront where they are enjoying new growth and vitality. Erik is a frequent contributor to *Sundays and Seasons* and has written for *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (2012) and *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (2015). He lives in Chicago with his husband, Kerry. Much to her surprise, **Christa M. Compton** (she/her) celebrates eleven years of ordination this year. The first chapters of her professional life were spent in a high school English classroom in South Carolina, where she was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year, and in classrooms at Stanford University, where she earned a PhD from the School of Education in 2007. Christa currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey, where she delights in bringing together people across generations to worship, pray, sing, learn, serve, and play. You will often find her borrowing an unrealistic number of books from her local library, writing poetry, and cheering for her beloved Virginia Cavaliers (especially during basketball season). **Amanda Gerken-Nelson** currently serves as Priest- in-Charge at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in Yarmouth, Maine. She lives in Portland, Maine with her wife and son. Both where she resides and the location of her church are on the unceded territory of the Wabanaki Confederacy, specifically the lands of the Abenaki and Aucocisco tribes. **Sarah Trone Garriott** 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 and create digital storytelling projects about their own faith (see www.iowainterfaithexchange.com for more about the camp). She serves as Iowa State Senator for District 14 (Waukee, Adel, Van Meter, and the Dallas County portions of Clive and West Des Moines).

Justin Lind-Ayres serves as the co-pastor at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Previously he was chaplain at Augsburg University and Luther Seminary. His recent book, *Eye on the Magi,* is an Advent devotional for families illustrated by his sister, Krista Schrock. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John's book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C* is now available, along with Years A and B. (Editor's note: these three books are wonderful resources for preachers.) John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Miriam Samuelson-Roberts** is senior pastor at Christ Church Lutheran in south Minneapolis and co-host of the podcast Alter Guild. She graduated from Yale Divinity School and is a member of Proclaim, a group for LGBTQIA rostered leaders in the ELCA. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband, Daniel, and their children, Esther and Elijah. **Bradley Schmeling** serves as one of the pastors at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota. A graduate of Ohio University and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, he also studied at Emory University in ritual studies and pastoral care. He served congregations in Columbus, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia, and worked in the religious life office at Emory. Living in Minneapolis with his pastor husband, they are doing their best to be aging gay guys who have a life outside work.

Blessings on your preaching during this challenging liturgical and non-liturgical season.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Pentecost 20
October 6, 2024

Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Walter Brueggemann provides a summary of Gen 2:18-24 that serves as a helpful guide for the exploration of all these texts. "The place of the garden is for this covenanted human community of solidarity, trust, and well-being."[2] Each of these texts suffers from both patriarchal and heterosexist assumptions, as well as a long interpretation history that makes matters even worse. The preacher may have to decide whether they can be recovered for a gospel sermon. Can they be the ground for some hermeneutical playfulness or do they, for the sake of the gospel, simply need to be rejected? Will the sermon be an experience of "solidarity, trust, and well-being?"

Genesis 2 is part of the second creation story, the older narrative, that feels as if it has been told for generations around the fire, storytellers relishing the wonderful details. Adam sits in the garden being presented with each animal. "Will this one work?" God asks. None of them, porcupines or penguins, bears or bumblebees, quite provide what this earth-creature needs. The creature names them, highlighting our human need to be in relationship with the circle of life, but also our propensity to categorize, label, and control. The power to name is significant, and it gets tricky. All the current political strategies around bodies, gender, and who gets to decide what pronouns are "natural" reveal this murky need to dominate. In the story, even though the animals don't "fit," they are part of the circle of relations that make this garden home and help this first creature become human. Eve, the new creation, who stands on her own, is the wonderful conclusion to the story. They are, at last, bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. This is no Disney text, but if it were, at vs. 25 the animals would sing an Oscar-winning song, and the hippos would become the back-up dancers. In human life, finding who we are and who we are meant to be is great joy for the whole creation.

Of course, there is danger that surrounds them, and all will soon not go well, but these verses may be best understood if we can capture the wonder of these two beautiful creations, fully alive as part of the circle of life. Let's be clear, too, that the wonder of this text does not require the resolution of

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982), 47.

binary gender in "one flesh." It's another wonder and delight to discover that the one flesh is a "they." It is astonishing to experience human relationship as one location for the revelation of God's YES to creation. We all yearn to live our lives in a community that is bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh. We long to be fully human.

A friend once gave me advice about finding a husband, "If he makes you grow into your higher and better self, then he is the one." He forgot to tell me that he would also bring out the very worst. How often we discover that our relationships, which once held so much promise, are never all we need. Marriage ends in divorce. Friendships break. Communities and families are torn apart by division, hatred, and cruelty that is sanctioned. As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem in Mark, he gives witness to the radical ethic of God's commonwealth. It's important to note that the Pharisees are not looking to explore marriage as a place of blessing and pain. They are not interested in how the commonwealth of God might give shape to marriages that are breaking. They want to destroy the witness he is carrying in his body.

Since they are not interested in the real reasons for divorce, it's important for us not to make a new rule about divorce from this exchange. It's also not an argument that can be used in the twenty-first century to limit how humans make and form bonds. If anything, Jesus is saying, "Of course, human beings were made for relationship, but you're missing the whole point." The problem of brokenness is not settled by an exploration of the rules and not by legislating morality.

Jesus does engage the question in interesting ways. He grants women the same rights as men when it comes to divorce. What strikes me as unique, however, is that he takes seriously the spouse that has been left behind. He recognizes that what is new for one is often a betrayal for the other. He considers the most vulnerable one in this new triad. We may not be able to make a new rule about marriage and re-marriage from this text, but perhaps we can say that in God's commonwealth, the experience of the most vulnerable shapes the conversation for how to go forward. The voice of the least carries more weight than the voice of the greatest.

Perhaps this deep vulnerability that occurs in the breaking of marriage connects the text about marriage with the text about children. Jesus takes into his arms the most vulnerable, the ones with no rights, the ones least able to shape their future, and suggests that these are examples of God's reign. If we are to draw conclusions about human relationships from these texts, it is the child, or the most vulnerable in our society, that must lead us. Truly, if we are not able to embrace these little ones, we cannot understand how to be fully human.

At first glance, the Hebrews text, as does much of the book, seems far from the concrete historical Jesus. This text reads more like liturgy. The Markan image of Jesus sitting with the children in his arms could serve as an icon for the Christ in Hebrews. The God who spoke through the prophets, now speaks through this one, who though a little lower than the angels, chooses to sit with the suffering. Perhaps we need Jesus with the children for the grand cosmology of Hebrews to ring true. The "reflection of God's glory" is made "perfect in suffering." The writer of Hebrews, in allowing us to see behind the cosmic screen, makes a connection between the wonder of that first creation in the garden and the messy world of children and divorce. The High Priest is the one who welcomes children; who delights in the wonder of human life; who binds up the broken, in marriages and in all things; who asks us how we would like to name ourselves; who allows each to step into the presence of the assembly and be fully human. At which point, the great high priest says, "I will proclaim and delight in that name. This, indeed, is the glory that I seek."

Bradley E. Schmeling

Pentecost 21
October 13, 2024

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12-17
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

In my parish, the pandemic changed the collection of the offering. With so many people shifting to online forms of giving, the plate went from row to row, often for long stretches, with not a single coin or numbered offering envelope. An empty plate passed from one hand to the next didn't feel like the joyful response to the good news that worship intends it to be. The ushers felt deflated. The stewardship team worried that it wouldn't inspire greater giving. The pragmatic folks, who see the offering as the primary way of paying the bills, wondered if it was just an empty ritual. Some congregations have abandoned the offering altogether, but the texts appointed for this Sunday make me wonder if feeling uncomfortable, particularly where money is involved, is an essential part of being faithful in North America. To be clear, I'm writing as a white male, who has had immense privilege in this culture, one who understands the dilemma of the rich man.

In liturgical theology, worship is our practice for living in the reign of God. The offering brings our money out of our pocket and into the reign of God. Grappling with money, wealth, and privilege, all of which cannot be separated from rampant consumption and our history of conquest, violence, and the enslavement of African peoples, should be brought

into the light of law and gospel. None of us put all we own in the plate, and our congregations aren't giving it all to the poor, usually not even a significant percentage. Even the most generous gift doesn't erase our complicity or restructure the economy. What's more, the earth is dying because of the way we're living. By eliminating wealth from the work of God's people, we're strategically denying our complicity in wealth, or, at some level, we are aware that our "plate," our use of money, in the light of resurrection, looks empty. We begin to feel the despair of the rich man, and we don't like that.

However, preaching alongside Amos and Jesus together means that walking away is too easy. Faith and money, and how they fit together, must be part of the ongoing dialogue between the community and Jesus. In Mark, the conversation with the rich man comes in an extended teaching on what it means to be greatest or least. Wealth is one more "kingdom" of consideration.

We likely don't jump into this consideration because the problem is massive, complex, ambiguous, and these days turns into partisan politics so quickly. Many of us are also trained by advertisers to believe we're not wealthy. As "consumers" we don't have enough. And truthfully, even doing something often feels inconsequential. My little compost bucket or gift to the denomination's hunger program only seems to treat the symptoms. Besides, we come to church for comfort, not to encounter voices like Amos.

One of the avoidance strategies that developed out of post-Constantinian, Western Christianity, was to move conversations about faith to a consideration of who gets to go to heaven. When Jesus says, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God," the American ear hears "How hard it will be for the rich one to get into heaven." Wanting comfort or easier answers, we walk away from the world as it is and locate our faith in the sky.

What if we reimagine this scene? The man comes wanting to discover the magic ticket to get into Jesus' eternal club. Even calling Jesus "good" means that the framework is good vs. bad. To humor him, Jesus lists the classic checklist, the Ten Commandments. However, then, "Jesus looked on him and LOVED him." Jesus takes a new direction, to shatter the framework. With a wry smile and a twinkle in his eye, Jesus goes to the extreme so completely that the man would have to realize that getting in on his own merits, proving it by selling all that he had, was so impossible that the frame of his own question must be wrong. In my imagination, Jesus is trying to refocus the question back to the more central issue, dying and rising, an ongoing experience of being in dialogue with Jesus and the community of faith, not just dying at the end of life. How does being part of the reign of God move us to die to wealth, and all that means in this world, and rise into a new creation? I imagine that Jesus wanted the man to stay right there and keep talking, struggling, learning, growing, transforming. Instead, he does what most of us do. He walks away, unwilling to live in the struggle, and then spends a lifetime wondering deep down if he's part of the thing that can save.

Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that Jesus' resurrection has already changed the game. We've already inherited the reign of God. We're in, and Jesus is inviting us to join him in embodying that reign in real and concrete ways. If we're not afraid of a judgy God, we can be honest about our wealth problem. In the words of Hebrews, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are." The freedom that comes with salvation allows us to engage the struggle, to let discomfort be a sign of faith. Being "on the hook" as the offering plate passes us by could be good for those clamoring at the gate for justice. Granted, none of us will reach the finish line having figured this all out, or gotten it right, or even come close to fixing the problem. To inherit the reign of God is also to inherit all those who yearn to be free, to thrive, to live in peace.

When we look clear-eyed into the realities of all this, it's still easy to despair or be overwhelmed by it all. It seems impossible that justice could come, that the greatest could become the least, that we could give away all we have. Yet, Jesus says, "With God all things are possible." There is hope. In fact, there will be a harvest for those doing this work. There will be a community so large and encompassing that it seems like a new family. There will be moments that are so full of grace that "a hundredfold" is the only way to describe it. With that courage comes our inheritance, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Perhaps Psalm 90 is the prayer, even the offertory prayer, for those who struggle with wealth, those of us on the hook for justice.

> So teach us to number our days
> that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.
>
> Make us glad as many days as you afflicted us
> and as many years as we suffered in [this struggle].
>
> May the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us;
> prosper the work of our hands;
> prosper our handiwork.

Bradley E. Schmeling

Pentecost 22
October 20, 2024

Isaiah 53:4-12
Psalm 91:9-16
Hebrews 5:1-10
Mark 10:35-45

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The text from Isaiah this week is full of the pronoun *he:* "he has borne our infirmities" (vs 4), "he was wounded" (vs. 5), "he was oppressed" (vs 7), etc. At first read, and trying not to immediately assume the Christian interpretation of the text—that the "he" referred to is Jesus—I wondered "who *is* 'he'?" The trials "he" endured and the esteem "his" community had for "him" are impressive. "He" must have represented something great to "his" community. I wonder who it was who inflicted all this hardship on "him" and for what reason? Reading the chapter before today's text, we learn that the "he" to which this text refers is the "servant" introduced in the preceding verses of chapter 52 (Isa 52:13). Chapter 52 introduces this servant with the editorial heading "The Suffering Servant." Though that heading was not part of the Isaiah text itself, it points to a theme that runs through the other texts appointed for this Sunday. We hear the "suffering servant" not only in Isaiah but also in Hebrews and Mark: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:8-9). "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45).

Substitutionary atonement seems to be the message in our texts today and it is not unfamiliar to us as preachers nor to our congregants. The imagery of substitutionary atonement permeates our liturgy, hymns, and prayers. An interpretation that follows such imagery is that we, too, as disciples of Christ are called to suffering servitude for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of God's Kingdom. Suffering for the sake of the gospel is deemed holy; indeed, suffering in general is deemed holy. That this week's pericope includes Psalm 91:9-16 is peculiar: "Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent." I must admit that I felt like the Psalm conveyed the "good news" in this week's readings more than the other texts.

I bristle at substitutionary atonement. Perhaps not so much the atonement theory itself—that Christ died "for you," as the words spoken when the eucharistic meal is shared around the table so clearly articulate—but rather the subsequent interpretations and imagery that accompany this theology, shaping the faith and lives of Christians throughout history. I struggle with the interpretation that I briefly mention above which claims that suffering is holy and must be endured for a holy purpose. As a queer person who has experienced and witnessed great suffering at the hands of institutions—including our church—I cannot claim the suffering I experience as holy; it is evil. As I continue to interrogate my white privilege and learn about the scourge of racism and how scripture and tradition have been used to perpetuate white supremacy in our churches and communities, I cannot claim the suffering my black siblings experience is holy; it is evil. Claiming that suffering is holy and must be endured seems to me a tool of oppression and not theology. Such suffering is something those with power, those who do not experience the oppression of the state, claim to minimize their responsibility to those who are suffering in order to retain power and control. Rather, I take great comfort in the Theology of the Cross: that Jesus knows and is with those who suffer but does not condone their suffering.

I hold these feelings in tension with the knowledge that there have been those who were "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isa 53:5), those whose experience of suffering exposed truths about our communities that needed exposure. When I wondered "who is 'he'?" I actually thought of someone other than Jesus. Today, the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, falls eight days after the anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death on October 12, 1998. Matthew was a young, white, gay student who was beaten, tortured, and left to die on a barbed-wire fence near Laramie, Wyoming. Matthew was murdered because he was gay; homophobia is evil. Matthew's murder ignited a nation-wide conversation on homophobia and the suffering of queer folk in America. His murder has inspired books, movies, and plays with the explicit purpose of educating older and newer generations about the danger of queer-phobia and the importance of acceptance of queer people. Matthew's murder activated his mother and father to create the Matthew Shepard Foundation whose purpose, according to their website[3], is to "amplify the story of Matthew Shepard to inspire individuals, organizations and communities to embrace the dignity and equality of all people." Matthew didn't die *so that* education, understanding, and community transformation could happen. Matthew was murdered because of who he was. He was "wounded for *our* transgressions" of queer-phobia and "crushed for *our* iniquities" of silence and inaction in the face of oppression. Our communities have been transformed by Matthew's story.

Amanda Gerken-Nelson

3. https://www.matthewshepard.org/

Reformation Sunday
October 27, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 46
Romans 3:19-28
John 8:31-36

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Freedom and truth. Perhaps no two words feel more shopworn during an American campaign season than these. We face an extra challenge on this Reformation Sunday, preachers, as we try to dust off these words and give them new life.

Leave it to Jesus to pick two words that we have managed to corrupt in all kinds of ways. Let's start with "truth." Later in the Gospel of John, when Jesus is on trial, Jesus will say that everyone who belongs to the truth listens to his voice. Pontius Pilate responds, "What is truth?"

Pontius Pilate might as well be living in the United States in 2024. What *is* truth? We have lost our hold on what it means, lost our capacity to agree on what things are true and what things are false. Misinformation and conspiracy theories and straight-up lies abound, swirling across our social media platforms and into our earbuds until we don't know how to recognize what is true at all.

Not to mention the lies we tell ourselves: *God could never love me after what I've done.* Or: *I don't need anyone else. I can go it alone.*

And then there's "freedom." We often treat freedom as an individual possession. In its worst form, it means "I can do anything I want, and no one can stop me." We also think about freedom, understandably so, as mostly about what we want to be free *from*—stress, worry, conflict, grief.

Today's readings invite us first to tell the truth about ourselves. There's a version of our confession that begins: *We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves*. That's one way to think about what it means to be a slave to sin. We act in ways that we know are wrong. We hurt ourselves and others even though we know we will regret it. We fail to make the world a safer place for the vulnerable. We make war more easily than we make peace. We are trapped in a cycle of what we've done and left undone. There is some comfort to be found in the reminder from Romans that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We're gripped by sin, but that doesn't make us special.

The reading from Jeremiah gives us another truth. We have a God who keeps promises. Even though God's people have a record of breaking covenants, God is willing to make a new one. God will write the law within us, so that with every heartbeat we are reminded of God's love for us and the commandment to love God and to love our neighbor. It's not just about knowing the Lord intellectually. It's about knowing in our very bones that the Lord is with us in every circumstance, knowing that God will remember our sin no more.

Which brings us to back to freedom. The truth will make us free, Jesus says—by which he points to the truth that God is the One who frees us from sin and death. It is God's forgiveness that frees us from the shame and guilt that paralyze us. It is God's word that holds us fast in times of trouble. It is God, in the words of Psalm 46, who is our refuge and strength, especially in the turmoils of our own making. The present tense of the psalm has a particular power: The Lord of hosts *is* with us; the God of Jacob *is* our stronghold.

When we trust in that truth, we are free indeed. We are free to love and be loved. We are free to rejoice in that gift of grace that we can never deserve but can only hold out our hands to receive. We are free to love and serve others, not because we must live up to some impossible standard, but because we simply can't keep ourselves from sharing God's grace with generosity and joy.

What if we really lived into the freedom that Jesus promises? What if we could set aside our judgments—of ourselves and of each other—and replace those judgments with the assurance that God is with us? When we rest in the promises of God's forgiveness and love, it makes us more forgiving and loving, which is something that the world desperately needs. We need hands that reach out in mercy more than fingers that point in accusation.

When we study Reformation history, I invite our confirmation kids to write some theses for our time. Here's a sample of what they have written:

- The Church should be known for love and acceptance.
- You should not be harmed or abused for believing in a certain religion.
- Faith should never be forced.
- God doesn't discriminate.
- Welcome all who want to come to the Church (*written in rainbow letters*).
- God is with you. God will teach you. Take what you need, not what you want.
- You can't always be perfect. No matter what mistakes you make, God will always forgive you.

Perhaps your parishioners would be willing to write some modern-day theses of their own this year. Maybe those words can be a way of naming truth to each other, a truth that makes us free indeed.

Christa M. Compton

All Saints Sunday
November 3, 2024

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a
John 11:32-44

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

When I was a little girl, Saturday night was hair-washing night. The responsibility fell to my dad, who had the right touch for scrubbing and rinsing our thick curls with minimal drama. He always used Johnson & Johnson's *No More Tears* baby shampoo. But early on, the shampoo's name felt like false advertising. When the suds got in my eyes, there were definitely a few tears.

As an adult, I've often wished for that promise to be fulfilled in all corners of life: *No more tears*. No more people diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses. No more broken relationships. No more sudden, awful deaths. No more tears.

But, of course, that's not how it works. People get sick. Relationships end. People die. Every single person who hears our All Saints sermons will be carrying multiple griefs, some of which they can name and some of which are beyond words. It's worth noting that on this Sunday before Election Day in the United States, there might also be a kind of collective anticipatory grief in the pews. People will be worried about different electoral outcomes and their consequences, vibrating with a fear and anxiety that might produce a few tears. For so many reasons, it's important to have this day in our church year when we are honest about our grief and can hold fast to God's promises in the midst of our tears.

The scripture readings for All Saints are brimming with tears. When Mary kneels at Jesus' feet and berates him for not arriving in time to save her brother, she is weeping. Her friends and neighbors are also weeping. As soon as that community of mourners takes Jesus to see Lazarus' resting place, Jesus, too, begins to weep. The reactions of the crowd to Jesus' tears reflect the contrasts in our own contemporary responses to grief, from viewing tears as a measure of deep love to dismissing tears as something shameful or unearned.

Actor and comedian Rob Delaney has written a book called *A Heart That Works* about his son Henry, who died from a brain tumor at the age of two-and-a-half. Though not particularly religious, Delaney writes about his grief as something both awful and sacred. His unspeakable loss has taught him that we don't get to avoid suffering in this life. When a reporter asks how it helped to understand that we all suffer, Delaney says: "Well, that's the first step…One thing I would say with confidence is that we don't do grief, grief does us. It's going to come through you if someone you love desperately dies, and it's not up to you when it strikes. But if you understand that a storm is coming, and you feel it beginning inside of you, it's a real waste of time to fight it. Let the weather pattern emerge. Cry if you need to."[4]

Let the weather pattern emerge. Cry if you need to. Delaney's honesty is a good fit for All Saints Sunday, as is his metaphor of a rainbow to describe what it is to carry deep grief over time. The color remains, he says, but now there is an extra band of black: "I smile first when I think about Henry. Now, when I hear his name, I feel happy. Is there still grief? Yes, of course. Can I execute my appointed tasks for the day? Yes, I can." Delaney knows the "both/and" experience of living with grief.

There is a rainbow thread of promise throughout today's readings. Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb and into more life. Lazarus is set free from what has confined him in the grave. There are many reasons to lose hope—Jesus is too late, the stench is too great—but in the end there is only more life for Lazarus. And, one can imagine, many happy tears from his family and friends.

Isaiah gives us the image of a feast—not just an ordinary meal, but a feast of rich food and well-aged wines prepared on a mountain for all people. While we are feasting on a sumptuous spread, the Lord will be feasting on death itself, swallowing it up so that it can wreak no more havoc. And then the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces. This promise has no limits. It is for all people, all faces.

And then there's the beautiful image of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation: "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." It's almost impossible to imagine the complete end to the pain and suffering. But God keeps those promises. God is, in the words of Psalm 24, strong and mighty, and God deploys that strength to defeat death.

Throughout the readings we find transformation—from grief to joy, from tears to gladness, from old to new, from death to life. There are many limitations in this earthly life, but there are no limits to what God's love can do or what God's promise of eternal life can make possible. As Isaiah proclaims so clearly, "This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in the Lord's salvation."

Christa M. Compton

4. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/oct/23/rob-delaney-comedian-we-have-a-new-capacity-for-pain-a-heart-that-works

Pentecost 25
November 10, 2024

1 Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark12:38-44

> *The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.*
>
> *The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,*
>
> *but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*
>
> —Psalm 146:8b-9

Mite-y Giving

Can anyone not forgive me, on this Sunday after our U.S. election day, for seeing in our Gospel story of the unnamed widow dropping her two mites into the temple offering box an eerie reminder of the millions, many of them no doubt widows and/or poor, who dropped the offering of their votes into the ballot box on Tuesday or the post box sometime earlier? Whatever the outcome it's a startling reminder of the truth of the psalmist that is God's promise to uphold the orphan and widow while bringing to ruin the way of the wicked.

The two widow stories we hear in today's readings, separated by eight or nine centuries of Jewish storytelling, are memorable snapshots of two nameless women whose unstinting generosity has become legendary. A woman's status and security were almost entirely dependent upon men—first one's father, then one's husband who as good as "owned" the females within his household. The point of today's stories headlining widows is that they were women consigned to living at the margins of society. That's why both Hebrew scripture and the New Testament continually hold up the compassionate treatment of widows as the mark of a people intent on living by God's plumbline of mercy and justice, just as that other widow story, the Book of Ruth, an alternative reading for today, shows.

Think about these two widow stories—the Gentile widow of Zarephath who used her last bit of oil meal to bake a loaf of bread for the Jewish prophet Elijah, and the widow who dropped her two copper coins into the Temple offering, who, Jesus somehow knew, was also giving her all—her "whole life" the text says. I wonder what adjective first comes to mind as you think about their behaviors?

For me it's the old-fashioned word "foolhardy" that pops into my head, a word that my dictionary defines as "thoughtlessly bold" or "imprudently daring." Is it just another sexist stereotype for our patriarchal scriptures to have selected two nameless women for these roles—to act the fool? Particularly the richly detailed story from 1 Kings raises our eyebrows as we learn that this Gentile woman is gathering wood, as the text so pathetically and poignantly points out, so that she could prepare a final meal for her son and herself before dying together of starvation. Which is the greater miracle, the wonder of the perpetually full jar of flour and flask of oil that Yahweh provided or the miracle of the foolhardy generosity of this widow willing to share her last meal with an intrusive stranger?

Our Gospel reading is a much briefer, leaner story—only a glimpse—into another anonymous widow's life. Jesus is sitting one day across from the Temple offering box, probably observing those same behaviors that a chapter earlier in Mark's Gospel had led him in anger to overturn the tables of the money-changers. He especially noticed how "many rich people were putting in large sums." Then along came a "poor widow" who must have seemed out of place in this parade of conspicuously pious and well-dressed philanthropy. Observing her closely, he sees her approach the offering box and drop in two copper coins, the lowest denomination of coin, scholars tell us, worth one sixty-fourth of a denarius, a denarius being a common laborer's living daily wage. Not much, in other words.

But for Jesus, perhaps noticing the smirks on his disciples' faces, this has the makings of another of his teaching moments. Nodding at the woman he says to his disciples: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had to live on (literally, in Greek, her whole *bios*, as in "biology")—her whole life (vs. 43-44).

This, of course, is a favorite stewardship text for preaching—and for good reason since Jesus is once again making money the shorthand way of getting at the care-taking God has called us to exercise over the things of this life entrusted into our care but not our keeping. But in recent years I've come to focus more on just what Jesus is getting at in pointing out how this poor but generous widow is giving from her very poverty and not from her abundance like all those around her. Find ways to ask your congregation to consider what it would mean to give not only generously but sacrificially, not from our abundance but from some particular point of poverty within our own lives.

There's hardly a better hymn than the oldie "We Give but Thine Own" (ELW #686) but try, too, Fred Pratt Green's "For the Fruit of All Creation" (ELW #679) with its ingenious triple rhyme in verse 3 "For the wonders that astound us,/ For the truths that still confound us,/ Most of all that love has found us/Thanks be to God."

John Rollefson

Pentecost 26
November 17, 2024

Daniel 12:1-3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

Birth Pangs

I can't help but think of our Gospel story on this penultimate Sunday of the church year as yet another in the long line of Jesus' disciples' "gee whiz" experiences that Mark seems to delight in recounting. Today's reading picks up where we left off, Jesus having directed his disciples' attention to the poor widow dropping her last coins into the Temple treasury. "As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look Teacher, what large buildings'" (v. 1). In Mark's telling, this is the disciples' first visit to Jerusalem and its Temple. These guys, remember, are country bumpkins from up north in Galilee. We can forgive them for "oohing and aahing" like any tourist from the hinterlands over the beautiful architecture that Herod-the-not-so-great had erected on Mt. Zion where Solomon's temple had stood before the Babylonian conquest.

But Jesus, not so easily impressed by the mere appearance of things, throws cold water on the disciples' enthusiasm with the curt words, "Do you see these buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" (v. 2). Indeed, Jesus' words would prove prophetic, for as Mark well knew by the time he wrote his account some forty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, the legions of the Roman general and eventual Emperor Titus would utterly demolish Herod's temple so that today only a piece of its supporting wall—which Jews today call "the wailing wall"—is left standing.

But that isn't quite the end of this "gee whiz" episode. For Jesus, Mark says, then led his inner circle of followers down off the Temple Mount over to the Mount of Olives opposite. And there Jesus is pictured sitting in reverie, musing on the "end times." Here, interestingly, he's found not making a personal passion prediction of his own demise but instead prophesies regarding the end of all times. The disciples ask their Master what sign they are to expect to signal the beginning of the end. Then follows what scholars have called Mark's "little apocalypse" which fills the thirty-seven verses of Mark chapter 13 with Jesus' warnings and advice regarding what to expect. (See Donald Juel's *Master of Surprise*, 77-88, for more!). In fact, we began this church year last Advent 1 by hearing as our Gospel the tail-end of this same chapter. In today's lection Jesus warns of the danger of false prophets coming in his name to claim his followers' allegiance saying, "I am he!" He warns of wars and rumors of wars, as well as natural calamities such as earthquakes and famines. But he's careful to point out that all this must take place and yet "the end is still to come" (vs. 5-8). This is not the end but only the entree onto the end.

It's in the final words we hear from Jesus today, however, that all this doom and gloom give way to the good news of the Gospel as he announces that all this "is but the beginning of the birth pangs" (v. 8b). Now there's an image for you, one that Jesus seemed quite fond of when speaking of the end times, as well as that other famous bachelor, the Apostle Paul (see 1 Thess 5:2-3, Rom 8:22). Some of us—and especially the mother types among us—know very well what "birth pangs" are all about. In her extended labor with our first-born, my wife at one point actually asked me to shoot her, so excruciating was the labor pain—despite the Lamaze classes we had labored through together, which I thought were painful enough! This is the image that transforms all of Jesus' apocalyptic rhetoric into a revelation of that God-given hope that is able to sustain the faithful through all times of trouble. For birth pangs, of course, are pains worth enduring for what they portend, for their long-awaited, patiently endured, hope-filled out-come is birth—new life. So it shall be with us, Jesus promises, as the end-time becomes ever more imminent, as the kingdom of God looms ever nearer. As our brief apocalyptic reading from Daniel promises: "There will be a time of anguish," followed by the long awaited "time (when) your people shall be delivered" (vs. 1-2), a quite nice coincidence of imagery that becomes a useful play on words––"anguish" and "delivered" and "birth.

And so, the Letter to the Hebrews counsels us, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful" (v. 23). This is the essence of faith, to trust that God is faithful—and not place false trust in our own steadfastness. I love the words which serve as a kind of parenetic encouragement and blessing: "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (v. 25). Now that's an image worth savoring—"provok(ing) one another to love and good deeds!"

"My Lord What a Morning" (ELW #438) is an up-beat African American spiritual with an apocalyptic theme, which presents a nice contrast in mood to the much more maudlin-sounding yet finally affirming Scandinavian hymn sung to a Finnish tune, "Lost in the Night" (ELW #243).

John Rollefson

Reign of Christ Sunday
November 24, 2024

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

What is Truth?

In the Gospel of John, the word *truth* (ἀλήθεια) appears twenty-five times. We also see *true* (ἀληθινή) frequently in the scripture. While not the same root word in Greek, Jesus uses *truly* (ἀμὴν) often to introduce a teaching. Without a doubt, truth is a significant theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus has repeatedly spoken about the truth and that which is true. The first words out of his mouth often underscored the truth of his teaching. Scan the chapters leading up to this moment, and you'll see it throughout: Jesus has been all about the truth. But now in contrast, the official who is tasked with discerning truth, shrugs his shoulders at the concept.

I do not believe that Pilate is seeking an answer from Jesus. We often make the mistake of hearing biblical characters speaking with a holy, earnest voice. A quick survey through the Gospel of John should cure us of that. The woman at the well is at first sassy and combative. When Mary comes to meet Jesus after her brother has died, her words are a biting accusation, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Thomas sarcastically labels this mission to Bethany a "death trip," and later gives a pretty rude response to news of the resurrection. The characters in John are human. They're not always on their best behavior, but they are often very honest about what they are feeling and thinking. When Pilate asks, "What is truth?" we must keep in mind the life that a Roman official leads. He has spent his whole career making strategic choices to keep moving up the ladder of authority. To keep climbing in a brutal regime, he would have to make moral compromises. He's jaded and cynical. His question amounts to asking, "Who even cares?" He clearly doesn't. Instead, he sees an opportunity to play off the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. If the writing of John is dated sometime after the destruction of the Temple, the Roman Empire is trying to keep a handle on things. Stoking animosity and division between oppressed groups is an effective strategy to maintain power. An apologetic take on Pilate's motivations is undone as he whips the crowd into a frenzy, a task that he appears to relish. Even if he had a moment of wavering, Pilate comforts himself with the functional truth of his world: the end always justifies the means.

Two types of leadership are presented in contrast here. Jesus is the truth. After bending the truth for so long to suit his needs, Pilate wonders what truth even means.

Pastoral Reflections

In the conflict over COVID-19, we heard opposing points of view on vaccinations, mitigation strategies, treatments, or even if the virus was real. Many people refused to acknowledge the violent January 6th attack on our nation's Capital. State legislatures have passed laws to discourage the teaching about the history of American racism and the continuing impacts today. Surveys reveal that political affiliation predicts our perception of truth when it comes to these events. Americans disagree not only about the way forward, but what has actually happened and what is now taking place. The media's approach is often to get quotes from both sides and present them as if they have equal merit. Overwhelmed and exhausted, the people are left to wonder what is true, or if truth even exists.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes it clear that truth does exist. He says without qualification, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Throughout this Gospel, Jesus is showing himself to be this truth. It's not an easy message to receive; even his followers struggle to understand. Some are offended. Many turn away. By the time we reach the cross nearly all of them lose heart. But Jesus will not give up, even coming back from the dead and through locked doors to bring the truth. Our people need to be reminded that truth does exist. Our communities must practice seeking truth and living according to the things that are true. The truth of Jesus is not an easy way. His truth calls us to sacrifice for our neighbor, to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to forgive those who have done us wrong. This truth asks a lot of us and often gets in the way of earthly success and power. This is why Pilate had little interest in the truth.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, speak the truth of Jesus in unwavering terms. He stands in contrast to all earthy rulers; his kingdom is unlike any other. Jesus calls for our allegiance through the noise of everything else clamoring for our loyalty. Worship is an opportunity to practice the truth that we need to carry throughout the week. This Sunday, coach the congregation to replace every "Amen" in worship with "It is true." This can help the congregation understand why they say "Amen." In this exercise, both presider and parishioners may find a new truth in the familiar movements and words of worship.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Advent 1
December 1, 2024

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The lectionary readings for Advent 1 invite us into a season of anticipation and reflection, focusing on the eschatological hope that undergirds our Christian faith. The passage from Jeremiah offers a prophetic word to a people living in the shadow of destruction. Originating during or shortly after the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, these verses form part of what Martin Luther famously called the "Little Book of Consolation." Despite the devastation around them, the people of Judah are assured that "the days are surely coming" when God will raise up a "righteous Branch" from David's line, a figure who will embody justice and righteousness. This promise points not just to a distant future but to a new reality already breaking into the world.

Psalm 25 shifts the communal promise of a "righteous branch" from Jeremiah into a personal plea for God's guidance and mercy. While the prophet speaks of God's faithfulness in bringing justice and righteousness to the land, the psalmist echoes this trust on an individual level, seeking the same steadfast love and guidance promised to the whole community. Together, these texts connect our personal reliance on God's faithfulness with the broader hope of divine justice, assuring us that our unfolding journeys of faith are integral to God's ongoing work of redemption.

1 Thessalonians brings the focus to the early Christian community, where Paul prays for the Thessalonians' growth in love and holiness as they await Christ's return. Paul's prayer reflects an eschatological urgency, reminding the community that their ultimate hope lies not in their present circumstances but in the promise of Christ's coming.

Finally, Luke 21 offers an apocalyptic vision that echoes the upheavals of both Jeremiah's time and the destruction of the Second Temple. Jesus speaks of cosmic signs and distress among nations, reflecting the chaos and uncertainty often accompanying end times, past and present. Yet, amid this turmoil, Jesus calls his followers to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." This imagery of standing and lifting one's head is a powerful metaphor for resilience and hope in the face of overwhelming challenges.

Together, these texts draw us into the tension of Advent—an anticipation of God's future that is already and not yet fulfilled. They challenge us to look beyond our immediate circumstances, trust in God's promises, and live in the hope of Christ's eternal and immanent return, even as we navigate a world marked by uncertainty and despair. A common motif runs through all these readings: the tension between present realities and future hope. Jeremiah's prophecy, the psalmist's prayer, Paul's intercession, and Jesus' apocalyptic warning all point to a future that breaks into the present. Each text underscores the faithfulness of God amid human uncertainty and distress, reminding us that God's promises are not distant dreams but active realities shaping our lives today. This Advent, we are called to live in that tension—rooted in the present but always looking forward to the fulfillment of God's reign.

Pastoral Reflections

Advent is a season that tells the truth about what it means to be human: to wait, to yearn, and to hope. These readings do not shy away from the harsh realities of our world—chaos, destruction, and deep uncertainty. Yet, amid this, they offer a powerful message of hope and redemption. The good news is that God's promises hold true, even under the most challenging circumstances.

We live in a world that often feels on the brink of collapse, with constant reminders of global crises and personal struggles. Like the ancient people of Judah during the Babylonian siege, or the early Christians witnessing the destruction of the Second Temple, we might find ourselves asking, "Where is God in all this?" But just as Jeremiah offered a vision of a "righteous Branch" springing up in a time of devastation, and Jesus spoke of redemption drawing near even as the world seemed to crumble, we are reminded that God's work of renewal is ongoing.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus calls us to "stand up and raise your heads" when the world is at its worst. This call is not just for the ancient disciples, but for us today. It is a call to resist the temptation of despair, to remain vigilant, and to look for the signs of God's inbreaking commonwealth. In a world wearied by war, violence, and environmental crisis, this is a message we desperately need to hear. The good news is that God's redemption is not just a future hope—it is already breaking into our present, transforming us and the world around us.

Preachers have the opportunity to counter the weightiness of the world with words that communicate the vital power of hope and joy, inviting congregations to adopt an Advent mindset. Just as Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year, it invites us to begin anew in our faith, shake off the weariness of the past, and look forward with expectant anticipation. This is a season of holy waiting, not passive wanting. It requires an active, engaged spirituality—

one that prepares us to recognize and participate in God's work in the world.

The stripping down of our liturgy and sanctuary during Advent is not just about making space for God; it is about waking us up, like rolling down the windows during a long road trip. It is a reminder that something new is happening, that God is coming to us in ways we might not expect. This Advent, let us stay alert and be ready to rise up, lift our heads, and witness the new creation God is bringing into being.

Erik Christensen

Advent 2
December 8, 2024

Malachi 3:1-4
Psalmody: Luke 1:68-79
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The readings for Advent 2 place us squarely in the tension between the oppressive realities of worldly power and the disruptive, hopeful message of God's revolutionary reign. Luke's Gospel doesn't begin with poetic imagery or genealogies; instead, it grounds us in the harsh realities of the Roman Empire, naming rulers like Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, and others. These names were symbols of an empire that maintained order through fear and oppression. Yet, Luke quickly shifts our attention from these centers of power to the wilderness, where the prophetic voice of John the Baptist emerges. This wilderness isn't just a physical location but is a spiritual space, a place of preparation and transformation, an unanticipated alternative to the sites of worldly power.

Malachi 3:1-4 deepens the Advent theme of preparation with its vivid imagery of a refiner's fire and fuller's soap, symbolizing the purification that must occur before the coming of the Lord. This isn't a gentle cleansing but rather a transformational scrub-down that readies the people to offer righteous worship to God. John's call to repentance in the wilderness echoes Malachi's prophetic imagination, urging us to confront our complicity in structures of sin and injustice and to turn back toward God with renewed commitment.

The Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79) stands in for the psalm, capturing the joy and hope of God's faithfulness. After months of silence, Zechariah bursts forth in praise, proclaiming that God has not forgotten us, even amid entrenched systems of oppression. His words remind us of God's enduring promises to the people of Israel and the hope that God's ongoing work will guide our feet into the way of peace. Zechariah's song reflects the continuity of God's covenantal love, calling us to trust in the transformative power of God's presence among us.

Finally, Philippians 1:3-11 offers a vision of how this preparation unfolds within the community of faith. Paul's deep affection and gratitude for the Philippians are evident as he praises their partnership in the gospel. His prayer for their love to abound more and more in knowledge and insight underscores the ongoing process of spiritual growth. This preparation isn't just about getting ready for a single event; it's about a continuous journey of becoming more fully who God calls us to be, both as individuals and as a community.

These passages call us to prepare, not by retreating into familiar patterns of power or passivity, but by confronting the realities before us with active, expectant hope. They urge us to engage deeply with God's ongoing work, participating in the transformation already unfolding in our lives and communities.

Pastoral Reflections

Advent is that time of year when we're called to slow down and pay attention, but let's be honest—it's not easy. We're surrounded by the noise of the season, the demands of our to-do lists, and the pull of a culture that wants us to believe that peace and joy can be bought and wrapped up with a bow. But the texts for this Sunday remind us that God's work often begins in places we might least expect—in the wilderness, far from the centers of power and influence.

Luke's Gospel doesn't waste time with sentimentality. It starts with a hard look at the political realities of the time, naming the people responsible for maintaining an empire built on fear and control. And yet, it's not in the palaces or the governors' mansions that we find God at work. It's out in the wilderness, where John the Baptist is crying out, calling us to prepare the way of the Lord. This message refuses to be domesticated—it calls us to confront the ways we've become too comfortable with the status quo, too complacent in our faith.

The work before us isn't simply getting our spiritual lives in order so that we can enjoy or appreciate the holidays. It's about engaging deeply with the world as it is, acknowledging the challenges we face, and still daring to believe that God is actively bringing about transformation. Whether it's the refining fire of Malachi, the communal growth that Paul prays for, or the prophetic hope of Zechariah, the message is clear: God is up to something, and we're invited to be part of it.

As preachers, we need to help our congregations see that Advent is not a season of nostalgia but of active, expectant hope. We're not just waiting for Christmas; we're preparing for a world transformed by the coming of Christ. This means letting go of the distractions that numb us and opening ourselves to the refining work God is doing in our lives. It

means recognizing that the voices calling from the wilderness of the margins are often the ones we most need to hear.

This Advent, let's challenge our communities to resist the pull of consumerism and busyness and, instead, make room for the radical hope that Christ's coming brings. The true power of this season lies not in what we can buy or produce but in the profound, enduring promise of God's presence among us, guiding us into the way of peace. Even in the wilderness, we can trust that God is with us, calling us to prepare the way.

Erik Christensen

Advent 3
December 15, 2024

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Psalmody: Isaiah 12:2-6
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Those who preached last week for Advent 2 have the challenge of preaching another sermon on John the Baptist this week. However, this time the text about John is less an introduction to the itinerant preacher and his big-picture theological ideas, and more about practical advice for living out this theology. "What, then, should we do?" is the question the crowds ask as they wait to be baptized, and John delivers concrete answers. If you have more than enough clothing or food, share it. If you collect taxes, don't cheat people of their money. If you have power, don't abuse it.

These exhortations (which are just some among many, we learn in verse 18) are the center of this text, literally and figuratively. John's explosive opening lines addressed to the "brood of vipers" coming to be baptized, warning of "coming wrath" and being "cut down and thrown into the fire" often steal the show in this pericope. But in the context of the whole passage, it seems that those harsh words are mostly to get people to pay attention to the meat of what he has to say.

There is something of a chiastic structure to this passage—a literary device in which a sequence of ideas or phrases is presented and is then repeated in reverse order. The first and last verses of the pericope refer to John's exhortations. The second and penultimate verses use food and harvest imagery. Verses 9 and 16 both refer to fire. And so the passage goes if we organize it into a chiasm, starting from the outer verses and making our way to the central verse, which is verse 13: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." As is typical of a chiastic structure, the center verse says it all.

It is interesting to note that the other three texts for the day, including the text from Isaiah that functions as a psalm, all mention protective and "closeness" attributes of God: God is near (Phil 4:5), God is strength, might, and salvation in our midst (Isa 12:2, 6), God is a warrior who gives victory, removes disaster, deals with our oppressors, brings us home, restores our fortunes (Zeph 3:17-20).

One would think, with all these themes, that we'd hear something a bit more victorious from John the Baptist in the gospel reading, rather than his advice to give away what we have. But, perhaps, that is the victory. The preacher might help listeners imagine that God's protectiveness and closeness are known most to us when we co-create a world with God where *all* can flourish. Help listeners envision that the strength and might and salvation of God come alongside the realization that giving up privilege is sometimes necessary--and to those who are accustomed to it, often painful, in order for the "rough ways [to be] made smooth" (Luke 3:6).

Pastoral Reflections

In 2020, I read an article featured in *Scientific American* titled "GDP is the Wrong Tool for Measuring what Matters,"[5] and the subtitle reads: "It's time to replace gross domestic product with real metrics of well-being and sustainability." John the Baptist of Luke 3 would approve. For John, real metrics of well-being and sustainability include tending to the things that weave together the fabric of equity and community, thinking of the whole rather than just part of the whole, looking at the world with a lens that can see inequality and oppression clearly and do something about it.

The final verse of the gospel text makes clear what we know in our bones: these exhortations, whether we like it or not, are good news. John the Baptist is right. We all know that everyone deserves to be clothed and fed, and that so many in the world have too much at the expense of other people having too little. Some people know this more self-reflectively than others, but we do, I believe, all know this truth somewhere deep down. We know these exhortations of John are true and are ultimately good news because they create a healthy and sustainable world: share your abundance, treat people fairly, live in a way that benefits the whole community. See the ways in which we are all connected.

It may be hard for some to wrestle with verse 17: "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." I've spoken with many people who have said this image haunted them as children, making them think that with any wrong move, Jesus could appear in

5. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/gdp-is-the-wrong-tool-for-measuring-what-matters

the doorway with a pitchfork ready to throw them into the unquenchable fire.

But Jesus, here, is a farmer, with a farming and gardening tool in his hand. This is not a violent profession. As for the chaff that he burns: instead of imagining that the wheat is one kind of person and the chaff is another kind of person, might we imagine that these are both parts of the whole? In other words, wheat and chaff exist in all of us, and in every layer of society—things that are not helping to realize this vision, this kingdom, where all have life and have it abundantly (to switch gospels for a moment). If Jesus is a farmer tending to his crops, making sure the chaff is threshed off the wheat properly, burning it so that the healthy, nourishing part of the wheat plant can flourish, perhaps this is an image of good news, too.

May we hold God's vision for all of creation flourishing, proclaimed through the words of so many prophets in our readings today, fiercely and tenderly as we seek to proclaim God's good news.

Miriam Samuelson Roberts

Advent 4
December 22, 2024

Micah 5:2-5a
Psalmody: Luke 1:46b-55
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The lectionary in Year C is clear: try to have the Magnificat sung or spoken on Advent 4—if not as the psalmody, then as part of the reading of the gospel. It is with good reason that this text is emphasized this Sunday, which this year is a few days before Christmas. It is one of Christianity's most ancient hymns. We can imagine this song being sung by Mary in the presence of Elizabeth, we can imagine early house churches and magnificent cathedrals and living room devotions all proclaiming this song. Throughout history, it has been a core piece of what we have proclaimed in our liturgy and our theology.

All of this familiarity with and devotion to the Magnificat makes its content a bit shocking, when we really pay attention to it. As with oft-repeated prayers or songs, it is worth pausing on one or two lines at a time to consider what they really mean. Even the first line: my soul magnifies—can we imagine the physical sensation of what it might be like for our very soul—our entire being—to praise or magnify God? One could lift up and dissect any one of these sixteen verses in such a way, attending to all the ways the song connects generations, power structures, imaginations, hearts—all rooted in the greatness of God's blessing and mercy.

The other texts this Sunday offer a plethora of images to explore as well: Micah 5:2-5a proclaims the mysterious miracle of a great ruler coming forth from one of the "little clans of Judah" (v. 2). This shepherd who feeds his flock (v. 2), this ruler who shall be "the one of peace" (v. 5a) comes forth through "she who is in labor" (v. 3). We as Christians read these prophetic texts through the lens of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. But the theme of something great coming from something insignificant is as important for contemporary Christians as it was for the Jewish community who first heard these promises. Even the littlest clan—and as Jesus will later proclaim in Luke's Gospel: the most prodigal child, the nearly invisible grain of yeast, the tiniest mustard seed, the coin that lies forgotten by most—can be a vehicle for God's restorative work.

The reading from Hebrews lifts up the beautiful phrase, "I have come to do your will" (v. 7), that echoes Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's annunciation: "let it be with me according to your word." When Mary does shape her life according to God's will for the restoration and flourishing of all of creation, the Magnificat is what springs forth from her lips: a vision of what God's will can look like, a world evened out a bit more, a society capable of sharing its abundance with all.

Pastoral Reflections

In the interest of the advice above to "really pay attention" to the words of the Magnificat, I have found artistic interpretations of familiar prayers and songs to be deeply moving when it comes to understanding the meaning of the prayer in a different light. Even the switch of one word or phrase can illuminate its meaning in a profound way. I offer here two such interpretations, though many more exist and are worth exploring.

Magnificat (sung) from *Holden Evening Prayer* by Marty Haugen:[6]

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you,

You have looked with love on your servant here,
and blessed me all my life through.

Great and mighty are you, O Holy One,
strong is your kindness evermore.

How you favor the weak and lowly one,
humbling the proud of heart.

You have cast the mighty down from their thrones,
and uplifted the humble of heart,

you have filled the hungry with wondrous things,
and left the wealthy no part.

Great and mighty are you, O Faithful One,
strong is your justice, strong your love,

As you promised to Sarah and Abraham,
kindness forevermore.

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
and my spirit rejoices in you,

You have looked with love on your servant here,
and blessed me all my life through.

"My soul is alive with thoughts of God": An adaptation of Mary's Magnificat, by the Rev. M Barclay, featured in *Art and Theology*[7]

My soul is alive with thoughts of God.
What a wonder, Their liberating works.

Though the world has been harsh to me,
God has shown me kindness,
seen my worth,
and called me to courage.

Surely, those who come after me will call me blessed.

Even when my heart weighs heavy with grief,
still, so does hope abide with me.

Holy is the One who makes it so.
From generation to generation,

Love's Mercy is freely handed out;
none are beyond the borders of
God's transforming compassion.

The power of God is revealed
among those who labor for justice.

They humble the arrogant.
They turn unjust thrones into dust.

Their Wisdom is revealed in
the lives and truths of those on the margins.

God is a feast for the hungry.
God is the great redistributor of wealth and resources.
God is the ceasing of excessive and destructive production that all the earth might rest.

Through exiles and enslavement,
famines and wars, hurricanes and gun violence,

God is a companion in loss,
a deliverer from evil,
a lover whose touch restores.

This is the promise They made
to my ancestors, to me,
to all the creatures and creations,

now and yet coming, and in this promise,
I find my strength.

Come, Great Healer,
and be with us.

Miriam Samuelson Roberts

6. Haugen, Mary. "Magnificat," *Holden Evening Prayer.* 1990: GIA Publications.

7. https://artandtheology.org/2022/05/27/magnificat-adaptation-rev-m-barclay/

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2024

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

By the Singing of Angels

Think, good preacher, about the faces of Christmas Eve past. Who do you see sitting in the pews in your catalog of memories on this holy night? Who are these dear people who courageously crossed the sanctuary's threshold to encounter the familiar surprise of the Christmas narrative? Who do you recall embodied before you as the remembered past shapes your preparation for another night to proclaim the birth of the Christ-child? Can you see the faces?

On Christmas Eve, we celebrate the incarnation of our God in the soft brown skin of baby Jesus. We speak and sing of the child "wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manager," as is right and salutary. But what of the bodies—the flesh and blood—incarnate before us within the worshipping body? What of these bodies that each year dare to enter the Christmas story? Can you see them? Bodies carrying doubt and hope, skepticism and longing, joy and expectation. Each face a myriad of stories that we will never fully know. But if we hold them close, those of Christmases past and those of Christmases to come, we can clearly see that all share in the story of human suffering.

This holy night calls us to cut through the sparkle and lights of the season which, culturally, has been in full effect since November 15 (if not earlier). Preachers are called to speak into the truth of heartache and pain that come with incarnate living. The festivities and tinsel-strewn decorations surrounding the season cannot distract from the lamentations welling up in the world, in our bodies. Into real human suffering, God erupted the Bethlehem night with divine messengers as the shepherds witnessed the proclaimed promise of Christ's birth. Mystic and prophet Howard Thurman wrote, "Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels."[8] What, then, if the sermon and the whole of the liturgy focused on the singing of angels? How might the divine song counter the harsh discord we experience in our bodies?

Angels, from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth.
Once you sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship #275, stanza 1)

The song of the angels rises and crescendos this evening as the worshipping body longs for a word to meet the reality of human life lived among pain, brokenness, and the crassness of it all. The angels sing to the shepherds the refrain that accompanies the spoken message first told by a singular voice: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord!" Salvation is birthed as God's word takes on flesh and reveals our God-with-us in the fullness of life's suffering. The message carried by one angel is amplified by the chorus of celestial beings, for "suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people'" (Luke 2:13-14). It is this refrain that reverberates in the bodies of its hearers, a refrain bearing peace, hope, love, and comfort to an aching world.

Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn king."
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
"God and sinners reconciled."
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #270, stanza 1)

This good news of great joy is sung out for all peoples! Life ***is*** saved by the singing of the angels, for the same song that flooded that first Christmas night sky washes now over the faces of all who gather in houses of worship. A preacher could focus on the mystery of these divine messengers, to be sure, and wonder about the substance of seraphs. But salvation is in the message not the messenger. And this message is the proclamation of Christ's birth. It is the song of the angels!

Angels we have heard on high,
sweetly singing o'er the plains,
And the mountains in reply,
echoing their joyous strains.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #289, stanza 1)

Imagine the faces of those gathered for worship this Christmas eve. Now, look up! Can you see them? The angels swooping and gliding through the air? Can you hear the song they carry on their wings, the chorus and its refrain? The "joyous strains" of the angels sing over, sing out, and sing through our suffering with the promised salvation of Christ alive among us! This is the song of Christmases past, the song of every Christmas that saves all who know the pain of daily living. May we join the song and the singing of the angels, for

8. Howard Thurman, *Deep is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 92.

our lives are held and kept by it as surely as they are held and kept by the Incarnate One.

All my heart again rejoices as I hear, far and near,
sweetest angel voices,
"Christ is born," their choirs are singing,
till the air, ev'rywhere
now with joy is ringing.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship #273, stanza 1)

Justin Lind-Ayres

Christmas Day
December 25, 2024

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12]
John 1:1-14

The Vocation of Christmas

Christmas morning can feel like an afterthought in the scope of this liturgical season. The hype of Christmas Eve supersedes Christmas Day, and church attendance reflects this truth.

Somewhere along the way these past decades in the North American culture things shifted and the pinnacle of the Christmas celebration now comes as congregations huddle close in the glow of candlelight on December 24 to sing "Silent Night, Holy Night!" In fact, if December 25 falls on a non-Sunday, many church communities do not have a Christmas Day worship service since all time and resources are spent in the planning and executing of Christmas Eve liturgies.

Some years ago, I served as an associate pastor of a large congregation in the suburbs of Atlanta. We had five Christmas Eve worship services (2 pm, 5 pm, 7 pm, 9 pm & 11 pm), with only the two later services identical in liturgical scope. All energy was poured into those distinct and detailed services; nevertheless, we did gather on Christmas Day for one 10 am service. I remember arriving at the church early to join the senior pastor in vacuuming the sanctuary and scraping droplets of candlewax off the pews from the night's silent-song sung by flickering flame. The aftermath of Christmas Eve's festivities was a flaky reminder of the light of Christ that burns even with the dawning sun.

The attendance that day was sparse for any worship, but it was especially so in comparison to crowds just hours beforehand. Still, there was a cozy feel to the gathering as the faithful arrived to hear the good news that opens John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…what has come into being in him was life, and life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:1, 4-5). These are likely familiar words to Christmas Day worshippers, but they are powerful words that lead to the Christmas revelation of Jesus, the Word made flesh, "full of grace and truth."

The metaphor of light brings a vitality to the promises of God, for the energy burns bright no matter the sun's setting. It is always important to temper this metaphor with the truth that the same Divine-energy permeates darkness as well. Even as the Word bears light for the world to see, we name that this same Word took on flesh in the darkness of Mary's womb. Light and darkness—both/and—bear the promises of our God! What if, so as not to disparage the wonder and mystery of holy darkness, we proclaim on the bright morn of Christmas Day: "The light shines in the light, and nothing can outshine it"? On this day of Christ's birth even with the sun's dawn, the light still glows and radiates the gift of God. For this is the life of all people!

The calling of Christmas is to share the life and light of love birthed and ever-birthing among us. The incarnate love of Christ beams bright in our witness to the dawn of redeeming grace, as Ken Bible's hymn, *Love Has Come,* beautifully concludes, "Love is Jesus within and among us. Love is the peace our hearts are seeking. Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas. Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high!" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #292). The gift of Christmas is love, and our work as God's people is to embody love in our lives. This is the vocation of Christmas, the gift and calling of the baptism promise to live out the light of Christ in word and deed.

It may be a good thing to offer a thanksgiving for baptism on Christmas day to reenforce the vocational thrust of the baptized life in Christ Jesus. No matter the crowd size, gather the people around the baptismal font and make a splashy spectacle of the word of God that shines in, among, and through us. From the pascal candle, light candles leftover from the Christmas Eve service and pass the light of Christ remembering the Christ-light we name and claim in the baptismal liturgy. Boldy declare: "Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world…whoever follows me will have the light of life'" (John 8:12). Instead of singing "Silent Night, Holy Night!" by candlelight, sing out over lighted candles that "Love Has Come," and this love of Jesus is the gift we all share together and with the world.

Again (see Christmas Eve reflection), the words of mystic and prophet Howard Thurman speak into this season, this

moment. In his poem "The Work of Christmas," Thurman reflected that after all is settled after Christmas Eve as stars and angels, princes and kings, and shepherds have come and gone, then:

> "The work of Christmas begins:
> To find the lost,
> To heal the broken,
> To feed the hungry,
> To release the prisoner,
> To rebuild the nations,
> To bring peace among people,
> To make music in the heart."[9]

Here is the vocation of Christmas, the call to bear Christ's redeeming love to the world: to tend to our neighbors in need, to heal and rebuild, to sing out the love of Jesus that brings light and life to all people. This is Christmas; this is our gift; this is our calling. Thurman's words harken us back to the task of bearing and being God's shalom in the world. A bright Christmas indeed!

Justin Lind-Ayres

First Sunday of Christmas
December 29, 2024

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

At the beginning of this Gospel, Luke set out to give an "orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us…" (1: 1). Perhaps this story is part of his orderly account, filling in the gap between Jesus' presentation in the Temple and his baptism. This is the only story in the New Testament about Jesus as a young boy. While some non-canonical gospels include stories of the boy Jesus performing miracles and doing magic, Luke's account is quite ordinary by comparison. Some scholars see this episode as Jesus' *bar mitzvah* (e.g., Craddock, *Luke,* 41). That rather popular interpretation is challenged by *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* edited by Jewish New Testament scholar A.J. Levine. The footnote on this text claims "thirteen as the age of adult responsibility" (note, p 103) thus, the appropriate age for a *bar* or *bat mitzvah.* It seems quite clear that Jesus' parents didn't go to Jerusalem for any special rite of passage for their son; rather, the family went to Jerusalem because it was Passover. Luke emphasizes Jesus' place within Judaism and the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. This story follows another story in the Temple: the rite of purification, "according to the law of Moses," and the presentation of the infant Jesus "as it is written in the law of the Lord." (2: 22)

This connection between the testaments is affirmed by pairing this gospel text with the Old Testament reading about the boy Samuel. There has already been an earlier connection in Luke: Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46-55) echoes Hannah's song of praise (1 Sam 2:1-10), both women thanking God for surprising pregnancies. The boy Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people." (1 Sam 2:26). A similar description frames the story of Jesus in the Temple: "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (2:40), then at the end: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." (2:52)

The story itself is surprisingly ordinary: Jesus goes to Jerusalem with "his parents" (no hint of virgin birth) for the festival of Passover. When Jesus stays behind his parents assume he's with friends or relatives—a common twelve-year-old choice! But his parents grow anxious and when they find him in the Temple, his mother is angry: "*Child*, why have you treated us like this?" Why didn't she say his name? Is she reminding Jesus that he's too young to be on his own? She goes on, "Look, *your father and I* have been searching for you in great anxiety." Again, there's no hint that Jesus has anything but normal parents. Jesus reminds them that he's where he's supposed to be: "Did you not know that I must be in *my Father's house*?" What was Joseph supposed to think? Up to this point others have said who Jesus is—the angels, Elizabeth, Mary, shepherds, Simeon. Now Jesus is beginning to sense his identity as God's child, an identity that will be confirmed in his baptism in the next chapter (3:21-22).

The Colossians reading is a beautiful blessing that could be used as the Benediction instead of as the Second Reading. Perhaps it could be read antiphonally, one side of the assembly saying the words of blessing to the other side. (Some slight adaptations in the text may be helpful.) Or you may choose to keep it as the Second Reading but still read it as a congregational dialogue. Let the power of the words touch people in a personal way.

Pastoral Reflections

Whenever I read or hear today's gospel, I always think of a song we sang many years ago in Sunday School:

9. Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1985), 23.

In the temple, in the temple,
Stood a little boy one day,
And the doctors wondered greatly
At the words they heard him say.
It was Jesus. It was Jesus.
He was but a little child,
But the light of heav'n was shining
In his face so pure and mild.
(text by Flora Kirkland)

I have no idea why I remember this song I sang at least seventy years ago. We didn't sing it at Bible camp and it's not in the red or green or cranberry hymnals. Did I have any idea who the doctors were who wondered greatly? Perhaps I thought they were medical doctors since I didn't know any other kind. Maybe I remembered the song and the story because it was great to picture Jesus as a kid, and we didn't have any other stories like that.

Today would be a good day to ask a middle school student to read the Gospel. As you prepare to preach on Luke's story, read the text with some middle schoolers—sixth, seventh and eighth graders. Start with their questions about the text, then ask some of your own. Did Jesus' parents make him go with them to Jerusalem because it was Passover? Would you go to church if your parents didn't make you? The teachers in this story seem amazed that Jesus knew so much. Do you ever feel like you know more than your teachers or your parents? Is Jesus just making a good excuse for himself when he says, "Don't you know I must be in my Father's house?"

You can also write about yourself at age twelve. Or write as though you are twelve. This may not turn into a sermon, but it can help you get in touch with the middle school boy named Jesus standing in the temple.

Barbara Lundblad