

Preaching Helps

July, August, and September 2025:

*Fourth Sunday after Pentecost to
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

Preaching for Hopeful Resistance

The theme for this issue of *Currents* is the doomsday reality of climate change and almost unreal promise that doomsday is not the only day. Hopefully, Barbara Rossing's essay and responses to it will give you hope for this earth and all its creatures, even as some with vast sums of money tell us that life on Mars is the only alternative to a ruined planet. The challenge for preachers is how we can learn from these essays and find ways to translate words on a journal page into spoken words that will connect with those who are listening. Of course, this is a challenge preachers face every week: how does God's living word become flesh for the congregation in the midst of millions of words that overwhelm people with lies and false promises?

Rossing turns to the book of Revelation for words of hope that assure us that God's residence is on earth among us. She and the respondents are honest about the dangers and devastations caused by climate change. But all of them call for hopeful resistance to the exploitation of our common home. I have often turned to the book of Isaiah for similar signs of hope in the midst of destruction. Isaiah, too, is unflinchingly honest about what seemed dooms day for God's people. But he also trusts in God whose promises interrupt our despair.

Isaiah 35 has been such an honest, hopeful word for me, and not only in Advent. But Isaiah 35 shouldn't be here. Amid rumors of war and desolation, this chapter surprises us. A voice speaks without identity, without addressing anyone by name. Without the particularity of time: no kings, no history, no nation. This poem follows another poem, a poem filled with terrible destruction: "The streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch...Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses." (Isa 34: 9, 13) Lest we think such destruction was meant only for enemy nations, God also uttered harsh words of judgment to Jerusalem. How do we hear those words when if we try to cling to American exceptionalism?

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

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

Creation itself will join in singing as the ecological destruction of the previous poem is completely transformed. But this poem does not belong here. Even the footnote in the *New Revised Oxford Bible* tells us the poem comes from another time. A different writer. Some say it belongs to Second Isaiah. Others argue that it comes even later—sixth century BCE or later still—surely after the exile. This poem comes too early. Who moved it? Some things even our best scholarship cannot explain. Our wisdom falls short. The Spirit hovered over the text and over the scribes: "Put it here," breathed the Spirit, "before anyone is ready. Interrupt the narrative of despair." So, here it is—a word out of place. A word that couldn't wait until everything was looking up.

Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place. A word that refused to wait until there was more evidence for celebration. As Walter Bruggemann has reminded us, "Israel's doxologies are characteristically against the data." We see and hear the data every night on the news and every morning on the front page of the paper. Add to that the data of our own lives: waiting for the test results from the doctor, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we'll make it through the next round of layoffs, reeling from the daily executive orders and political decisions. We know the data all too well and we long for a word out of place. This is our calling as preachers in this time of chaos and despair: to speak a word out of place so that people in the congregation will be heartened and strengthened to be part of the hopeful resistance.

I give thanks for pastors who have written their reflections on the texts for this summer season of Ordinary Time: **Linnéa K. Clark (she/her)** serves as the pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church in Hamilton, New Jersey. She is also a partner and writer for Barn Geese Worship, which publishes creative worship resources for congregations and ministry leaders. She holds a Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School and Yale's Institute of Sacred Music. Originally from western Massachusetts, she lives in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, with her spouse and three cats. **Mary Halvorson** retired in 2021 after thirty-five years of ministry. She lives in Roseville, Minnesota, with her husband and two dogs. She gardens, quilts, plays with color, and consults with congregations and pastors in times of transition. Her grandchildren bring her great delight. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** is a retired ELCA pastor, who served for thirty-five years in urban, bilingual congregations in the south Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. He is the author

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Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, *Preaching Helps*

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost July 6, 2025

Isaiah 66:10–14

Psalms 66:1–9

Galatians 6:(1–6), 7–16

Luke 10:1–11, 16–20

Engaging the texts for preaching

There are sermon possibilities in all three appointed texts today. This is also Fourth of July weekend in the United States which provides another text that may loom especially large in some communities.

Isaiah 66 draws a beautiful portrait of Jerusalem as our Mother, inviting us to “nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast...” (66:11) We seldom hear such nurturing female language about Jerusalem or about God in the Bible. Given the harsh condemnation of diversity by the current government, this could be a day to celebrate Isaiah's picture of Mother Jerusalem as well as female images of God in the Bible. Though male imagery dominates, the first chapter of Genesis reminds us that the image of God is male and female. (Gen 1:27) Thankfully, there are now a number of hymns that invite us to sing this image: “Mothering God” (ELW 735) and “Womb of Life and Source of Being” (*All Creation Sings*, 948) are two that lift up female imagery for God, Christ, and Spirit.

The **Galatians 6** text will be stronger by including the first six verses of this chapter. “Bear one another's burdens” is especially important as we face cuts to Medicaid and other programs that have been life-giving to poor people and people with disabilities. Today's reading begins: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.” Prayer breakfasts and cross necklaces are very prominent in Washington, D.C. But is God being mocked when we look at what is being sown by our leaders? What is being sown now that will reap disaster and disease in the future?

Luke 10 focuses on Jesus sending out the seventy; the appointed text deletes verses condemning unrepentant towns. Jesus had already sent out the twelve in chapter 9, giving almost identical instructions. While twelve has special meaning for the people of Israel, seventy is different. Why seventy? Some turn to Genesis 10 where seventy nations of the world are named. Others see “seven” as a number that gathers up all places and people, as when we say, “the seven seas.” Jesus is signaling God's mission to the whole world – beyond Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Whatever the numbers mean, the task is urgent. “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.” Don't get distracted! Go to the towns I am about to enter and say to them, “The kingdom of God has come near you.” Jesus sends them out in teams of two – this work isn't easy to do alone! These teams are preparing the way for Jesus as he makes his way toward Jerusalem. That's intriguing, isn't it? In John's gospel Jesus promises to prepare a place for us, but here, the seventy are preparing a place for Jesus! What if Luke wants readers throughout time to see themselves as part of this mission? What instructions does Jesus give in this Evangelism Handbook?

“Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’” Evangelism doesn't begin with threats. We don't ask people, “If you die tonight, do you know where you will be?” That question is meant to scare the hell out of people, but it's not what Jesus had in mind. “Peace to this house,” is our first word.

This is Christ's peace we offer: to a person whose race is different from ours, a gay person and a straight person, a child at knee-level and an elder who can't move far beyond her pew, to someone who's a long-time friend and someone whose name you don't know. Evangelism begins with a word of peace.

"Eat what is set before you." This is about more than good manners. Jesus' instructions are about having respect for the people who are providing hospitality, even if what they serve isn't appetizing to us. Eating with people who are different would become a big deal later on when the Gospel message moved beyond Jerusalem. Could believers who were Jewish eat with Gentiles? It's no accident that Peter realizes God's impartiality through a vision of all kinds of food he'd been taught to never eat! (Acts 10 and 11) Perhaps we can expand not only what we eat, but what we sing! There are several Spanish hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, known among Lutherans as the "cranberry hymnal." Often the Spanish lyrics come first, followed by the English translation. I wonder if Jesus might say to us, *"Sing what is set before you"* – rather than going immediately to the English verses? Once or twice a month we could sing a song in Spanish or learn portions of the Spanish setting of the liturgy. How can we honor more fully the people who live in the community to which we have been sent?

But this Handbook is about more than peace and eating. Jesus is realistic. Some towns won't offer hospitality. Some people will refuse to hear. Some may be downright rude. When that happens, Jesus tells the seventy what to say: "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you." Pretty harsh, isn't it? Well, not as harsh as the disciples asking God to rain down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54–55). "Move on," Jesus says. "Don't let the dust of that town weigh you down or discourage you." This is a word of protest and warning – and encouragement. Judgment still belongs to God.

And did you notice? Even in the unwelcoming towns, "The kingdom of God has come near."

Barbara K. Lundblad

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost July 13, 2025

Deuteronomy 30:9–14

Psalms 25:1–10

Colossians 1:1–14

Luke 10:25–37

Law can be gospel if we are brave enough to let it.

In a previous town, the empty-nest couple who lived next door to me were modern Orthodox Jewish. They were highly observant. They walked to shul every Shabbat, separated meat and dairy, and gave me their chametz every Passover. In the fall, they welcomed me to dinner in the sukkah they built in our shared driveway. Under the glow of its lights, I witnessed the rich beauty of the religious practices embedded in their daily life, from ritual hand-washing to prayers of blessing. In their day-to-day experience, God's law required effort, but it was not restrictive, and it did not condemn. Their faith practices showed me a God who is deeply invested in God's people, who is present in every action, every breath. As my neighbors and I often discussed, no observance of God's law is more important than caring for one's neighbor.

Engaging the Texts

For those who customarily preach a contrast between a law that condemns us and a gospel that sets us free, it is worth considering God's liberating, gospel-filled law this week. The Hebrew Bible text from Deuteronomy 30 provides a solid summary of the entirety of Deuteronomy: what God asks of God's people is neither complex nor hidden. God is clear. Following God's law leads to life and flourishing. When we turn away from God's law—the love of God and of neighbor—God's people are harmed, and our mutual life suffers. God's law of love beats in our very hearts, and through it flows the salvation of all God's people here and now, not just in the hereafter.

The author of Colossians picks up the theme. The word of truth bears fruit among God's people as they echo it with their actions. Though the author uses the term *gospel* (Colossians 1:5), the attributes of this word of truth are similar to God's law in Deuteronomy. It involves knowledge of God and good works; it is intimately linked to God; it depends on true hearing and true comprehension. It may challenge expectations, but it's not complicated.

Jesus illuminates this fundamental law with the parable of the so-called "good Samaritan." In his story, two people who ought to be familiar with the core of God's law to love God and neighbor—a priest and a Levite—pass the traveler who has been robbed, beaten, and left for dead. In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine evaluates popular explanations

of why the priest and Levite do not aid the traveler and rejects antisemitic interpretations that hinge on a misunderstanding of observing Jewish law: they do not risk ritual contamination by physical contact with the traveler, and anyway, Jewish law places the acute need of emergency situations above perfect observance.¹ Instead, their fear wins. They do not want to be the robbers' next victims. A Samaritan chooses to risk himself on behalf of a neighbor with whom his people are at odds. The Samaritan demonstrates that God's law can be observed even by those who don't realize they are following it, and through that observance come radical connection, safety, healing, and freedom—the work of the gospel.

Pastoral Reflections

The parable of the “good Samaritan” is widely familiar, and many people can recount the plot. Fewer people, even among those who are biblically literate, can recall its context in the gospel of Luke. Your mileage may vary in your own context, but in my experience, focusing too deeply on the parable draws attention away from its frame, which is essential. Jesus doesn't tell the parable for fun: he responds to a bad-faith question from a lawyer. When the lawyer requests that Jesus specify who, exactly, counts as a neighbor, Jesus tells a story of an enemy who behaves in a neighborly way when more obvious candidates for “neighbor” do not.

This year, the frame of the story seems particularly important. In the context of the United States, our wider culture's working definition of “neighbor” is much narrower than the one proposed by Jesus. Our neighbors are the people who live in our apartment building or along our street. We meet them in church and in the grocery store. At a stretch, neighbors are the people in our towns, cities, or states. They share our citizenship and speak our language. Neighbors aren't exactly like us, but they're similar. We choose to care about neighbors before we care about strangers. Federal funding is for neighbors, not strangers. Assistance is for us and our neighbors, not strangers.

Jesus presents a different definition. Neighbors may or may not live near us; they may or may not have the same cultural values and practices. Neighbors can be quite distant from us. They can even be our enemies. Neighbors can have any immigration status, reside in any country, speak any language, work any job or none, be of any age and ability, be religious or not. We might agree or hold diverging views. Neighbors become neighbors when we take the risk of caring for them and about them. Neighbors become neighbors when we risk accepting their care.

It is a big ask for God's law and God's grace to trans-

form strangers to neighbors when they behave like enemies. Enemies are not the people I want as my neighbors, yet here we are. The frame of the story is essential. Following God's law requires courage, but the heart of this law is gospel truth.

Linnéa Clark

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 20, 2025

Genesis 18:1–10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:1–28

Luke 10:38–42

In a previous congregation, we had two backup hard drives. Each Friday afternoon, our administrator would remove the first one, swap it for the second one, and place the first one in the fireproof safe to ensure a recent backup of our data.

The hard drives had been named Mary and Martha by someone with a sense of humor. They took turns as they worked: one week, Mary received the backup; the next week, Martha got it. Although the biblical Mary and Martha were at odds, the hard drives worked in tandem.

The biblical sisters may not have been so different from each other after all, and both of them fulfilled meaningful vocations.

Engaging the Texts

Luke 10:38–42 follows directly on the heels of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), part of a longer chapter in which Jesus teaches his followers to integrate God's law with their actions. The home where Jesus stays belongs to Martha; with no mention of other men in the family, she is the head of the household. Her younger sister Mary immediately takes a place at Jesus' feet, a position typically occupied by students as they listened to a rabbi or other teacher. Though noteworthy, women like Mary in first-century Jewish society were known to learn and to teach in homes, synagogues, and other public and private spaces.²

As Martha welcomes her unexpected guests, she gets right to work with “her many tasks” (Luke 10:40). However, the tasks prove distracting and frustrating. It is simple to assume that the tasks relate to the additional work of hosting unplanned dinner guests, but the gospel does not specify. Perhaps this is more about Martha herself than about Mary's lack of work. For my part, I recall how often I am prone to “procrasti-working”—procrastinating from some of my work

1. Amy-Jill Levine. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 99–103.

2. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011–2017), 137–138.

by turning to less urgent work instead—and the feeling of overwhelm that inevitably results.

When Martha's frustration bubbles over, she directs it at Jesus rather than speaking directly to her sister. Despite her attempt at triangulation, Martha becomes a surprise student of Jesus, too, even though she hasn't taken the time to sit down at his feet. Jesus' response reminds her that any action is incomplete without learning.

Despite Jesus' response, Martha's housework and hospitality are not unimportant. Her "many tasks" still matter. The encounter between Abraham, Sarah, and the three holy strangers illuminates hospitality's importance. As the scene shimmers with noonday heat, Sarah and Abraham jump into action. Abraham promises water and bread, but Sarah uses the best flour to make cakes. Abraham and his servant slaughter and cook a tender calf. Abraham even provides curds and milk, full of nourishing fat, protein, and flavor. These are not quick preparations. Sarah and Abraham work for an extended period to produce the feast. Neither of them have time to talk with the guests until the meal is served.

With the food finally on the table, something wondrous happens. For many years, Abraham and Sarah have heard God's repeated promise that they will become parents, but there has been no sign of its fulfillment. They have even tried to take the promise into their own hands with harmful effect. Now, in the shade of a tree, God renews the covenant one more time. In fact, this is the last time they will hear God's promise before the birth of Isaac. In less than a year, their son named Laughter will be laughing on their laps.

The gracious hospitality of Sarah and Abraham imbues the choices of Mary and Martha with greater richness. To sit at the feet of the visitor is to receive an indelible promise from God. To be busy with preparation is to do the holy work of hospitality. Both choices have dignity. Both offer an encounter with the holy.

Pastoral Reflections

I have heard church people talk about the story of Jesus with Mary and Martha as a sort of religious personality test: "Are you a Mary or a Martha?" In other words, are you a listener and thinker, or are you a doer? Churches need both Marthas and Marys, but the implication is that it's more worthy to choose the spot next to Jesus than the place in the kitchen.

One unnamed elephant in the room is that of women's household labor. As a woman, I feel my own irritation rising whenever I read Mary and Martha's story. Dinner with Jesus would be impossible without the planning, preparation, shopping, fixing, cleaning, and accounting that Martha provides. There's a term for this: invisible labor. While it frequently affects women in their households, it can also affect people of any gender in service industries, academia, caregiving, and

administrative work. Racial and gender minorities are particularly likely to be affected. Caring, supportive, domestic, behind-the-scenes work is not less dignified. It is essential, and in many ways, it is Christ-like.

When it comes to the ways we choose to live out our Christian vocations, the juxtaposition of Sarah and Abraham's hospitality with Mary and Martha's hospitality is a clear reminder of the goodness and holiness of behind-the-scenes labor. Still, it isn't all about work: an important conversation also takes place at the feet of the divine visitors. Reflection and action need each other. When local and global crises call us to act on behalf of the poor and marginalized, we still need to plant our roots deeply in conversation and learning alongside Mary. When contemplation threatens to slow us to a halt, we need Martha's action, urging us forward.

Linnéa Clark

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 27, 2025

Genesis 18:20–32

Psalms 138

Colossians 2:6–15 (16–19)

Luke 11:1–13

Engaging the Texts

Genesis 18:20–32 presents Abraham's audacious argument with God over the fate of Sodom. Walter Brueggemann describes this passage as "a theological critique which seeks to break open the closed, fated view of the world."³ Abraham's bold negotiation follows his and Sarah's hospitality to three visitors, contrasting their generosity with Sodom's violence. Remarkably, this is the only time "righteousness and justice" are paired in Genesis, signaling that both divine and human righteousness are at stake.

Brueggemann notes that earlier manuscripts suggest Yahweh remained standing before Abraham—an unusual posture implying direct address rather than subservient petition. Abraham's challenge reaches its peak when he declares "Far be it from you!" which Brueggemann translates as "That is profane!" The argument establishes that even a small number of righteous people can save an entire community. At the very end of this whole cycle, it is because the LORD remembered *one* bold petitioner that Lot and his family are rescued.

However, this text requires careful interpretation. Popular readings often reduce it to "scare theology" focused on

3. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press, 1982).

numerical calculations, stylized judgment, or narrow moralizing about sexuality. Brueggemann argues that Sodom's sin was broader social disorder—injustice, pride, and indifference to the needy—as reflected in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Psalm 138 follows the pattern of praise-deliverance-cry that pervades Israel's worship. The psalmist celebrates God's steadfast love while acknowledging that trouble continues. God's delivering hand does not cease reaching toward those in crisis.

Luke 11:1-13 shows Jesus teaching bold, intimate prayer. Notice the differences between Matthew's version and Luke's, including the verse about the Father giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Jesus encourages unashamed persistence in prayer, assuring disciples that God surpasses even good earthly fathers in graciousness.

Pastoral Reflections

Preachers must acknowledge that any mention of Sodom and Gomorrah will likely cause pain to LGBTQ+ members of our congregations and may validate prejudice among others. Despite centuries of misinterpretation linking this text to homosexuality, the biblical witness consistently identifies Sodom's sin as social injustice—pride, inhospitality, and indifference to the vulnerable. If we read this text in worship, our preaching must clearly reject harmful interpretations that weaponize this text against LGBTQ+ people.

Abraham's argument with God offers a revolutionary model for prayer and intercession. As Brueggemann observes, "There is something unembarrassed about Abraham which helps us to see intercession as nearly strident in the face of God" (*Genesis: Interpretation*). This isn't polite, formal prayer—Abraham disputes with God about the very meaning of God's character.

What's at stake theologically is whether there's "good news, even for Sodom." Much is at stake pastorally too, as Brueggemann notes, "for countless persons are trapped in this closed structuring of reality and yearn for the intrusion of grace" (*Genesis: Interpretation*). Abraham's intercession demonstrates that even one person's prayer for those caught in violence and injustice can change the situation, effect rescue, and cause a "revolution in the heart of God."

When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he's giving them relationship within the ritual. As Luther Seminary's Matt Skinner summarizes, the Lord's Prayer declares that God hears, provides, forgives, protects, and expects generosity among us⁴. Jesus encourages persistent prayer. Although, your neighbor might grumble about getting woken up in the middle of the night for some bread, tortillas, or lefse, God's

door is always open for you.

Anne Lamott describes it this way: "Prayer means that, in some unique way, we believe we're invited into a relationship with someone who hears us when we speak into silence."⁵ Sometimes our prayers are wordless—tears, sighs, even angry silence directed toward God.

Like Margaret in Judy Blume's classic novel *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (Bradbury Press, 1970), we're invited into unashamed conversation with God. Margaret argues with God, gives God the silent treatment, and expresses honest doubts and fears. Her prayers mirror Abraham's boldness—direct, persistent, unafraid to challenge.

This may be a Sunday when your sermon gives voice to the prayers of girls navigating a sexist, religiously contentious world, to the cries of LGBTQ+ people raising their demands to God, and to the petitions of those seeking rescue, repair, and redress from violence. Listen to and encourage their boldness before both God and church.

Mike Wilker

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost August 3, 2025

Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14;2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-12

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Engaging the Texts

Ecclesiastes 1 and 2. This is the only Sunday in the three-year lectionary when we read from Ecclesiastes (unless your congregation reads Eccl 3 on New Year's Day). Qoheleth, the teacher in the assembly, reflects on the quest for meaning amid life's realities. The thematic word "vanity" translates the Hebrew *hevel*—literally a breath of air or puff of wind. As a metaphor, it suggests emptiness, meaninglessness. Whether accumulating wealth or wisdom, Qoheleth observes, everything eventually goes "poof." Our collected treasures and knowledge will be lost or passed to others who may squander them.

Contemporary liturgists should consider expanding the reading to include Ecclesiastes 2:24-26, which contains the text referenced in Luke 12:19. Qoheleth counsels: "There's nothing better for mortals than to eat, drink, and find joy in their labor."

Psalm 49 examines both "those who trust in their

4. Matt Skinner, "Who Taught You How to Pray?" *Dear Working Preacher*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/who-taught-you-how-to-pray>.

5. Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (Riverhead Books, 2012).

wealth” and the wise who rely on their own judgments and justifications. The same conclusion applies to both: death awaits, and neither wealth nor wisdom can purchase a different future. The psalmist, situated among neither the wealthy nor the wise, recognizes that their “pomp” is transient. Death equalizes all—only relationship with God ultimately matters.

Luke 12:13-21 begins three consecutive Sundays addressing wealth, security, and eschatological vigilance. Jesus’ point is clear: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Notably, the wealthy man in Jesus’ parable quotes Ecclesiastes 2:24, creating tension between Qoheleth’s counsel to enjoy life’s pleasures and Jesus’ warning against greed.

Pastoral Reflections

Let’s face it: we’re more afraid of scarcity than we are of the devil. Payday lenders and financial markets exploit this fear relentlessly. Before greed, before hoarding, there’s anxiety about our future—and this needs naming from our pulpits.

We’ve witnessed billionaires jockeying with politicians to acquire even more wealth and power, transferring the common good from vulnerable people into their private barns. They steal food from children, healthcare from the sick, and dignity from migrant workers to distract and control. One Iowa Senator, justifying this wealth transfer that depends on cuts to programs like Medicaid, callously declared, “Well, we’re all going to die, for heaven’s sakes, folks.” When Iowans protested, she strolled through a graveyard joking about death, then called on people seeking everlasting life to “embrace my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

I hope our preaching will free people from twisted theology that reduces Jesus to a cosmic insurance policy while ignoring his clear teachings about wealth and compassion.

By extending today’s Ecclesiastes reading to include verses 24-26, we hear the tension between Qoheleth’s counsel to enjoy life’s pleasures and Jesus’ warning against greed. This creates opportunity to explore deeper truths about God’s creation, human labor, and our relationship to abundance.

God calls and blesses us to tend creation and care for our neighbors (Gen 2). Yet our worth does not derive from our work, wealth, or wisdom. Each person is inherently worthy, blessed by the Creator’s steadfast love and the liberating gift of Jesus Christ. Joy blossoms when we eat, drink, and work with God rather than against one another.

Here in Iowa and across America, farmers demonstrate alternatives to hoarding. Growing Hope Globally began when Ohio farmers Vernon and Carol Sloan invited neighbors to address world hunger by sharing corn from their fields. Partnering with Lutheran World Relief, they fund agricultural development programs abroad, serving over 2.3 million people with lasting solutions to hunger.

This sermon will hit close to home for listeners across economic lines. Preach with both prophetic challenge and pastoral compassion, remembering that scarcity anxiety affects everyone differently.

Research and celebrate local food pantries, community gardens, and mutual aid networks already embodying joyful sharing. These ministries offer concrete hope beyond critique.

Reflect honestly on your own financial anxieties. While some clergy face inadequate pay and healthcare, most of us enjoy relative security through salaries, benefits, and retirement plans. How does your relationship with money shape your preaching?

I believe Jesus sets us free from control by bullies and billionaires. He gives courage, creativity, and compassion to resist predatory systems. Jesus reveals God’s love and care for those living with illness and in poverty. Jesus calls us to share our food, drink, and labor in joyful fellowship—not because life is meaningless, but because the life we have today is God’s gift to share with joy.

Mike Wilker

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost August 10, 2025

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 33:12-22

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

Reflections on the texts for preaching

Genesis 15:1-6. This passage is part of a larger narrative in Genesis often referred to as the *Abraham cycle*. It might be helpful for preachers to share some background about the *Abraham cycle*, especially regarding what happens before and after this passage.

The assigned pericope occurs at a particularly vulnerable and uncertain moment in the *Abraham cycle*, during which Abram laments, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus” (2)⁶ “You have given me no offspring” (3). To which “the word of the Lord” (4) responds, “This man shall not be your heir...Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...So shall your descendants be” (4-5). The passage concludes that Abram “believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (6).

Amid the religiously diverse environment across God’s

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

creation, it is important for preachers to be understanding and sensitive to the significance which the *Abraham cycle* holds for each *Abrahamic faith* (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Another important consideration regarding the *Abrahamic faiths* relates to the alarmingly rampant levels of Antisemitism and Islamophobia, especially in North America, but also in many other parts of the world. Understanding the effect these things have on the communities preachers serve will be helpful for sharing the good news.

As I write these words, countless communities and individuals are waiting in uncertainty and agony such as what Abram expressed in verses 2-3. Preachers can draw parallels to the *Abraham cycle*, highlighting some of the similar challenges that God's people experience. Preachers can also point out how lament can be a faithful response in challenging times, as seen through the trajectory of this passage. Finally, preachers can respond to the agony and uncertainty that so many are living under with "the word of the Lord," proclaiming God's presence and agency with those who are struggling, as is seen throughout the *Abraham cycle*. Preachers should also be cautious not to demean, undermine, minimize, or add to anyone's real life struggles when engaging and proclaiming good news with these topics.

Psalm 33:12–22. Psalm 33 proclaims "a new song" (3) focusing on "the new world that Yahweh is now creating...ordered by God's justice over which God presides with faithfulness."⁷ The verses assigned proclaim "Our heart is glad in [Yahweh], because we trust in [Yahweh's] holy name" (21). To provide parishioners with more context, preachers can read or reference the verses omitted from this pericope. With so much uncertainty and so many challenges across God's creation, Psalm 33 gives preachers an opportunity to proclaim, "a new song" (3) which highlights how Yahweh is still working among us to create a new world that shall be upheld by God's justice and faithfulness. Preachers might point toward the efforts of community leaders, charities, or social agencies as examples.

Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16. This pericope is part of a larger section from Hebrews extending into chapter 12. Since the pericope for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost also includes parts of this section of Hebrews, one joint commentary for both passages will be offered here.

Throughout my ministry, I do not believe I have ever offered a sermon on any passages from Hebrews. Further, I do not recall hearing much, if any, preaching on Hebrews. Thus, preachers should be mindful that some parishioners will likely not be that familiar with Hebrews, and it would be wise to offer some context about this book.

Even though Hebrews is often referred to as the "Letter to the Hebrews," it has a distinctive style and theology which differs from the Pauline Letters. While the author of Hebrews is unknown, most scholars believe it was written for an audience of both Jewish and Gentile Christians between the years 50-90 CE. Hebrews conveys several major themes to its readers including that Christ is the true divine Son of God, faith in Christ is superior to any other confession, and encouragement to readers to persevere and remain faithful.⁸

The section of Hebrews which the assigned pericopes come from offers an image of a great cloud of witnesses whose lives witness to "the substance of things hoped for" (11:1). The author concludes this section proclaiming that "Jesus may be added as the ultimate example of one who proved faithful in suffering and prepared the way for others to follow (12:1-3)."⁹

Hebrews presents preachers with many opportunities to share the good news of who Christ is for the world and gives preachers a chance to offer words of encouragement with the congregations they serve. One final caution pertains to the suffering that is described in these passages. Preachers should be mindful of how descriptions such as Jesus "endured the cross, despising the shame" (12:2) might be heard by individuals who are victims or survivors of abuse, oppression, or other kinds of trauma. Further, preachers should be aware of the impact which various understandings of suffering and theology will have on how parishioners hear and interpret these passages. Care should be exercised so as not to convey harmful theological understandings around suffering or oppression that have sometimes been used with passages such as these. Rather, preachers should strive to share a message that is helpful, affirming, and uplifting, centered in the gospel, as was the original goal and intention of the book of Hebrews.

Luke 12:32–40. These verses, along with the gospel for next Sunday (12:49–56), are part of a long discourse which Jesus offers in Luke. This pericope contains a phrase that numerous parishioners will probably find familiar, when Jesus tells his audience, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (32). "Fear, in this instance, refers to the anxiety and misgivings associated with the uncertainty of life, modeled so well by the wealthy farmer-landholder in Jesus' parable (vv. 16–20)."¹⁰ Jesus then instructs his hearers "Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven" (33). Jesus cautions the audience, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit...like those who are

7. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 33.

8. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 429-433.

9. Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, 429.

10. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 495.

waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks” (35–36). He refers to those whom “the master finds alert” (37) as “blessed” (37). He concludes, “You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (40).

Preachers should be mindful of how Jesus’ instruction to “not be afraid” (32) might be heard at a time when many people and communities are fearful and have reasons to be afraid. Some of the uncertainties and injustices causing these fears are similar to those which caused fear in some of the communities Jesus served. Preachers can name those parallels and proclaim Jesus’ same powerful promise of the “kingdom” (32). However, preachers should also use caution to avoid this coming across as what I have often heard described as a “Jesus band-aid.” This is when sermons try to engage the daunting challenges, injustices, uncertainties, and fears which people are experiencing but either intentionally or unintentionally end up minimizing or demeaning people’s struggles with an overly simplified message that seems to suggest that Jesus will magically make everything better. Preachers can carefully study how Jesus proclaimed the promise of the “kingdom” (32) in this and other gospels for examples of how to proclaim hope in light of people’s real fears without it sounding like a “Jesus band-aid.” Finally, preachers should understand that some parishioners may mishear Jesus’ declaration that “the Son of Man is coming” (40) as referring to ideas about *the rapture* that are prevalent in some circles of twenty-first century North American theology. Preachers can carefully describe what Jesus actually meant by his words in order to avoid such confusion.

Eric I. Hanson

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost August 17, 2025

Jeremiah 23:23–29

Psalms 82

Hebrews 11:29–12:2

Luke 12:49–56

Reflections on the texts for preaching

Jeremiah 23:23–29. This pericope is part of a larger section in Jeremiah 23, extending from verses 9–40, which laments the state of the nation and false prophets. The specific issues with these false prophets are that they are enabling and perpetuating “evil”¹¹ (10) and “wickedness” (11). As the

passage declares, “they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from wickedness” (14). This section of Jeremiah concludes that false prophets shall be left in “everlasting disgrace and perpetual shame” (40). To provide parishioners with more context, preachers may want to read or refer to the verses missing from this pericope. The assigned pericope laments “How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart?” (26).

This Jeremiah passage offers preachers an opportunity to encourage genuine and healthy lament as a part of worship. Further, the theme of false prophecy enabling “wickedness” (11) is sadly still happening. Speaking from my own experience, right before writing this article I was a part of a *Bread for the World* regional meeting which centered around potential cuts and changes being proposed to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). If enacted, these cuts and changes would have an adverse effect on many of the most vulnerable populations in the United States who are already struggling and rely upon these programs for assistance. During this meeting, one participant questioned how it would be possible to continue carrying out faith-based advocacy in an environment with “wickedness” (11) similar to what Jeremiah described. One of the organizers responded to this question about this challenging reality with the words, “God is still God.”¹² This is an example of a prophetic voice proclaiming the good news of God’s reign even in the face of “wickedness” (11). Preachers can use their own prophetic voices to renounce the forces of “evil” (10) and “wickedness” (11) by sharing the good news found in this Jeremiah passage or that was proclaimed in that *Bread for the World* meeting, declaring to the world that “God is still God.”

Psalms 82. This psalm promises that God shall “Give justice to the weak and the orphan...Rescue the weak and the needy; [and] deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (3–4). Throughout my ministry, I have found that a number of the parishioners I have served hold a very different understanding of what “justice” (3) means than what is proclaimed here as well as in other scriptures. Preachers should be mindful of how parishioners hearing this passage might understand “justice” and have an opportunity to highlight the biblical understanding of God’s “justice” by proclaiming some of the examples shared in Psalm 82. Sadly, much of creation is still suffering under “the hand of the wicked” (4). Yet as the words of Psalm 82 proclaim, God’s “justice” promises to “rescue” and “deliver” (4) those who fall under such cruelty. How might preachers share this good news with so many longing to hear it?

texts in my articles come from the NRSV.

12. *Bread for the World’s May Regional Meeting*. Zoom. 5-14-2025.

11. Unless otherwise noted, translations cited from biblical

Hebrews 11:29–12:2. Commentary on this passage is included in the entry for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, for August 10, 2025.

Luke 12:49–56. This passage is part of a long discourse Jesus offers in Luke's gospel. In the opening verses Jesus uses images of "fire" (49), and "baptism" (50) before describing specific challenges that his audience would encounter, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided" (51–52). This "underscores Jesus' awareness that the presence of division and judgment will...stand in stark contrast to what might have been expected"¹³ and is "in tension with the Lukan representation of Jesus' own mission...the hope for peace (1:79; 2:14)."¹⁴

I have witnessed, and also personally experienced, deep "division" (51) as well as conflict like what Jesus describes throughout my life and ministry. Further, we are living at a time that is extremely divisive, and preachers should be mindful of how Jesus' words about households being "divided" (52, 53) might be misheard as endorsing every conflict or how his words about "peace" (51) may be misinterpreted as a total rejection of "peace" (51). The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out that "genuine peace is not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice."¹⁵ Jesus' words here seem to offer a similar explanation about the purpose of his ministry and mission. Admittedly, this is a difficult text to preach on, but it is also an important one. How might preachers use this opportunity to share the good news in a way that is faithful to the passage and also does not reinforce unhealthy understandings of "peace" and "division" prevalent in the world today?

Eric I. Hanson

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost August 24, 2025

Isaiah 58:9b–14

Psalms 103:1–8

Hebrews 12:18–29

Luke 13:10–17

Reflections on the Gospel for preaching

Luke's story is set in a synagogue, most likely in Galilee, and it's the last mention of Jesus teaching in a synagogue in this gospel. On this particular Sabbath, the reader encounters a disruptive Jesus, whose words and actions infuriate the religious leaders. (Was it Jesus' intention to challenge these leaders? Is he that strategic?) His actions both comfort (the woman) and disturb (the leaders). This seems par for the course when Jesus teaches about the Kingdom of God.

On the heels of this story about the bent over woman, Jesus asks the question: therefore, what is the kingdom of God like? It is like what we just read and experienced in Luke's story. It is like a woman healed after being bent over for eighteen grueling years. Her view was the dirty ground and sandaled feet. We don't know what kept her bent over. We can imagine how painful and isolating her life must have been. Her sightline was narrowed down to the ground, and she was unable to look into the eyes of others, leaving her bereft of human connection. She comes to the synagogue, an act of courage and hope. She is alone, set apart from others. Jesus sees her, acknowledges and speaks to her. He walks headlong into controversy. His starting point is compassion, not human merit or achievement. Jesus then does what is unlawful for men in public: he lays his hands on her, touches her, and she is immediately healed. Her spine softens and straightens, her neck rises, her gaze lifts. She looks right at Jesus, eye-to-eye, person-to-person. Her immediate response is to praise God for her unfurling body, her newly expanded sightline and her reconnection to community.

Like a chemical reaction, when Jesus acts, life is disrupted, rearranged, and broken open, forging new bonds and understanding. In other words, when Jesus acts the Kingdom of God transforms and creates something new. For those with power and privilege, Jesus' actions are met with pushback and argument. The ruler and leaders of the synagogue are more concerned with rules, proper order and certain traditions than with the miracle of this woman's liberation from a life of pain. The professional and institutional response to Jesus is: come back another day when it is proper to be healed. Jesus' act of compassion and beauty is turned into something ugly and unlawful.

For Jesus, there is no other way to live in the kingdom of God. He must break with the rules, as good and helpful as

13. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 510.

14. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 510.

15. Martin Luther King Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998), 303.

they can be. He must respond when there is a need, a thirst, a hunger. The law must first serve love, serve those in need. When do our rules, our customs and traditions, take precedence over human need? Can we be nimble and responsive, shedding protocols when they stand in the way of love? In Luke's story Jesus models how propriety and proper order are dropped for affection and caring. This kingdom ethic will make the institutional system and its leaders get bent out of shape. We hold dear the ten commandments, including this one: remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. What Jesus does on this particular Sabbath, healing a woman bent over for eighteen years, seems like holiness to me. The Hebrew word for Sabbath means to stop. I would add, to slow down, pay attention, linger, pause. To see, to notice another's need and pain, we must slow down, even stop. Jesus desires that we all be seen eye-to-eye and beheld by the loving eyes of Jesus. Invite your congregation to imagine Jesus looking at them, eye-to-eye. Maybe it's with a cup of coffee or tea, sitting across from Jesus as he drinks us in with love. The preacher can explore the many ways we are "bent over," unmoored from community. How we long to be seen, for someone to give us their gaze, their time, their attentive care. And hopefully, the church, the gathered body of Christ, looks into the loving eyes of each other, greeting one another with the eye-to-eye claim: God's peace be with you, the Christ in me greets the Christ in thee.

In our world, speed is the enemy, keeping us from compassion and empathy. Below is a story that invites a slowing down, a disruption, in order to love more dearly.

The author Kerri ni Dochartaigh describes in *Cacophony of Bone* her father's solitary piece of advice. "He told me, that, when an argument occurs, the only thing to do, whatever the weather, is to go outside. To put a stop to all that is happening indoors—leave the plates on the table, turn out the lights, gather coats and whatever else might be needed - and get outside. Get up off the floor, the bed, the chair, the edge of the bath- and walk together - side by side. Change the scenery, the tempo, the flow of a given moment and you change everything in that moment irrevocably. You cannot, he told me, drag yourself back into a full-blown barney when you find yourself outside under the sky, under any sky that's there for the having."

Luke shows us the radical and extravagant nature of the kingdom of God in this story. Jesus unleashes a new covenant of life over death, the power of love and compassion over evil. The woman's healing and wholeness is a foretaste of the healing awaiting God's creation.

Mary Halvorson

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 31, 2025

Proverbs 25:6–7

Psalm 112

Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16

Luke 14:1,7–14

Reflections on the texts for preaching

Commentators claim verses 7–14 in Luke's gospel contain two exhortations that are connected by a wisdom saying: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke sets forth these two exhortations: 1) avoid status seeking and 2) a warning against seeking rewards for every good deed. These statements are standard rabbinical wisdom. They are reflections on human behavior and what it means to live well. But here, Luke will use them to point beyond human behavior to the behavior of God. God will lift the humble. God will bless those who give no thought of reward. God exalts and God blesses. God is the actor here.

God calls us into a love which must be shared with others. This is the case with the story of the banquet. The Pharisees are testing Jesus. They are watching him closely. (We see already that this is a weird display of hospitality, to be watched and scrutinized!) Some kind of conflict is brewing. But, as is so often the case with Jesus, things get turned around, and it's the Pharisees, and we readers, who are tested and challenged. We are to live and love a certain way. But, hey, we want the good seats at the table. We want to be recognized. We want to make sure we are seen and sit next to someone important, who will help us in our social networking. Where we sit gives us a sense of power, status, and worth. We want to keep the table safe from the riff raff, those who make us uncomfortable.

But Jesus knows something the Pharisees and their cohorts don't. He knows how God operates and how God's reign works. The etiquette, the protocol, if you will, of God's kingdom transcends the power games of our status-obsessed culture. Jesus calls us to take the lower seat, to live with humility. This doesn't mean becoming a doormat. Humility means being freed from having to prove our worth, which sounds a lot like liberation. We do not rise at the expense of another, but we are all raised together. We don't have power over but share power with. (A reminder: Power simply means the ability to act. It is what we do with our power, to crush or lift up, to tend or abuse, that matters.)

The Kingdom of God looks like this: a shared banquet where the seating is all on one level, in a circle, no first or last chairs. The table Christ invites us to, where we come with outstretched and gnarly, arthritic, calloused, soft, cracked

hands, where we all—all—come as beggars, is a foretaste of the ridiculously welcoming feast to come.

The words humility and humor share the same root. Humus, means of the earth, ground. True humility keeps us grounded, connected to the earth. Humility keeps us honest, and reminds us we are dust and to dust we shall return. Good humor is also based on honesty about the human condition. C.K. Chesterton once wrote: Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. Humility is a gift. The shared banquet with equal seating, where the stress and strain of figuring who one is or hopes to be, is gone. Grace.

The Hebrews text is also full of exhortations about living well as social and faith-filled persons. The strangers to whom one is to show hospitality were most likely Christians from other countries, who depended on their siblings in faith for room and board and rest from their travels. I think of all the opportunities for hospitality, big and small, that happen upon us daily. These are grace laden moments. And in these moments and meetings we encounter the divine, the very heart and essence of God's love. The author of Hebrews empowers the community to provide hospitality for others, to engage ethically with others, in mutual love. Christians are the kind of people who live like this. Christians are the kind of people who care for those who are ill-treated. Christians are the kind of people who are content with what they have, who receive strangers as angels unaware. Consider the angels unaware in your life, tell their story.

Years ago, on a cold winter day, a man stopped by the church where I served. I could smell alcohol on his breath. He was clearly drunk. He was unkempt. He was also much bigger than me, and a total stranger. I stood in the doorway as we talked, and the whole time I was thinking it would be really stupid to let him into my office with no one else around. He wanted a bus token. Nothing else. But I was suspicious. I was nervous. Then he told me about his daughter who had died. He cried. And then he did something that took my breath away. He recited, by memory, a poem he had written in memory of his beloved daughter. The words flowed with beauty and finesse and brilliance. I stood there in awe, and also in humility, as I was busted by my own type casting. He finished his poem, thanked me for the bus token and left, almost as quickly as he had come. I remained in the cold doorway and wondered if the encounter had really happened. For me, he was an angel unaware.

Mary Halvorson

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 7, 2025

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Psalms 1

Philemon 1:1–21

Luke 14:25–33

Engaging the Texts

At first look, the texts for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost might seem a bit fraught—we might be tempted to hand over the preaching to a colleague, an intern, or choose different scriptures for this particular Sunday. There are the if-then statements in Deuteronomy, the “Wicked” who blow away like chaff in Psalm 1, the difficult topic of slavery in Philemon, and the enormous costs of discipleship enumerated in the Gospel lesson.

But shirking preaching on these texts would have us miss out. Careful, open, and generous reading is necessary in our struggle to preach these texts. The abundant life God and Jesus want for us is described against the possibility of adversity and death in each of these readings. The exhortation—our calling—is to “choose life” as the Deuteronomy text spells out.

What does a faith-filled chosen life look like? Psalm 1 offers a good metaphor: Those who delight in God's law and claim the love, grace, and mercy God has for us are like trees planted by streams of water—their leaves do not wither, they are strong and bear fruit in season, in all that they do they prosper” (Ps 1:3). The abundant life God wishes for us—gives us—makes us like these trees—strong, nimble, fruitful, sustained.

Of course, to listen to the wicked, travel the paths of the sinner, or scoff at the love and grace God gives is another choice we can make, as the Deuteronomy text warns. These were real choices before the Israelites as they headed into the promised land with its promised new abundant life. And they are real choices for us today—timeless choices for God's people, in fact.

God sets before the Israelites/us a choice—if we love God and walk in God's ways, *then* we enjoy abundant life. Of course, should we decline this way, and instead turn away from God and fall victim to the ways of life that lead to worshipping false gods, be they material wealth, selfishness, or general wickedness and sinning ...well, then life abundant eludes us. The if-then is most helpfully read as a cause-and-effect description of what abundant life with our gracious God looks like, not as an ultimatum or threat.

When read carefully, Paul's plea for Onesimus to Philemon, has this breath of grace-filled description to it, as well. Paul, who certainly did not hesitate to make demands or condemn others, has a more gracious tone in this letter. He appeals to Philemon on the basis of love, not the command he could use—he writes to him as an equal, a disciple of Christ. He reminds Philemon of his identity as a follower of Jesus and gently points the way to how Philemon should best respond to the changed Onesimus' return. It is an appeal to do the right thing in this particular situation, much like the Psalm and Deuteronomy texts for the day.

Could it be that using that same descriptive vs. prescriptive lens to read this week's Gospel lesson might yield a more nuanced reading of its message, as well? Is this a list of demands that Jesus is making for his disciples, or is it more descriptive of what a life of discipleship looks like?

Pastoral Reflections

This Sunday's Gospel makes one want to end the reading by saying "This is the Gospel of the Lord?!" Hate your family and your life, suffer in carrying the cross, give up all your possessions—this is what Jesus, the embodiment of love requires of his followers? One could preach this text literally—a call to hate and suffer and fall into poverty—but many in the pews might be asking where the good news is in that.

Taken with the other readings for the day, we might begin to wrestle with this text a bit differently. For sure this text is speaking about the cost of discipleship ("cost" is only used once in the NT and it is in this text) and a radical shift to the ethics of Jesus. And it's true—we do better at following Jesus when we set aside our need for our neighbor's approval, our greed in acquiring material wealth, and the perversions and stereotypes that keep us distracted and estranged from the abundant life Jesus offers.

But what if we ask what kind of discipleship is being *described* here and let that be our guiding hermeneutic instead of what is *required*, as if there is a checklist to complete? Then we see that what's being described is a commitment to love a much wider circle of people, to live in freedom from selfishness and greed, to be strong in our faith and suffering, and to steward our relationships and God's creation in faith.

Jesus is doing something new here in moving us past our human distractions and assumed kinship ties into something far greater. Being a disciple means having a new family in Christ, new expectations, new life. Yes, there are costs, but also gifts.

These texts are asking us to take very seriously what it is to love God and follow Jesus. Discipleship without action and a sense of obligation for the other is tantamount to renouncing our faith. There are consequences and sacrifices in discipleship. It's a process, not some sort of elusive end goal

we strive ever toward. We will be challenged, we will make mistakes—and our life will be richer on this path of following Jesus and loving God. Choose life! A life abundant, filled with divine grace and mercy and love. **Amen.**

Melanie Heiser Hill

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 14, 2025

Exodus 32:7–14

Psalm 51:1–10

1 Timothy 1:12–17

Luke 15:1–10

Engaging the Texts

What a bouquet of texts we have this week!

The Israelites, unable to tolerate the risk of faith, try to domesticate God into a god more to their liking—a bit more tangible (a golden calf) and sparkly, a little less exclusive, less demanding—in the Exodus text. God's response is anger and Moses has to talk God down from smiting the whole community. Yikes!

Psalm 51 plays the repentance theme. This is a Davidic psalm purported to be David's response after the prophet Nathan convicted him of his egregious sin toward Bathsheba and Uriah, and therefore God. David (the presumed psalmist) laments, prays for healing and renewal, beseeches God to create in him a clean heart and renew a right spirit. The golden calf makers could've used the language of prayer and repentance this psalm gives.

Although 1 Timothy is a disputed letter of the Apostle Paul, it does continue the theme of repentance nicely, and whoever wrote it in Paul's name takes on the sticky issue of righteousness. What is righteousness? Something one earns? No, it's a divine gift—we don't attain it on our own. In fact, the arrogance of a sinner even *trying* to justify themselves, just highlights the free gift of grace that God gives. The one writing as Paul delineates the unrighteous behavior of Saul-Paul to make the point—God's grace is deep. So deep that Paul was not only given a second chance after persecuting the followers of Jesus, but called to serve God in a most particular way, furthering the spread of the gospel. God can use us all.

And then two beloved Lost & Found parables for our gospel lesson. Familiar to many, the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin encourage us to read carefully, and be open to looking at things in a new way. Jesus is teaching and his audience swells with both religious authorities and sinners reviled by said authorities. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!" the Pharisee and scribes spit in anger. Jesus

responds with a parable. Tricky those parables....

On the face of it, these are simple little stories—a sheep/coin, is lost and the shepherd or the woman who lost the coin desperately search for their lost precious ones. Often we read these parables as being about The Lost. When we do this we don't give much thought to the shepherd, or the woman who tirelessly sweeps the house and lights a lamp to search for her missing coin.

What if this parable isn't as much about the sheep or the coin, but more about the respective searchers? What if this parable is about God's character—God searching and searching for the lost ones, the ones everyone else has already written off as lost for good. How could this parable inform our idea of who God is? How is God like a shepherd? A woman?

Pastoral Reflections

The context of these stories is important. Jesus has been accused of welcoming and eating with sinners—this is a critique that the religious insiders level at him. Could these parables also be critiques—perhaps of the religious insiders and their inhospitableness?

In these two parables—as well as the third Lost & Found story, the Prodigal Son, that follows—the presumed “sinner” (sheep, coin, son) do not repent. They are entirely passive, all three. This suggests it's not repentance that's being highlighted in these stories—the son doesn't have a chance to apologize, lost sheep often *hide* in their fear, and coins are coins, devoid of feeling and action. No, there is no first step requirement of repentance before one can be found. The message of these parables is that the shepherd, the woman, the father—GOD—will find the lost ones, because the sheep/coin/son can't do anything to get themselves found—only the one who searches for them and welcomes them can do that.

Could Jesus be saying: I need these sinners and tax collectors just like the shepherd needs the sheep and the woman needs the coin. *That's* why I welcome them. Not because they turned to me (repented) but because I searched to find them.

This is a parable about who's in and who's out, who's lost and who's found, who's welcomed and who's not. Who are the lost in the audience that hears these parables? Is it the sinners and tax collectors, or is it the Pharisees and scribes?

God's nature is to search for all who are lost—for those desperate to be found and for those who are hiding in fear. *We* are sought, even when we're not looking to be found. Why? Because of who God is—not who we are or might become.

But there's another aspect to these stories that should not be ignored. These are stories of celebration! When the lost are found the call goes out to rejoice with the searcher and the community which has been restored. The flock is full. The coins are all there. The family/community is restored. Let's have a party!

The party is what these parables are about. These deceptively simple stories are not so much a call to repentance, but a call to rejoice! Choosing whether to join the party reveals whether you think God's love, grace, and salvation are based on your merit or on God's mercy. Those who find God's grace and mercy offensive when given freely to others can't celebrate and thereby, ironically, exclude themselves from God's grace.

So who are the real lost ones here? Not the sheep or the coin (or the son) it would seem. What about the sneering religious insiders who are “concerned” about who Jesus welcomes? Doesn't God search them out, too?

Melanie Heiser Hill

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 21, 2025

Amos 8:4–7

Psalms 113

1 Timothy 2:1–7

Luke 16:1–13

Reflections on the texts for preaching

If you are uneasy about preaching about God's preferential option for the poor, maybe you should have your seminarian take this Sunday! Amos, the psalmist and Luke point to the reality of God's desire for justice, God's promise to complete it, and a warning to us about how money makes us its slave.

For Amos, justice is not justice if it is not justice for the poor. The justice God seeks is not merely obeying laws that society enacts. The rich who “trample on the needy” (4) technically fulfill the Sabbath law, but not its spirit. You can imagine them impatiently looking for the sun to set, so that they can get back to business. And a business that is crooked (5) and oppressive (6).

In the eighth century BCE, the sabbath was not primarily a day for religious rites; there was no established weekly synagogue service. The sabbath was for rest for all creation (Ex 20:1-17) and rest for all who work, human and beast (Deut 5:6-21). It is especially the latter that is violated here. The greedy businesspeople can't wait for their sabbath to be over, because then their slaves and hired hands lose their sabbath blessing and have to get back to work, making money for them.

By the time Amos preached, the concentration of land in fewer and fewer hands led to greater numbers of small farmers being dispossessed. Now, as landless workers, the poor are at the mercy of those who “buy the needy for a pair of sandals” (6). It is for this oppression of the poor by the wealthy that

God will send Israel into exile.

But aren't there good rich people? Not all business people are dishonest or treat their workers unjustly, do they? Surely that is true, but hold that thought while we detour to the Psalm. Psalm 113 begins with beautiful words of praise. God's praise echoes throughout all time (2-3) and all space (4). God is high above all nations, even above heaven itself! (5-6). "Who is like our God?" the psalmist asks in v. 5.

Most every nation around Israel could answer: "Our God is like that—high above the heavens, eternal, worthy of glory!" What makes the LORD unique is not God's height but God's desire to be in solidarity with the lowest, to stoop down and lift them up. The LORD doesn't just look on the poor with care, God shares their lot and transforms their lives. Justice for the poor is not just what God does, it is what God is. This is echoed in 1st Timothy, where God in Christ offers himself for all (6).

Back to your question: the wealth and its uses gets a little muddier in Luke. The rich man seems to run a pretty good operation (albeit lacking supervision of his CFO!). Jesus doesn't directly condemn the rich man for being rich. And wow, was he rich! The amounts owed by his debtors are not those of a farm family. The quantities of flour and oil are for large agribusiness. And the owner commends his manager for his shrewdness. There are many ways to read that. Maybe it's ironic. Maybe the manager had the authority to discount the master's debts at the end of the harvest. Once doing so, it would be hard for the owner to go back on his generosity without suffering damage to his reputation. Maybe even, the steward deserved commendation for lessening the load on the debtors, even if he did it to save himself.

But this parable is not about how we use what we have. Rather, it is about the intrinsic power of wealth to enslave us. Jesus' clear words in v. 10-13 give us a warning and a hope. Wealth will enslave us (and it can do so to both rich and poor, and anyone in between). Serving God brings us the true riches.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 28, 2025

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Psalm 146

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Reflections on the texts for preaching

Amos has the unenviable job of preaching the coming exile when that calamity is still far off. Israel is relatively stable, peaceful and prosperous. The Assyrians are not at the gate. A parallel might be preaching that the American empire is doomed, and those who overindulge while others go without will be the first to suffer. Anybody want to preach that on the street corner?

The prophet critiques those who "are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (6). He contrasts the righteousness of Joseph and the idleness of the rich, whose lifestyle prevents them from seeing the poor, widow, alien and orphan. Walter Bruggemann and others point to the importance of grieving what is lost as fundamental to the work of justice. Given these times, it might be good to remind our hearers—and ourselves—that there is much grief work to do today.

Psalm 146, like 113 last week, directly connects justice for the poor with worship. Here the praise of God as Creator is directly linked to God's action in "executing justice for the oppressed" (7). God's liberating action in v.7-9 is the very essence of God's being. Therefore, it is also the very essence of the church's mission.

First Timothy gives us practical counsel: be content with having enough. Why? Because wealth is a power that corrupts: not just the rich, but those who long to be "fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction" (9). Wealth and its desire lead us to ruin; it makes us "wander away from the faith" (10).

Wealth is a power. Even the desire for wealth brings all kinds of evil. Ouch!

Like many, I suspect, I've thought about what I would do if I won the lottery. (I do NOT play it, by the way). I would tithe (of course!), set up trusts for my daughters and granddaughters, maybe fund a non-profit, travel, eat out more, etc. But I would still be "the same old Patrick"! Nope, says Paul. Nope, says Jesus. Money doesn't just have power to destroy us, money *is* a power.

Humor aside, I struggle with how much I have, and what the gospel asks me to do with it. I imagine that many of our parishioners do as well. There are no easy answers, and how this is preached will depend on one's context. Given increas-

ing inequality, we can't avoid it.

Paul urges us to pursue true riches: "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." (11). It is worth noting that δικαιοσύνην is translated as righteousness in every English version I've seen; in every Spanish version, it is translated as justice. How could that inform our faith and our mission?

Finally, Paul gives practical advice for those of us with wealth in v.17-19. His exhortation is not specifically a social restructuring, but a return to the radical hospitality of his Jewish roots.

And then, Luke's unique story. It is the only parable where Jesus names someone. It's not an example of faith, which we might expect. It is Lazarus, so poor and mistreated even the "dogs lick his sores" (21).

Did Luke know of the Lazarus in John 11 and 12? Their contexts and sources were quite different. Did Jesus decide to name him because of the connection to his friend? We could speculate a lot about that. But one thing stands out. Instead of masses of nameless poor, we have a named person. Lazarus is not unknown.

And he is not unknown to the rich man, who calls him by name. He was at his gate every day. Maybe the rich man ignored him. Maybe Lazarus was an example to the rich man of what he wasn't. You can imagine the guests at his sumptuous feasts laughing at Lazarus as the dogs licked his sores. Or perhaps they turned away in disgust. Maybe they tossed a small coin his way now and then, as an act of charity. He knows Lazarus's name, but refuses to know him as a person.

Even after death, he treats Lazarus as someone to be ordered around, someone less than him. At the same time, he treats Abraham as someone he has the right to address and ask for favors. There is a certain deference in his tone. But the parable makes clear that his connection with reality is tenuous. He doesn't realize the nature of the chasm (26). He thinks that sending Lazarus to his brothers will save them, when they've only ignored or despised him in their lives up to now (28-31).

These are not easy texts to preach. May Wisdom guide us.

Patrick Cabello Hansel



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