

Preaching Helps

October, November, and December 2025:

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost to the First Sunday of Christmas

Don't Skip the Beginning of Matthew

The October issue of *Currents* always focuses on the Gospel for the coming church year, in this case, the Gospel of Matthew. Years ago, I was disappointed to discover that Matthew began the New Testament with a list of begats. My parents had given me a Bible for Christmas when I was in fifth grade, American Standard Version with a black cover and red edging on the pages. The cover hung over the pages like a little awning all around. I vowed to read it all, Genesis to Revelation. But I didn't. I skipped all those long lists of those begotten in the Old Testament—I was disappointed to discover the New Testament started this way.

The church has skipped this part, too. As we enter the year of Matthew, the first thing people will hear from this Gospel is Chapter 1, verse 18. Matthew 1:1-17 will not be read and will not come around every three years (or every ten or every seventy times seven!). Perhaps lectionary planners feared there were lots of people who didn't like listening to lists of names without stories. We skip instead to Joseph and the angel, and then, the magi. But perhaps it's something deeper than an aversion to lists. There is something a bit unsettling about this genealogy which starts with Abraham and ends with Joseph. After all, haven't we been taught that Joseph had nothing to do with it? To read the genealogy of Joseph risks confusion. Before we hear the angel's word about the Holy Spirit, there is a danger that Jesus will be too closely attached to the earth. We would feel a bit more comfortable moving these begats to the footnotes to avoid any possible misunderstanding.

God, however, did not skip the human part. At the risk of eternal embarrassment, God entered human life in a way likely to be confusing. God bent down ... and became clay—Emmanuel, that is, God-with-us. How God did this cannot be explained by genetics (or explained away as divine magic). Perhaps, the evangelist knew that we would be tempted to deny the human part of Jesus. Standing where he did—on this side of the resurrection—Matthew may have known we'd downplay the humanity of Jesus. So, the Gospel begins with a list of human names. We dare not skip this part. We must read it slowly, tripping over names we've never seen before, giving equal stress to the obscure as well as the familiar.

Stumbling over the **Women**. Their presence is odd indeed! This pattern does not follow precedents in the Old Testament. Women in the long list of "begats"? No, it simply wasn't done that way. Read slowly, then. Touch these strange names...

Tamar: The Canaanite woman who had married two of Judah's sons; both died without heirs. Tamar believed that Judah, her father-in-law, would give her his other son, but that did not happen. She believed Judah would somehow keep his promise of heirs to her. She believed this was part of God's promise (even though she wasn't sure of being part of God's promise). So strongly did she believe this that she disguised herself as a prostitute to deceive Judah into having sex with her to keep the promise of descendants alive (Gen 38).

Rahab: Not disguised as a prostitute—she *was* a prostitute. A native of the Canaanite city of Jericho. She lived in the very walls of that city. Her profession was an asset for hiding spies who came across the river. (Who would be suspicious of strange men in her house?) Defying the king's orders, she saved the Israelite spies. When she lowered them to safety from her window, they told her to tie a scarlet cord outside her window so the invading army would spare her. Blood-red sign of Passover; God's sign that water can be thicker than blood (Josh 2:1-21 and 6:22-25).

Ruth: The woman of Moab. We sing her words of promise at weddings, yet this was a promise made by a young Moabite woman to her aged Israelite mother-in-law. "Your people shall be my people," she said. It was so, and God became her God. The biblical story seems to suggest that she seduced Boaz to lie with her. However it happened, she gave birth to a son who was the ancestor of King David (Ruth 2 – 4).

The wife of Uriah: Wait a minute! Why not remember her name, Bathsheba? To call her "the wife of Uriah" is a constant reminder that David took Bathsheba to bed because he wanted her—even though she was married to Uriah the Hittite. She is a tragic heroine: widowed by King David's command to put Uriah in the front lines of battle, possessed by David for his own pleasure, suffering the loss of her first-born child. Bathsheba is remembered, not as a seducer, but as the wife of Uriah (2 Sam 11:2 – 12:24, 1 Kgs 15:5).

Mary: The genealogy ends with Joseph and Mary: "... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband

of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah" (1:16). The pattern changes here at the end. The writer is clear: "Joseph is the husband of Mary" but not the father of anyone. He is husband of Mary "of whom Jesus was born."

What a strange genealogy to begin the Gospel! Surely the evangelist didn't just happen upon this list of women! The evangelist's inclusion of these women couldn't have been predicted: women who were foreigners outside the lineage of chosen people; women who were in many ways a scandal; women who didn't seem to know their proper place; women who went beyond tradition and family. Mary herself joins the list of these sisters who were seen as sexually deviant, unfit to be prologue or present-tense Mother of the Messiah. Who would believe that story about the Holy Spirit?

Matthew didn't skip this part. Matthew didn't omit the ones we'd leave behind. The ones on the outside. The ones who weren't expected to appear in any genealogy. The promise of God was borne by these women, borne in their wombs and in their stubborn refusal to be set aside. Women who believed the promise when insiders forgot.

The time in which we live is marked by erasure, by deleting names and events that make us uncomfortable as Americans. One of our callings as preachers is to help people remember those who have been forgotten and those who are now being erased or fired. Leaders like General Charles C.Q. Brown, Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Why was he fired? He "got the job because he was Black," according to the Secretary of Defense); U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Shoshana Chatfield, Admiral Lisa Franchetti, Admiral Linda Fagan—women in the highest ranks of Navy and Coast Guard all fired (Why? they are all women). Add to this list the 26,000 images that have been flagged for removal from every branch of the military. (Why? They emphasize diversity, equity, and inclusion; one of the images flagged was the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima; why? it was the word "gay"!) Arlington National Cemetery removed educational materials about the history of women and people of color in the armed services. The Army and the Navy removed web pages about a decorated Japanese American Army unit and pages about the Navajo Code Talkers. At least thirty-two artifacts were removed from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. One artifact removed is a book belonging to Harriet Tubman. That book is filled with hymns she was believed to have sung when she was leading enslaved people to freedom. (Why was that book removed? I guess it was a reminder of slavery which we are supposed to forget.)

In this time when particular people and certain stories are being erased or fired or removed from library shelves, we

give thanks that Matthew dared to name women who could be charged with polluting the Messianic line. Perhaps it's time to read Matthew 1:1–17 in public worship even if it's not in the lectionary.

I'm grateful to the following writers who are taking us deep into the texts appointed for the end of Ordinary Time and the beginning of a new church year. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is Indiana Christian Church Associate Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary and an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. She is author of: *Parenting Beyond Boundaries in Mark's Gospel* (with Sung Uk Lim, forthcoming 2026); *The Gifts They Bring: How Children in the Gospels Can Shape Inclusive Ministry* (2023); and *For Theirs is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel According to Luke* (2019). **Caleb Crainer** (he/him/his) serves as pastor at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Los Angeles and Dean of the LA Metro Conference. He has been formed by Valparaiso University, The Graduate Theological Union, The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, 4 billion years of evolution, friends, parents, and a fair amount of Star Trek. Caleb is currently savoring his Ph.D. work in Contextual Theology at Claremont School of Theology. **Samantha Gilmore** is the Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. She previously taught homiletics at General Theological Seminary (New York City) and speech communication in ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. She holds a Ph.D. in Practical Theology focusing on Homiletics, an M.Div., and an M.A. in Christian Education focusing on Spirituality and Missional Formation from Princeton Theological Seminary. **Justin Lind-Ayres** gives thanks for Barbara Lundblad's faithful work on this preaching resource and its many contributors over the years. He serves as co-pastor at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. His most recent book, *Eye on the Magi*, is an Advent/Christmas devotional for families illustrated by his sister, Krista Schrock.

Catherine Malotky is a retired ELCA pastor, grateful for forty-two years married to a wonderful partner, delighted to be mother to two amazing daughters, two fantastic in-laws, and four of the sweetest grandchildren on the planet—and she is loved by a really nice dog. **Joseph Schattauer Paillé** is pastor of Community of the Cross Lutheran Church in Bloomington, Minnesota, after serving parishes in New Jersey. He is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and St. Olaf College. You can find his writing in *The Cresset*, *Perspectives*, and the "Reinterpreting Mission" edition of *Currents*. **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 books *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Years A, B and*

Care now available. (Editor's note: these 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. **Ann Svenningsen** has served as an ELCA congregational pastor in Iowa City, Minneapolis, and Moorhead, Minnesota; as president of The Fund for Theological Education and Texas Lutheran University; and, most recently, as bishop of the Minneapolis Area Synod. Currently retired, she and colleague, Jodi Harpstead, co-coordinate *Pray Without Ceasing* (www.pray-without-ceasing.org) a movement of congregations committed to weekly prayer in this time of change and uncertainty. Her husband, Dr. Bill Russell, and she have three children, Sarah, John (deceased), and Mary; and four grandchildren. They live in Minneapolis.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, *Preaching Helps*

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost October 5, 2025

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

Psalm 37:1–9

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Luke 17:5–10

Engaging the Texts

The prayer of the day for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost asks God to backfill for us when we are lacking in faith, but our texts are both more demanding of and more trusting in God's intervention. Habakkuk is a short book, and the assigned reading is even shorter, but it packs a punch. It's fair to say that Habakkuk despairs in the face of rampant injustice among his people. It was bad enough that little Judah was cowering between the turf wars of a seasoned world power (Egypt) and a new upstart (Babylon). But it was truly dispiriting to have his own people behaving badly—the rich bullying the poor; the proud stacking the deck so their damaging power overwhelmed the “least of these.” In chapter 1, Habakkuk complains, and rightfully so! Will God not listen to his prayers? The verses in Chapter 2 are God's response, not a SMART goal, specific or measurable, but a vision. Unsatisfying, frankly, except that God has kept God's promises before, and that is the glimmer of hope to seed the waiting.

Psalm 37 could be heard as a therapeutic response to Habakkuk's demands and it reminds its hearers not to fret about the outrageous wickedness around them. Understand “fret” as being intensely worked up or consumed. The psalmist requests an alternate response—to trust in God and do good (v. 3a). The question remains, however. Why do the wicked seem to prosper?

Second Timothy is another approach—the testimony of a seasoned Christian to a new leader, both of whom were paying prices for their proclamation of the Gospel. Though it's unlikely Paul is the actual author of 2 Timothy, the author is clearly borrowing Paul's credibility and his witness to God's faithfulness. The “why” question is implicit, but the writer turns to a deeply rooted faith to cushion the question.

Finally, in Luke, the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith after hearing (in preceding verses) a difficult requirement to forgive, even repeat sinners, if they are repentant. Jesus' impatient reply implies that the question is off—even the smallest faith can do wonders; it is sufficient. Yet, we glimpse here the quandary that hounds the disciples. How can they get past their own egos and continue to follow Jesus' path even if rewards/results are not evident? Even if they suffer for the faith?

Jesus has asked them to protect the vulnerable (in 17:1–4) to the point of rebuking a fellow disciple who has caused another to stumble and then asks them to understand that they are called to service. This, then, is our orienting purpose as followers of Christ, the one who flips the oppressive hierarchy (slavery) on its head and chooses to serve, freely and in love.

Pastoral Reflections

The good news is spare in this Sunday's texts but thank goodness preachers have an opportunity to remind our hearers that the most difficult of faith questions have been asked before. Especially in these contentious times, we can, like Habakkuk, get distracted from the wisdom expressed in Psalm 37, and get really cranked up by the wickedness around us. We can “lose faith” that things will ever return to a path that looks like justice to us, and in our discouragement (and exhaustion), we can start shutting down in the face of what seems like impossible odds or never engage at all. Our baptismal calling to serve others can dim, and we turn inward to protect ourselves, to buffer the noise that just keeps coming.

Can we trust that God is in charge? That God's vision of justice will season our world in meaningful ways, and, even more, in ways *we* can taste and see? How can we keep going if we don't get some kind of reinforcement for the hard work of loving our neighbors and challenging the stumbling blocks that oppress and demean? And what if injustice is not just “out there” but within, in our own communities, congregations, families, and our own hearts? What if serving others seems futile, when our own wounds demand much of us as we struggle to heal?

Habakkuk's gift to us is his demand. Rather than fade to silence, he shook his fist at God and *demand*ed. God did not reject him but engaged. Better in so many ways to be wrestling with God than to just let it go. Trust can contend

with the other. Yet, the psalmist's wisdom is also true. If we fixate on the injustice, if it burns in us, there will be much good work left undone. Our anger will not ultimately carry us forward, at least not for long.

Can we trust God to be God? Can we be sustained by a vision of a better, more God-reflective world? Might we need to seek out reminders, both from memory, and in our daily lives, even if they are only glimpses? Not nearly as satisfying, perhaps, as would be trumpets blaring and the wicked getting their due, but a vision could inspire us, couldn't it?

And don't we have experiences of God's transcendence, reminders all around us of a transcendence that reflects God's care for us and our world, the breathtaking circle of life with all its joy and sorrow, and the wonder of making life better for someone, even in small ways? Can this be enough to send us back into the breach, to leverage our little mustard seed faith, to taste the bread and wine, and remember that we are called in love to serve?

Catherine Malotky

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 12, 2025

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8–15
Luke 17:11–19

Engaging the Texts

On the surface, the story of Naaman in 2 Kings could be an “emperor has no clothes” kind of story—powerful man brought down from his high-and-mighty perspective by a shameful disease and a prophet with good boundaries. The “emperor,” in the end, walks away humbled and healed. The story is enriched by the politics of it all. Naaman is not merely a powerful male in a patriarchal society, but a warrior whose allegiance lies with the oppressing power. Again and again, he must listen to those “beneath” him (slave girl, wife, servants) to find his way to healing. Again and again, his trappings of power are powerless, and even threaten his goals. Yet he persists until he is humbled, washes, and is healed. At last, he can confess that God is God.

The psalmist proclaims (v. 10), “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding.” Perhaps this is the key: practicing fear of the LORD is our praise. We English speakers can deepen our understanding of “fear” by knowing that God is gracious and merciful (v. 4). The root for the Hebrew word translated as “mercy” is the same as the Hebrew word for “womb.” This is not a show of power, but power itself, to form and nurture

life. A notion that was likely lost on Naaman, until he was healed.

We are back in 2 Timothy again this week, encouragement for the life of Christian leadership. There was a sharp clarity of the good news for eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, but as decades passed, the need to interpret that good news to new audiences in new contexts made for debate and contention in the community of faith. No less true for us. How shall we discern false teaching from true?

The Gospel reading takes us to the borderlands of faith. Jesus literally stands at the boundary between one version of faithfulness (the Northern Kingdom of Israel) and another (the Southern Kingdom of Judah). Centuries of animosity had sharpened disagreements, solidified loyalties and prejudices, and fixated on doctrine rather than gospel. And it is here in the borderlands that Jesus healed lepers, people whose skin disease rendered them unclean and marginalized (see Leviticus 13 and 14). And it is here that one, a Samaritan no less, came back to say thank you, and his faith was blessed by Jesus. Note that “eucharisto” (εὐχαριστῶ) is the Greek word rendered as “thank you” in English translations (v. 16).

Pastoral Reflection

Perhaps it is true in every age, but I am struck by the resonance between today's texts and the struggles of our day, particularly the not-so-subtle differences between what qualifies culturally as powerful and influential vs. what constitutes life-giving and sustaining power from the perspective of faith. Naaman's trappings of power, not to denigrate his skills as a warrior or his success in battle, are not ultimately what healed him personally, and certainly did not facilitate a healthy world, with empires battling it out for turf and wealth. We so often make God in our own image, or the image we imagine is the right one. Humans are painfully and deflatingly prone to grandstanding and violence rather than the hard work of listening, engaging, understanding, compromising, and maturing. That kind of womb-work (mercy) is too slow, not acquisitive enough, and requires taking risks. The DNA that survived to be passed down to us had to be quick to suss out who was dangerous and who could be trusted. Sadly, this dominance model is not serving us well in the twenty-first century when the diversity of God's creation and the resilience we rely on in the natural world are being stressed by our own insatiable appetites for more.

Jesus flips our ideas about who is allowed in and who is not. Luke purposefully places the healing of the ten lepers story in the midst of the culture wars of his day. Who could be counted as a follower of Jesus? Who had been faithful over the centuries to the covenant God made with God's people? Jesus wandered right into the middle and made a Samaritan the admired one. For Jesus, it seems, doctrinal differences, even

physical anomalies, are not reasons to exclude. Christians today are rife with friction about what constitutes faithfulness, who qualifies to be righteous, and even whether any other faith tradition should count as worthy of honor and sensitivity. Not so different from Jesus' day.

Much of the New Testament, and certainly this appointed Gospel text, challenges us to think beyond the boundaries we expect to be true. The idea of including Gentiles was scandalous to early believers. They don't follow the rules! And worse, those Samaritans willfully worshipped God somewhere other than Jerusalem! Unforgivable!

And yet, it was a Samaritan who came back, who said thank you to Jesus for giving him his life back, and whose faith Jesus blessed. Might we also humbly come to Jesus' table, receive in the bread and wine his body and blood, and hear his blessing on our attempts at faithfulness? Might we open our eyes to those who are marginalized around us and seek a deeper welcome, a more honoring acknowledgment of the truths others bear? Might we submit ourselves for healing, and then return to Jesus and offer our "eucharisto" to him, the one who died and rose that we might live?

Catherine Malotky

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 19, 2025

Genesis 32:22–31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Luke 18:1–8

Engaging the Texts

The biblical wrestlemania is full of the drama and storytelling of a modern televised match. Jacob is fleeing from his twin brother, Esau, and has sent gifts to appease his brother. He says in v. 20 that he will see his face (*pani*) tomorrow. The pericope picks up at the crossing point for the River Jabbok (a play on Jacob's name). Jacob is alone. Suddenly, without any plot development, he finds himself wrestling with a man. Bam! (See Gilgamesh and Enkidu as a parallel story.) Was this a scout from Esau or Esau himself? Even injured Jacob is winning the fight. Sooner or later, everyone taps. Why does the man beg to be released before daybreak? Will we finally find out the identity of this mystery man? Jacob, the ankle grabber at birth, controls the situation and this time instead of tricking his way into a blessing, he demands it. The man renames him Israel, claiming that he has struggled with God and humans and won! Jacob tries to learn the man's identity, the man wonders why Jacob wants to know. Who wouldn't want to know? He blesses him and the

narrator explains that this is why the place is called "*pani-el*" because Jacob saw God "face to face." Tellingly, when Jacob does encounter Esau in the next chapter (33:10), he tells Esau that seeing his face is "like seeing the face of God." The story doesn't easily lend itself to the traditional reading of Jacob literally wrestling God, there are plenty of clues that this could be Esau and his struggles with God have been throughout his whole life.

The psalmist looks to the hills and wonders from where his help will come. Some readers may think that the hills refer to the ancient abode of gods, like Mt. Olympus. Contextually, the hills were likely a place of danger. The hills obscure thieves and bandits, they hide armies, and present challenges such as rockslides and flash floods. The psalmist does not necessarily expect his help to come from the hills. The psalmist is afraid of traversing the hills alone. The Lord watches over from a place even higher than the hills. The metaphor for the Lord's protection is cover that will obscure direct sunlight and moonlight. I wonder if the psalmist might be imagining the protection of a dense fog to avoid evil eyes in the hills.

The author of Second Timothy writes in the voice of Paul to his protégé. The author revises the story of Timothy from Acts 16:1-2 where we learn Timothy's Greek father and Jewish mother didn't have him circumcised. Now, we are told he has grown up in the faith. Verse 3:16 is often used to highlight the importance of sacred scripture, but "all scripture" uses generic Greek words "every writing." The text might be translated, "every writing for teaching, for exposing, for building upon, for instruction in justice is God-breathed and beneficial." The NRSVue translates the word in v. 17 as "proficient;" I think "precise" is preferable because the verb (*artios*) indicates an exact match of preparation and action. "Convince" in 4:2 also lacks the negative forcefulness of the verb (*elegxo*), so I suggest "disprove" instead. The author wants to encourage Timothy to not hold back from exposing liars and people who would mislead the people; to use any text necessary to precisely disprove their falsehoods.

Luke's parable of the widow and the unjust judge is similar to the parable of the persistent neighbor from Luke 11:5-10. Unfortunately, we don't have any details about the widow's situation. The parable is constructed in a peculiar way in that the narrator tells us the judge is not faithful or respectful and then the judge's own internal monologue confirms that he thinks of himself as neither faithful nor respectful. This rhetorical maneuver helps us trust the narrator. The judge considers a dual purpose for giving in to her demands: her persistence and his own discomfort. We should be careful about how we label the judge. The Greek says he is the "judge of the injustice" (v.6), not necessarily an "unjust judge." When Jesus tells people to listen to what the judge of the injustice says, we realize the judge has not said anything. We don't hear

that he actually did anything either, only that he thought about it. I think Jesus is pointing out that persistence can cause self-reflection, but not necessarily action. Verse 7 takes on a different tone, no longer rhetorical, but relevant. God has remained silent and has delayed long in enacting justice. Even though quick divine justice is promised, maybe citing Psalm 147:15 in Greek which uses the same word “quickly” (*tachos*), Jesus wonders if God’s delay has left people without faith.

Pastoral Reflections

We are invited to wrestle with these texts and remain curious about how they continue to speak truth into our tradition. One consistent message through these readings is the struggle of faith. Sometimes being a part of a religious community can feel like a wrestling match smackdown. We come in with high expectations for belonging and justice and we are tossed around by blame and anxieties. It can feel demoralizing to try to hold on to the promise of peace when the realities of conflict are so much more pressing. As we continue to precisely disprove the ear-tickling niceties of Christian Nationalism, we can remember that resistance comes in all forms. Some people will try to placate enemies from the past such as Jacob with his brother; some may resist by trusting in an even higher power such as in the Psalms; some may resist by precisely exposing evil such as Paul instructs Timothy to do, and others may resist through persistently showing up and causing a scene such as the widow does in Jesus’ parable. God’s silence and inaction are prevalent themes in our tradition. It’s important that contemporary audiences know they are in good company when wondering why God isn’t saving the day. Authoritarianism is here and Christians must wrestle with our part in ushering it through the gates. Justice may leave us scarred, it may leave us jaded, it may leave us hardened, but we will remain beloved. Jesus understood that the religious leaders of his time were not going to listen to the needs of the poor and dejected. There is no way to convince people who assume they have the impunity to act as they please. The judge says nothing. Jesus shows us a way through the impasse. God struggles with us for justice, and prevails by losing, by remaining above the fray, by exposing evil, and by being annoyingly persistent with us.

Caleb Crainer

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 26, 2025

[This is Reformation Sunday; while many preachers will preach on traditional Reformation texts, some may appreciate this option for Pentecost 20.]

Jeremiah 14:7–10, 19–22

Psalm 84:1–7

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Luke 18:9–14

Engaging the Texts

After the Neo-Babylonian conquest of the Near East, part of the conquerors’ strategy for putting down rebellions was to deport people from their ancestral lands on the periphery to serve as manual peasant labor in regions more tightly controlled by the empire. Even in exile, they were able to preserve aspects of their culture. Royalty were given grain allotments. Rituals and traditions continued and adapted. The prophet Jeremiah lived through this turbulent time, so maybe it is not surprising that the narrative of this book resists a cohesive structure. Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet from a priestly family who warned against God’s people abandoning God’s ways. It would lead to their downfall. He was persecuted for this teaching and imprisoned. Eventually, he was liberated by the conquering Babylonians and remained in Judah while other Jewish people were deported. This passage, during a harsh drought, is a foretaste of the doom to come. The prophet proclaims that Israel’s unfaithfulness has led to God’s abandonment. Note that Jeremiah does not necessarily consider the drought to be God’s punishment but is concerned with God’s refusal to rescue God’s people from calamity.

Psalm 84 is often interpreted as a psalm that praises the Temple in Jerusalem. Perhaps it is a pilgrimage destination, or a symbol of longing that was composed during exile. I wonder if a third alternative might be more interesting. The psalm employs the metaphor of the Temple terminology (dwelling, courts, altars, and house) but there is also a consistent presence of nature throughout this psalm (sparrow, swallow, balsam valley, place of springs, rains, pools of water, and heights). I wonder if this psalm might be a song that expands the notion of God’s temple to encompass the natural world. One key feature that supports this reading is the presence of birds nesting beside God’s altars. This would not have been allowed in the Holy of Holies. The happiness experienced by the pilgrim is not just upon reaching the destination, it is in the experience of the path, the journey, and the climb.

The reading from Second Timothy shifts focus from Timothy’s call to ministry and centers Paul as the example of faithful leadership. Paul considers his ministry concluded and his own righteousness intact. Bravo! The author writes from

Paul's perspective about his early challenges in proclaiming the message of the Lord to the Gentiles. He concludes with the future-tense verbs "will rescue me" and "will save me," giving the hint that Paul is not quite done.

This second parable in Luke 18 has an introductory verse that seems to join the two parables together but might belong more with the former because the judge is neither faithful nor respectful. Taken on its own, this parable might have less to do with either character and more to do with the Temple setting where they are both praying. The tax collectors, widely considered Jewish traitors and sell-outs to the empire, were ostracized from much of Jewish ritual life. The fact that the tax collector goes to the Temple would have been disturbing to an ancient audience. The Pharisee is praying to himself but secretly complimenting his own righteousness and giving thanks that he has been set apart from the sinners. He is self-righteous but quiet about it. Meanwhile the tax collector is in the corner making a scene. The narrator, Jesus, is quick to explain that the tax collector who is repentant was the one who was "justified." Contemporary readers should use caution because the theological tradition of "justification" is not necessarily aligned with the Greek term (*dikaioo*) referring to justice being served. An alternate translation might be, "this one went down to his house as he ought to be." This shifts the focus from the performance of humility to his correct alignment with his guilt.

Pastoral Reflections

Systems of exploitation keep us guessing at who the real enemy might be. Is it an overreaching empire bent on domination and control? Is it anyone who would distract us from God's sacred path? Is it ourselves and our own proclivity for self-righteous thinking? Or something nefarious we haven't considered yet? These texts challenge conventional narratives of who is the "good guy" and the "bad guy" in our stories. Jeremiah presents his own people, God's people, as the unfaithful ones, yet God, is also decisively unmerciful. The psalmist portrays an expansive goal of the Temple that stretches beyond the finite limitations of a building where we try to put our promises of safety. The author of Second Timothy rinses Paul of any past stains and presents him as a virtue-signaling fanatic who can't seem to stop. Jesus' parable tells of a reversal in the first-century Jewish community that would have been scandalous to his audience. The "bad guys" aren't so bad if they know they are bad? The "good guys" aren't so good if they think they are good? Perhaps the lesson is not in our limited capacity to judge others, but in our unwillingness to humble ourselves. Jesus wants his audience to know that they cannot rely on self-absolving religious leaders to save the day, nor can they solely demonize the sell-outs who know they are committing harm. Jesus doesn't tell us that either changes their behavior,

learns a lesson, or has their hearts changed by God. Instead, we are left in the very familiar reality of human imperfection. If we stop putting people on pedestals or in pits, maybe we can find common ground.

Caleb Crainer

Reformation Sunday October 26, 2025

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19–28

John 8:31–36

Engaging the texts for preaching

Once in an ecumenical worship class for which I served as a teaching assistant, students were required to attend a worship service of a different denomination from their own and to write a reflection paper on that experience. I will never forget a paper I read by a Catholic woman who happened to choose Reformation Sunday to fulfill her assignment by attending a Protestant Church. Her paper gave me a stomachache. She heard the tradition in which she was formed and to which she was devoting her life harshly denigrated by the pastor while the pastor maintained a big smile and celebratory tone.

As you prepare your Reformation Day sermon, remember the command not to "bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20). Martin Luther himself interprets this command to include coming to our neighbor's defense, speaking well of them, and interpreting "everything they do in the best possible light."¹ If there is anything we should remember on Reformation Sunday, it is that our righteousness comes from Christ and Christ alone—not from our membership in any particular Christian tradition. "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22–23).

Psalm 46 offers preachers a remarkably timely text from which to preach. It is the psalm upon which Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is our God" is based. It also resonates strongly with the instability of the world in which we live. One can't help but hear echoes of today's climate crisis with phrases like, "we will not fear, though the earth should change...though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble" (vv. 2–3). One can't help but hear echoes of our national

1. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles P. Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 353.

and international headlines with the verse, “The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter” (v. 6). The psalm names the reality of people’s fears, which can help our listeners see themselves in God’s Word.

The psalm doesn’t stop with holding up a mirror to our chaotic reality but proclaims good news in response to it by assuring hearers that they need not fear (v. 2), even amid all this turmoil, because God is with us and God is trustworthy. A sense of God’s real presence is reiterated with the present tense: “God *is* our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (v. 1); “God *is* in the midst of the city” (v. 5); The LORD of hosts *is* with us; the God of Jacob *is* our refuge” (vv. 7, 11). God’s presence is not an idea or hope that God might show up someday. Rather, hearers are assured that God is on the scene—the God who “makes wars cease to the end of the earth,” destroying weapons of war (cf. Isa 2:4) and calling the chaos of creation and violence to “Be still” (vv. 9-10; cf. Mark 4:39).

Preachers might invite hearers to read or repeat back parts of this psalm in unison during or after the sermon so that this prayer of assurance and trust can become theirs. They might even be invited to change the first-person plural language to first-person singular for a moment to help God’s presence with *them* sink in (e.g., “God is *my* refuge and strength... Therefore *I* will not fear”).

Acknowledging the trembling and tottering of life, Psalm 46 knows that we “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). The psalm also names that the death-dealing patterns and habits to which we cling (like weapons and war) must be broken for the trembling to cease and peace to “be still.”

We hear a similar message in John 8:31-36. Jesus confuses the crowd to which he is speaking when he claims that those who continue in his word will know the truth and be made free. The group has “never been slaves to anyone” (v. 33)—aren’t they already free? In fact, no. They are enslaved by sin; for “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin” (v. 34).

Seeing through a glass dimly (1 Cor 13:12), human beings don’t see clearly the ways they fail to trust God (the root of all sin) and let themselves be held in bondage to some other god (whatever we are placing our trust in over and above God). Even if someone points out the problem, we are masters at justifying our golden calf-shaped shackles and continuing to walk self-righteously toward death.

Thanks be to God for the good news that we are not the ones who make ourselves free! Rather, it is the truth which makes us free, and the truth is Jesus Christ crucified and risen for us, declaring victory over sin and death. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, God freely breaks our shackles, ushers us from a life of slavery to a life of beloved childhood, and gives us faith to trust God for all life, healing, and wholeness.

This isn’t a one-and-done in our lives. We’re only bap-

tized once, but we experience a daily dying to sin and rising to freedom as we wander off in our tossing and trembling world and are brought back home again and again. This is why we need preachers like you who proclaim the gospel in the pulpit and at the Table week after week. God’s Word speaks through your proclamation to bring your people home and to give them the peace to be still. Hallelujah!

Samantha Gilmore

All Saints Sunday November 2, 2025

Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1:11–23

Luke 6:20–26

Engaging the Texts

Christian preachers are called to proclaim the gospel of God’s grace, mercy, peace, forgiveness, and new life in Jesus Christ and him crucified. They are called to declare this good news to and for the people to whom they are called, week after week, year after year. The imagination with which they share this good news and which aspect they emphasize, of course, depends on the passage of Scripture from which they preach. But it is vital that preachers read that passage with this gospel-centered lens. Otherwise, they may get so focused on interesting details or a particular aspect of the passage that they forget the reason they stand in the pulpit—to bring “good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

I mention this because Luke’s Beatitudes, if read without a gospel-centered lens, may mislead the preacher into forgetting that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. Jesus is not proclaiming works righteousness or salvation by status in these Beatitudes and Woes. Jesus is not giving us a list of things we must do or be. Beatitudes are not commands, as though Jesus were saying, “Thou shalt become poor, hungry, full of tears, and hated if thou wilt be blessed in my kingdom.” Neither are Woes a threat to one’s salvation; otherwise, from a global perspective, most rich folks reading this would have to count themselves out.

Perhaps the wise people who put together the lectionary paired Ephesians with this passage so we wouldn’t forget: “In him you also...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory” (1:13-14). On this All Saints Sunday, remember that it is God in Christ through the Spirit who makes us saints and not our own circumstances, actions, or worthiness—thanks be to God!

With these Beatitudes, Jesus is bringing comfort and assurance to those who are struggling that they are not forgotten but seen and cherished by God. In a country that honors and strives toward ever more power and riches, we often assume (consciously or unconsciously) that this is how God displays God's blessing, and those who have less are not looked upon as favorably by God. In Christ, this is not so. We might turn to Ephesians to remind us that **all** people are "under [Jesus'] feet" and Jesus is the "head over **all** things," "far above **all** rule and authority and power and dominion, and above **every** name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come" (1:21-22). Whatever the world tells us, **all** are equal at the foot of the cross. **All** are made in the image of God, beloved ones for whom Christ died. The implications are endless.

With the Woes, Jesus is holding a mirror up to the rich and powerful to help them see their idols. "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13). Again, these woes are not threatening the salvation of those who hear but asking them where they are placing their trust. Power or wealth can easily convince those who have it that they do not need God but should place their trust in wealth and continue to increase it as much as they can. Freedom in Christ trusts God's promises and so is free to be in relationship with and a good steward of all God has made. But the rich may exchange that freedom for the slavery of wealth, which gives them a mindset of scarcity, hoarding all they can for fear that there is not enough to go around.

The preacher should take care not to guilt people here, as this usually leads to a fight-flight-freeze-fawn response that puts up a shield and can no longer hear. How might preachers instead invite people to reflect on what their lives reveal about to whom and to what they entrust their lives? And much more importantly, how might preachers 1) show their people (through story, image, parable) what freedom in Christ can look like, and 2) assure them that this freedom is theirs today, that the preacher's words of good news might set them free?

A final thought is one of language and proximity. One of the distinctives of Luke's Beatitudes is his use of "you." Rather than speaking about "the poor," he speaks of "**you** who are poor," "**you** who are hungry now," etc. I encourage preachers to learn from this and try it on. Many preachers predominantly use "we" and "us" for the good purpose of inclusion. But it's easier to feel like the preacher isn't really speaking to **you** in what they are saying; it doesn't tend to land as personally as "you" does. There are, of course, times when this would be ill-advised, such as the preacher using "you" to set themselves apart from the congregation (I am the saint; "you" are the sinners). But it's a different thing to hear, "God forgives us and blesses us," than "God forgives you and blesses you." If it could have the hoped-for relational effect in the preacher's

context, they might even step down from the pulpit as they do this to be closer to and level with the congregation. Jesus was not on a mountain in Luke, but "on a level place" (6:17), and close enough that people were touching him (6:19). What could the gospel feel like to give and receive in this closer proximity?

Samantha Gilmore

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost November 9, 2025

Job 19:23–27a

Psalm 17:1–9

2 Thessalonians 2:1–5, 13–17

Luke 20:27–38

Engaging the Texts

As our liturgical year draws to a close, Luke draws our attention to Jesus' teaching in Jerusalem before his passion. The Sadducees' question about marriage is a kind of absurd hypothetical, but it draws a substantial teaching from Jesus on worthiness and the nature of the age to come. The passive construction of worthiness—captured in the NRSVue as "considered worthy"—emphasizes that worthiness is not a kind of moral virtue we possess for ourselves, but a judgment rendered on us by God. For a group of well-connected elites like the Sadducees, this is a reminder that all of us remain open to judgment.

Jesus also explains the nature of the resurrection in language his listeners—Jews with a particular devotion to the written scripture—would understand. Jesus invokes the theophany at the burning bush to show how God reveals Godself as the God of Moses' ancestors. In particular, God was not just the God of these ancestors in the past but is the God of them right now. For Jesus, any questions about the nature of the resurrection or the age to come must begin not with the deaths of particular humans but with the ever-living God whose life transcends our experience of death.

The living God is also the focus of our Hebrew Bible reading from Job. In his misery, Job pleads for a redeemer (*go'el*) to intervene for him. Given Job's earlier requests for a trial where he can plead his case, this redeemer is likely an advocate who can defend Job and argue for his worthiness. While most listeners will assume this redeemer is God, C.L. Seow finds eight (!) additional ways this redeemer has been identified.² Whoever they are, the presence of this advocate gives Job the confidence to tell his friend that he will one day see God "in my flesh." Job's sufferings—many carried in his

2. C. L. Seow, *Job 1-21: Interpretation and Commentary* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

flesh—may have caused doubt and derision, but they haven't completely cut him off from God.

Reading the epistles can feel like hearing one side of a phone call; you must fill in some blanks to figure out what's going on. In today's reading from 2 Thessalonians, the author tells us that these Thessalonians might be led astray by false teachers who proclaim that the day of the Lord has already arrived. Filling in some blanks, we can surmise that these believers worried they had missed out on God's saving act. In the back half of the reading, the author flips it around. They haven't been left behind, but God chose them as the "first fruits" of salvation. In the RSV, this phrase was translated as "from the beginning," but the larger point remains. These Thessalonians haven't missed out on God's salvation but are right where they're supposed to be. Instead of doubting their salvation, they can find comfort in God's promises and serve others with confidence.

Pastoral Reflections

Over the past few years, I've noticed more of my colleagues celebrating a seven-week Advent season. While the four-versus-seven argument may lead you to think that these are vastly different practices, they have similar emphases. Converts to the seven-week practice claim that it helps them prepare for the coming of Christ at Christmas. Devotees of the four-week tradition claim that it helps them prepare for the eschatological coming of Christ. In both cases, the emphasis lands on the awaited healing and restoration of God's creation.

Consider today's Gospel text. The Sadducees imagine this restoration in terms of rearranging the status quo. As a result, they ask Jesus a question of logistics. *Which of the seven men will be the woman's husband?* Jesus, however, understands this restoration as a complete transformation. As a result, Jesus gives them an answer about our new identities. *They cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God.* Jesus doesn't tell them that they're wrong so much as tell them that their categories are too small.

Many Lutherans—including me—are logistically minded. *How many weeks of Advent do we celebrate?* Yet Jesus' answer to the Sadducees invites us to reflect on the depth of God's transformation and how we are empowered to join in that holy change. Jesus encourages us to ask questions that lead to growth. *What values are most important for our children to learn in Christian education? Which of my neighbor's unmet needs do I find it easiest to ignore? How can marriages and partnerships better manifest the lovingkindness of God?*

Preaching on Job is not for the faint of heart. In addition to dealing with challenging subject matters, there's an ever-present temptation to spend a whole sermon giving background context. One fruitful approach might be to use Job to explore our practice of lament. Job is, of course, no stranger to suffering. Today's reading refers to the wounds he

carries in his body. And yet the complaints about his maladies are paired with a belief that God is ultimately faithful. Job's laments help steer us out of nihilism on one side and toxic positivity on the other. In expanding the sermon, the new *All Creation Sings* offers a rite for communal lament and hymns of lament that could be paired with a homily in surprising ways.

While parishioners may find it difficult to connect with the epistle reading's eschatological elements, they will have an easier time relating to the Thessalonians' fear that they're in the wrong place at the wrong time to live their faith fully. We may imagine that if only our jobs, relationships, or health had turned out differently, we would be in a place to really make a difference in the world. Our churches have plenty of these stories, too. A sermon on this text might explore the ways that our focus on hypotheticals can distract us from the very real opportunities we have to serve.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost November 16, 2025

Malachi 4:1-2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Luke 21:5-19

Engaging the Texts

In today's gospel reading, Luke asks us, "Where are your eyes drawn?" For Jesus' disciples, the answer is the massive stones and ornate decoration of the temple. For many Jews, the temple would have been an immense source of pride. Shockingly, Jesus says that this grandiose structure—not just the building but the entire set of political and economic self-interests that it represents—will come crashing down. Where is Jesus' eye drawn? Not to the seemingly indestructible stones but to the resilient faith of the widow and her two small copper coins.

Given the difficulty interpreting these apocalyptic texts, we might want the disciples to ask *why* this will happen. Instead, they ask *when* it will happen. Jesus elides their question and focuses instead on *how* they should live. Jesus encourages patience (v. 9), discernment (v. 8), and courage in their lives (v. 19). Though this time of tumult may seem like the end of history, Jesus encourages them that their discipleship should remain steadfast.

The admonition to prepare comes to us in Malachi as well. Written in the postexilic period, Malachi spoke to people who assumed that their covenants were a thing of the past and that religious practices were a waste of time (see 3:14). Malachi, "my messenger," calls the people out of their malaise

to revere God. Far from being a thing of the past, the people's relationship with God is still unfolding. Malachi's use of oven, fire, and sun imagery suggests that God's judgment and mercy are related. To use his image, the sun that burns evildoers may be the same sun that warms those who fear God.

If Malachi's lackadaisical audience believes the day of the Lord will never arrive, the overeager Thessalonians think it will happen in the next couple of days. Some of these believers, referred to as "busybodies," have stopped working altogether and simply rely on the generosity of their neighbors. The author criticizes such idleness and encourages it not to spread among the community. The author invokes their own toil and labor as one reason why people should continue working. Labor was both a way of not placing undue burdens on others and of living as a member of the community. Toward the end of the pericope, the author takes this specific problem to make a more general point: Do not be weary in doing what is right.

Pastoral Reflections

One doesn't have to try hard to find ways of misapplying today's readings. Especially at a time when more work requirements for social services are being written into law, it would be easy to use 2 Thessalonians to justify dividing the poor into deserving and undeserving categories of our own making. But the author's concern isn't simply that someone is getting something without putting in the work. It's that they're behaving as if what they do now doesn't matter because Jesus is coming back. On the contrary, what the day of the Lord promises is the renewal and transformation of our lives. We do not weary in doing what is right because we believe that God uses all that we do to build God's promised future. Luther apocryphally said that he would plant an apple tree if the world ended tomorrow. What are the things we do not because they're efficient or effective but simply because they're the right thing to do?

Likewise, Malachi's images of fire might seem particularly well suited for a sermon on avoiding eternal punishment. But, as David Bentley Hart helpfully reminds us, "a punishment that is not intended ultimately to be remedial is morally dubious."³ The text does focus on judgment of evil, but the emphasis lands even more strongly on the healing that comes through "sun of righteousness." This healing involves the judgment of our sin, but God doesn't diagnose sin without offering a remedy or rehabilitation. A sermon could focus on places where there is a need for healing and explore why seeking that healing can be difficult for us. Where do we need change and healing not just in other people but also in ourselves?

Finally, Luke's apocalyptic imagery can set the imagina-

tion in a million directions, few of which are edifying. Ironically, Luke's Jesus offers us a steadying image of what it means to be followers of Jesus. When we encounter difficulties or uncertainty in our ministries, Jesus encourages us that "this is our opportunity to testify." Jesus doesn't promise us that these situations are easy, only that we always have a chance to make known the grace of God in Jesus. There may be difficult times to follow Jesus and uncomfortable times to follow Jesus, but there are never bad times to follow Jesus. We may not be able to control what happens or when, but we are able to shape how we witness to God's reconciling love.

Joseph Schattaur Paillé

Christ the King Sunday Last Sunday after Pentecost November 23, 2025

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble. . .*

*The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

—Psalm 46:1, 11

Paradise Regained

Many of us, I expect, spent at least a little time in a high school English class slogging through the miry bogs of the Puritan poet John Milton's enormous epic poem *Paradise Lost*. For some of us the experience itself felt more as if we were the ones lost in that mystical realm of poetic imagination that my own teacher and others tried their best to unlock for us as a linguistic paradise but which seemed to us just a jumble of words faintly reminiscent of English.

But Milton's poem itself, as the title suggests, is nothing less than a retelling of the story of Adam and Eve and what led to their expulsion from paradise, the Garden of Eden. For all its arcane language, *Paradise Lost* is our story since we too replay the roles of our first fore-parents day in and day out, repeating their no-longer-so-original sin of refusing to let God be the Lord of all life, the sovereign of all creation, and instead preferring to be the determiners of our own destinies. The story is told of how Thomas Ellwood, a friend of Milton, after reading a manuscript of *Paradise Lost*, one day visited the blind poet in his cottage. As real friends are wont to do, Ellwood spoke honestly and dared to critique his friend's poem in these words that have come down to us: "John, thou has said much here of Paradise Lost; but what hast thou to

3. David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (Yale, 2019).

say of Paradise Found?” It’s an apt comment often made of writers and politicians—and preachers for that matter—that we’re much better at diagnosing the problem than we are at prescribing its remedy. But this set Milton to musing so that the next time Ellwood called upon Milton, the poet pulled out a new poem (not nearly so long nor so good, critics say), a poem which Milton had titled *Paradise Regained*, the opening lines of which state the poet’s theme:

I who erewhile the happy garden sung, By one man’s disobedience lost now sing Recovered Paradise to all mankind,

By one man’s firm obedience fully tried, Through all temptation and the tempter-foiled In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,

And Eden raised in the waste wilderness.

And Jesus said to the thief hanging at his side: “*Truly I tell you, today, you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43). Amid the scandalous dereliction of that place of bloody torture and execution, amid the human garbage heap of that piece of “waste wilderness” just outside the city gates called Golgotha—the place of the skull—Jesus was placarded with the sign meant to be a sneering Roman joke: “The King of the Jews.” Wearing a crown of thorns as the mock emblem of his “royal” authority, there Jesus planted his sovereignty and established his reign from the throne of the cross, “*and Eden raised in the waste wilderness*” as he groaned into the midday darkness, “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” “Paradise” is a Persian word for “garden” that was used in the Greek translation of the OT known as the *Septuagint* to refer to Eden and in time came to be used in reference to the future state of the blessed dead.

It’s good news to be reminded by Christ our Sovereign that our origin and destination are one and the same in God who promised that the future of creation is not ultimately destruction but “*a new heaven and a new earth*” (Rev 21:1 and Isa 65:17). It’s good to know that God has not abandoned the creation so lovingly crafted in the beginning, broken and alienated from God as we humans have become by our own rebellious sin. It’s good to know that Jesus is not God’s futile effort to put things right, a bold initiative on God’s part that we successfully rejected by nailing him to a cross.

But as our second reading from Colossians reminds us, the very one whom we hung on the cross is “himself the image of the invisible God,” the “first-born of all creation.” For as Col goes on to say, “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers— all things have been created through him and for him.” What’s more, Christ “is before all things and in him all things hold together.” Until finally it can be said that in Christ “all the fulness of God was pleased

to dwell and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross” (vs 15-20).

Christ from his throne on the cross, seen through the lens of the resurrection, is God’s agent for mending our broken world, taking our own violence into God’s triune being “through the blood of the cross.” To be grossly vivid about it, it is Jesus’ sticky, coagulating blood that is the cosmic glue that holds our world together, that redeems and unifies and restores wholeness and holiness to God’s broken creation.

Finally, as Colossians adds in something more than an afterthought, “He is the head of the body, the church” (v. 18). This is no mere metaphor of the church as Christ’s body any more than Jesus’ crucified body is some metaphor of his humanity. But as Krister Stendahl used to like to put it, the church is called to be, despite all its disabilities and imperfections, “Operation Headstart” for the reign of Christ, the laboratory through which God has deigned to work the miracle of “*tikkun*,” the mending of creation, paradise regained!

John Rollefson

First Sunday in Advent November 30, 2025

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: “May they prosper who love you.” Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.

—Psalm 122:6-7

Wake-up Time!

The apostle Paul’s clarion call sets the theme for this first Sunday in the church’s new year, “you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep” (Rom 13:11). ‘It’s wake-up time,’ my father used to rouse me in the early dawn of my childhood memories, summoning his reluctant first-born to get up and join him in milking the cows before catching the bus to school. I luxuriate to this day in regularly awakening before dawn, snuggled in my bed, knowing that I will *not* be summoned to get up and get out to the barn.

God’s faithful of all times and places with whom we claim identity as church seem to suffer from a kind of sleeping sickness, like, notably, those disciples who kept napping while Jesus prayed his heart out in Gethsemane on the eve of his death. Drowsiness, lack of attention, and inertia seem to

be the order of the day. So on this new year's morning of the church year, it is high time to be up and at 'em, for as Paul claims in a curious turn of phrase, "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." Moreover, "the night is gone, the day is near" (vs. 11b-12a). The kairoic urgency of the "now" is clear, for as Paul had written the Corinthians, "Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2b). Jesus alters the image of sleep only slightly in his warning to the disciples, twice using another Greek verb most often translated "keep awake." Whether waking from sleep or keeping oneself from falling asleep, the message of Advent is clear: be alert and ready for the Lord's return!

Yet there is a danger here, Jesus warns, of an overzealous adventism that seeks to predict the exact timetable of his return even though he clearly says, "about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matt 24:36). The point is to "keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (v 42). Readiness is all, Jesus is saying in his little parable of the thief in the night which culminates in a kind of moral we can take as serving throughout this season of eager anticipation, "for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (v 44). "Expect to be surprised" is Jesus' message regarding the end time. It's a message the "rapture industry," recently regnant and lucrative, just can't seem to "get."

The first readings throughout this Advent season of Year A are all drawn from Isaiah and this continues in the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany until Transfiguration. This focus on Isaiah makes this an unrivalled opportunity to pay special attention to the words of what tradition has called the "Fifth Evangelist." Today would be a good opportunity to give your congregation some background to the writings of this "collective" prophet, beginning with the eighth century and stretching across 250 years of the subsequent writings of the Isaianic "school" who wrote in the original prophet's name. Or begin a Bible study during these seasons that could extend to include Isaiah's Holy Week and Easter pericopes.

It's the late Walter Brueggemann who suggested that Isaiah is "like a mighty oratorio whereby Israel sings the story of faith," and "like any oratorio, this one includes interaction among many voices, some of which are in dissent," or perhaps better in keeping with his musical metaphor, "dissonance." Bringing focus to this multi-authored opus, however, is that "in the end the book of Isaiah is an oratorio about the suffering and destiny of Jerusalem" which is the center of YHWH's peculiar attentiveness. Further, Jerusalem is the very "center of the world's best hopes for well-being" and the site of "the most profound disobedience and recalcitrance" (Brueggemann, *Isaiah* 1-39, 1)

One cannot hear these words regarding Jerusalem underlined by the psalmist's plea to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem"

and its "security" without thinking of the on-going plight of today's starving Palestinians who suffer under the current rulers of Jerusalem's bloody tyranny.

The universal vision of today's prophetic Word and psalmody is moreover a Word of shalom-creating judgment and arbitration whose bottom line is "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isa 2:4). This so-called "floating oracle," also found in Micah and in reverse form in Joel, is the unofficial mission statement of the United Nations, whose words are embodied in a striking statue outside the UN building, ironically a gift of the former USSR. It offers us Advent folks not only a vision but an agenda as to what our wakefulness is intended by God to be about: the welcoming of God's promise of peace into our war-weary, violence-prone existence.

Besides the traditional oldies and still goodies, "*Wake Awake, For Night is Flying*" and "*Savior of the Nations Come*," consider adding to your congregation's repertoire the composed spiritual "*Soon and Very Soon*" or the more traditional "*My Lord, What a Morning*." A fresh suggestion from the world of global hymnody is the Korean "*Come Now, O Prince of Peace*" (ELW #247) or try "*Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah*" (ELW #240) set to a lilting Yiddish folk tune both of which are fittingly sung on successive Sundays during the lighting of the Advent candles.

John Rollefson

Second Sunday of Advent December 7, 2025

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Engaging the Texts

The clear proclamation of God's enduring steadfast love for both Jews and Gentiles in the epistle to the Romans can help to temper potential supersessionist readings of John's warnings in Matthew 3. God has not cut down the tree of Israel so that a new root can grow; the new shoot from the root of Jesse as it is employed in both the Hebrew and New Testament texts is its testimony to the power of life over death, even after countless empires and power machines had attempted (and continue to attempt) to cut God's people down.

When John the Baptist calls out the crowds of Pharisees and Sadducees coming to him for baptism as a "brood of vipers" (Matt 3:7), he is not likely to have been concerned

about their potential ties to the Jewish establishment. Indeed, John himself, his parents, and, presumably, the people coming to him from Judea at the start of his ministry were all Jewish. Some in those first crowds were almost certainly Pharisees and Sadducees (the two largest sects of Judaism in the first century). John's father, Zechariah, was about as "establishment" as one can get—a priest from the tribe of Levi and so may have been associated with the Sadducees himself. And John's mother was so religiously conservative that some biblical scholars, such as James McGrath, suggest that she may have followed suit with women like Hannah before her, pledging the son of her old age to the Lord when she learned of his birth. (If she did, that would explain the long hair, specific diet, and clothes made out of camel's hair—these items would not have left John looking like a mad man in the first-century world, so much as guaranteed that he kept to Levitical purity laws while living a monastic life in the wilderness). No, it's unlikely that John is critiquing the crowds for being Jewish or, even for aligning with two of the most populous groups in Judaism at the time.

Instead, it seems more likely that John's concern is with the plurality of the crowds themselves. One or two people coming to him out in the countryside would suggest that they've been thoughtful and intentional in seeking out his baptism of repentance—that they're ready to turn their lives around. But when whole crowds of people began arriving, John was faced with the uncomfortable fact that he, a wilderness prophet, was becoming *popular*. But like the prophets of the past knew far too well, John knew that true repentance, rebirth, and pursuit of God's righteousness, was likely to be anything but popular. Following God's path of justice and righteousness is not supposed to be easy. Perhaps that's part of why John went out of his way to weave his clothes out of the coarser camel's hair (rather than sheep's wool), as a reminder of the demands of a life lived for God. Nevertheless, John doesn't turn the crowds away; he merely reminds them of what they're getting themselves into: "Bear fruit worth of repentance" (Matt 3:8). For, to do so, the prophet Isaiah promises, will ultimately be a signal to the people, ushering in a new era of peace and righteousness (Isa 11:10). This is the hope of the Advent season.

Pastoral Reflections

Few are the contemporary preachers who intentionally preach against the Jewish people today. Nevertheless, unintentional messaging can be just as harmful. Anytime that something (or someone) is only "good" in contrast to someone (or something else) deemed "bad" or "lesser," even if the contrast is left unstated, it is a good idea to check our biases. Christianity is good. Judaism is good. Full stop. Paul reminds us, in the Romans text for today, that both these statements can be true

at the same time. Exercise caution, therefore, not to elide the fictional trees that John refers to in Matthew's text with the tree of Jesse from Isaiah. God has not cut Israel down. Any religion, Christianity and Judaism included, that requires another to be so destroyed to flourish is not, ultimately, a religion of love.

But Isaiah knows nothing of John's axe. Isaiah knows only the pain and struggle of oppression—of being cut down and left for dead by the power systems of this world. And Isaiah celebrates that even in those moments when we might feel there is nothing left, God brings new life. God breathes hope into the world's destruction. For Isaiah, this hope takes the form of predators resting together, sharing the bounty of the earth in harmony, and raising their young side-by-side. It comes in the form of young children playing safely without fear of instruments of death in the places where they are meant to grow and thrive. The task of the preacher is to craft Isaiah's vision for our own day; to resist what may be easy or popular and to proclaim the good news of God's love and hope for all people. And while that hope can take many forms, for us as Christians, it comes in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Third Sunday of Advent December 14, 2025

Isaiah 35:1–10

Psalm 146:5–10

James 5:7–10

Matthew 11:2–11

Engaging the Texts

A word about wardrobe: Despite what most illustrated children's Bibles may have led you to believe, John was not clothed in a camel pelt. His clothes were woven, just like most everyone else in his day and our own. In last week's Gospel, Matthew states that his clothes were *made of camel's hair* (not skin), just as ours are made of wool, or cotton, or synthetic fiber. And, in today's Gospel, Matthew's Jesus clues us in on why that matters. Camels have rougher hair than sheep or even goats and the resulting fabric ended up somewhat rougher, certainly more so than fine linens made from plant fibers. John, quite literally, therefore, did not wear soft clothing. Put more simply, John was not a man of luxury. His ministry of repentance was not about comfort or indulgence. Instead, Jesus says in no uncertain terms, John was a prophet of the kingdom of God. And, by implication, God's kingdom is not about soft robes or luxurious palaces.

What, then, does the reign of God look like? Jesus has already answered the disciples of John. In God's kingdom: the

blind see, the lame walk, skin disease is eradicated, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear the good news (the same word used for imperial proclamations) (Matt 11:4-6). If John proclaimed repentance—turning one’s life and way of living around—Jesus embodied this transformation not just for a single life, but for a whole community, a whole world. In today’s world, perhaps the categories might change or be subject to revision that take seriously the agency of all involved, but the key point remains: God’s kingdom is a kingdom of turning, turning the world upside down, so that those who have been in anyway excluded—physically, financially, or socially—are brought to the center of God’s love.

Isaiah proclaims a similar restitution for God’s people who have been oppressed: “sorrow and sighing shall fade away” (Isa 33:10). Like John’s text, the human prophet visions this reversal in terms of vengeance upon those who have oppressed (a vision that one would do well to preach against), but the main point of the text is upon redemption and the renewal of life out of death. This, too, is the happiness about which the psalmist sings. Significantly, the psalmist distinguishes that it is not those engaged in wicked deeds themselves whom God will bring down, but rather, “the way of the wicked [God] brings to ruins” (Ps 146:9). The ways of wickedness ultimately bring death and destruction upon both oppressed and oppressor alike. Therefore, our God of love and justice seeks to end human destructive behavior for the sake of the flourishing of all human life.

Pastoral Reflections

I like soft clothing; I frequently opt for higher thread counts and silkier sweaters. And, to the extent that I allow this self-indulgence to distract me from God’s justice work in the world, I am thus convicted by today’s text. But I don’t think soft robes, in particular, is what Matthew is concerned about in today’s Gospel text. Rather, it’s what those robes represent. It’s possible that John wore clothes woven from rough camel’s hair as a sort of devotional practice—to remind himself of all the rough edges in the world still around him. Whether he thought about his clothes or not, though, John understood his purpose as a prophet to prepare for God’s inbreaking reign. What clothes we wear or don’t wear ultimately isn’t as important as this intentionality. What practices, like John wearing rough clothing, remind you of God’s justice? Of human error? Of human dignity? How can your choices of clothing, food, even the community you live in, help to embody the gospel you proclaim?

When I was studying abroad as a college student in Namibia, my host grandmother at one of my home stays insisted on buying for her family only white bread at the grocery store. As a young adult who had only recently become aware of the health benefits of the whole grains in many

brown breads, I was confused by this insistence. My host grandmother explained that she bought white bread now because, as a child, she had been unable to. Apartheid in her community, it seemed, applied even to the color of bread one can eat. Suddenly, the health benefits didn’t seem so important compared to her exercise of the autonomy to choose. This is how I think of the soft and rough clothes in Matthew’s gospel—it is not a question of which is better, whether there even is such a thing, but rather, of what the choice of one over the other represents.

Incidentally, the term that is translated as “soft” in Matthew’s Gospel text only appears three times in the New Testament. In Matt 11:8, a parallel text in Luke 7:25, and 1 Cor 6:9 where it is translated as “male prostitutes” (with a footnote that admits, “meaning uncertain”). An expanded search of the root word only yields a handful more results, each translated as physical sickness (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 10:1). Translators speculate that the term “soft” may have been applied to men who allowed themselves to be sexually penetrated. Its use in vice lists, especially in the larger Greco-Roman world, suggests more about an emphasis on male domination than any particular moralities around sexuality. Here it is ironic that the ones who are “soft” in Jesus’ critique are in fact those who might be perceived as attempting to dominate others in the political, economic, or religious spheres. Such usage provides a pastoral opportunity to break down narrow and judgmental binaries.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 21, 2025

Isaiah 7:10–16

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19

Romans 1:1–7

Matthew 1:18–25

Engaging the Texts

I’ve wondered about the pairing of today’s Old Testament and Gospel texts. Yes, they both refer to the sign that a young woman shall bear a child (Isa 7:14 quoted by Matthew in 1:23). Still, with a 300+ year gap between the experiences of Ahaz and Joseph, it’s important not to assume that Joseph’s experience is the unique and only fulfillment of Isaiah’s promise.

Arland Hultgren suggests that we keep the integrity of the two distinct texts:

Isaiah of the eighth century B.C. foresaw a new day of peace and security for the people of God, and

he spoke of the forthcoming birth of a child as a sign of it. The evangelist Matthew, in turn, who was a student of the Scriptures, saw the birth of Jesus to be the culmination of the hopes of the past, the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, and for the sake of the world as a whole.⁴

Even beyond our conversation about the “sign,” I see an interesting connection between the two texts, particularly the roles of Ahaz and Joseph. Both are challenged to choose: act in the way that seems righteous or act in a fresh, surprising, but faithful way.

Ahaz is unwilling to ask God for a sign as Isaiah requests. Alluding to Deuteronomy, Ahaz says, “I will not ask (for a sign), and I will not put the Lord to the test.” (A text used by Jesus in the wilderness).

Similarly, Joseph believes that his response to the news of Mary’s pregnancy is to divorce her quietly, the kindest way to fulfill the law and follow the path he believes is righteous. But even more striking than Ahaz receiving *Isaiah’s* promise of a sign, Joseph receives a *visit* from an angel of God.

“Joseph, son of David,” the angel says, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

With the help of the prophet Isaiah’s voice and the angel’s visit, Ahaz and Joseph are called to lean into an unexpected kind of faithfulness.

Joseph is even called to further action: “You are to name the child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” And, as our text concludes, “Joseph named him Jesus.”

Finally, a word about Jesus’ name. It is “Joshua” in Hebrew, which simply means “God saves.” The name for this child is also his mission, “to save people from their sins.” That mission is vividly fulfilled throughout Matthew’s Gospel: in Jesus’ earthly ministry (9:2), in Christ’s post-resurrection reign where Christ’s authority (28:18) to forgive sins is given to the disciples (16:19, 18:18), and in the Lord’s Supper, where disciples receive Jesus’ blood... “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28).

As a pastor, I was sometimes asked why we began worship with confession and forgiveness. A member once said, “I don’t invite my friends to our church because I know they’ll hear about sin before anything else. It’s not welcoming.” Though the words we use and the timing of our confession can be problematic, I am not ready to abandon it. Indeed, I think that confession and absolution are sometimes the most welcoming words of all.

Yes, we affirm, “All are welcome.” But, there are times when that is not enough. We all carry burdens of our sin:

keeping score, self-loathing, fear, selfishness. We wonder, “Am I still welcome in spite of all that makes me feel unwelcome?” The words of forgiveness are words of assurance that we are deeply welcome. God sees us to the depths of our hearts, knows our every secret, and loves us fully. God’s love cleanses us and grants a new beginning—forgiven and free.

Pastoral Reflections

How often does scripture describe an event from two points of view? Eli and Samuel? Peter and Cornelius? What a distinctive blessing to have the narrative of Jesus’ birth told from the perspectives of both Mary and Joseph. And, to hear their stories within a few days of each other (Dec. 21 and Dec. 24).

Today we focus on Joseph’s experience, amazing as it is. As we read how Joseph encounters one surprise after another, we’re amazed at both his rootedness in the Torah and his openness to a message from God through an angel.

The first surprise might seem like the biggest. Knowing that he was not involved in the conception, Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. As a son of David, Joseph knows that stoning is a possible punishment for a woman in this position. Perhaps, surprising himself (and joyfully surprising Mary) Joseph decides on a more compassionate response, choosing to divorce Mary quietly.

But then comes the greatest surprise of all—a surprise unique in human history. Mary, his beloved, is expecting a child conceived by the Holy Spirit! It will take more than Joseph’s faith and compassion to figure out what to do with that surprising news. Deuteronomy gives no guidance for such a situation.

Miraculously, Joseph believes the angel’s message and obeys.

As God’s people, we seek to follow Jesus. Rooted in Scripture—the stories, the teachings, the prophetic texts, the Gospel, the epistles—we seek to follow Jesus.

Still, the path of discipleship is not a simple or linear path.

Life happens. Surprises happen. We dwell in Scripture. But we also dwell in community; a real, living community where God’s messengers (Greek: *angelos*) come to us. Their names will probably not be Gabriel or Michael—but, rather, Hierald, Babette, and Jerod.

We listen carefully. We discern within a community. Even during the church’s heated and consequential controversy recorded in Acts 15 (discerning whether Gentile Christians must be circumcised), no angel appeared to guide them.

They discerned the path forward after much communal conversation, saying, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further than these essentials.” (abstain from blood, food sacrificed to idols, what is strangled, and fornication).

4. Arland Hultgren, December 22, 2013, “Working Preacher” (online).

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Community is at the very center of their discernment.

So today, we seek to follow Jesus. We stumble. We seek forgiveness. We yearn for God's presence and guidance.

We thank God for the witness in Joseph's story. "You will name him Jesus," the angel says, "for he will save the people from their sins." And "they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God with us.'"

What better words to hear as we journey. God forgives us. God is with us.

In that promise, we can live boldly, ever upheld by God's grace and forgiveness. Never alone, Emmanuel is with us always.

Ann Svennugsen

Christmas Eve December 24, 2025

Isaiah 9:2–7

Psalms 96

Titus 2:11–14

Luke 2:1–14 [15–20]

Engaging the Text

Luke 2 may be among those passages that preachers have engaged more than any other. It would be hard to imagine reading any other text on Christmas Eve. (At least on Easter Sunday, there are four different Gospel accounts of the resurrection). Fortunately, Luke 2 provides enough detail in twenty verses for a lifetime of sermons.

Still, of all the details Luke could include, why spend the first five verses describing the decree from Emperor Augustus, taken while Quirinius was governor, a decree requiring all the world to return home and be registered? One can find lots of reasons: to clarify why Jesus was born in Bethlehem and not in Nazareth, to explain why Bethlehem was so crowded that a manger was the makeshift bed for baby Jesus, to ensure that we know this birth was a real event, supported by historical detail, and that Jesus was a real human baby born in time and space.

These are reasons I have emphasized in my preaching. Yet, there is another critical reason for the detail in verses 1–5. And it speaks to the character of the reign of God, revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of this Jesus, born in Bethlehem.

To mention Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius is to invite us into a context that contrasts markedly with the reign of God. As James Hanson writes, "It is indeed striking to see how many terms associated with empire are employed by Luke in these few verses: Emperor (Caesar), registration (census), governor, Savior, Lord, host (a military term)... and,

of course, we have the specter of King Herod hanging over the story, as well (Luke 1:5)."⁵

While the emperor was to be revered as "Lord," a "Savior never to be surpassed,"⁶ out in the fields near Bethlehem, the angels announce, "to you is born this day in the city a David a Savior, who is Messiah (the anointed one), the Lord" — not to emperors but to shepherds.

The reign of God—is not the reign of Caesar. And, lest you begin to worry that the beloved Christmas text could spark a divisive political conversation at your family's Christmas feast, let's be clear about the meaning.

God's reign is one of love. We are clearly called to love, sacrifice, serve generously, and live our individual lives—and our lives in Christian community—aligned with the values of God's reign. And, yes, that will affect how we advocate and vote in the public sphere. Still, we can speak of the values of God's reign without claiming to know the one unique political means to accomplish those values.

Pastoral Reflections

More than any other time of year, Christmas is a season for remembering. The sights and sounds and smells all evoke memories of days gone by. I can almost smell the lefse my father made. I can see clearly the mess we made trying to help him. I can almost hear my little brother read the Christmas story for the first time. I can see my mother arranging her white porcelain nativity scene. The carols, the candles, the foods—they awaken in us a whole swirl of memories.

It's a season for remembering. But, remembering isn't always easy. Memories can bring joy; they can also bring sadness. Times of remembering can be bittersweet times—joy for the goodness of yesterday and sorrow for the goodness which is gone.

How ironic it is that the Christmas story has less to do with looking backward and everything to do with looking forward. It's the story of a birth, the creation of a newborn baby who has a whole life ahead of him. Holding a newborn, one can quickly be overwhelmed with thoughts of the future. How will her life unfold? Will he find love and joy in the world? The experience of birth opens our eyes to the future. Our vision is drawn toward the horizon.

No birth opened the future more powerfully than the birth we celebrate this night. For when we celebrate this birth, we not only celebrate the future of the babe in Bethlehem, we celebrate the future of the whole creation. Jesus' birth opens wide the future for us all. For, if the God of all the universe can become enfleshed in a wrinkled and reddened newborn,

5. James Hanson, "Working Preacher," Dec. 24, 2015, Narrative Lectionary Section.

6. Hanson, "Working Preacher," Dec. 24, 2015.

then nothing is impossible.

To make sure we understand that this new future is for all, God invites the most unusual guests to the birthday party. The first to hear the birthday song are shepherds, unclean and poor. The angels sing of “good news of great joy for **all the people**.” Jesus’ birth opens a new future for everyone.

Further, the names for this newborn speak to the shape of this future. “Born this day in the city of David is a **Savior**, who is the **Messiah** (the Christ or anointed one), the **Lord**.”

These titles speak clearly to God’s reign in Jesus—for the sake of the whole world. We celebrate this night the new possibilities which Christ brings to our personal lives, into our communal lives, into the life of the whole creation.

The new possibilities are reflected in Mary’s birth song (the hungry will be filled, the proud scattered, the lowly lifted up) and in Jesus’ first sermon (good news to the poor, release to the captives, the year of jubilee). We look for these possibilities for justice and peace in our world—and we ask the Spirit to sweep us up in the work to make them real.

Christmas will always remain a season for remembering. I pray that God’s grace will enfold each one of us as we are touched by the memories of holidays past. But, the Gospel for this night is that when we remember way back to the very first Christmas, then we are turned around and look ahead to see God’s future opening before us—the birth of Jesus flinging open a future for us all.

Ann Svennugsen

Christmas Day December 25, 2025

Isaiah 52:7–10

Psalms 98

Hebrews 1:1–4

John 1:1–14

Big Beautiful Bells of Christmas

Isaiah proclaims for us this Christmas Day, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation.” All fine and good; however, I typically do not find the feet of John the Baptist to be beautiful. Perhaps you do? But come Christmas time, I’m often done with John the Baptist and his Advent season campaign to “prepare the way” (Matt 3:3) with his “ax lying at the root of the tree” (Matt 3:10) message. His feet are more annoying than anything else as preachers need to deal with his stomping about in the days immediately following Christmas Eve as well, for the lectionary texts of Christmas Day, Christmas 2, and Baptism of Our Lord feature John, too. The liturgical calendar is persistently

pushing the presence of John the Baptist, much to my chagrin. Maybe this year will be different?

On this Christmas Day, the messenger is John the Baptist, and his dusty feet are declared beautiful. This messenger stands in the gap of this prologue hymn rife with cosmic drama. Light and life come into being through the Word of God as all of creation is called into existence. Then in a turn of sentence, the story telescopes from “all things” to just one thing: “There was man sent from God, whose name was John” (1:6). The story in its grand vision becomes oddly specific and, in truth, interrupts the poetry that is building toward the Christmas announcement of God’s incarnate love, “the Word made flesh.” But here he and his feet are again, the one who “came as a witness to testify to the light,” John the Baptist sounding out like a sentinel stationed on a hill.

“Witness” and “testimony” are key words in understanding John the Baptist’s function through Advent and into the Christmas season. His presence may be annoyingly constant, but it has a theological purpose—to point to Jesus. Indeed, “He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light” (1:8). He is the messenger giving witness to the Word, Christ Jesus, the good news, the very peace of God. In Jesus, salvation is born among us as the embodiment of God’s love-light shining in the world, and John the Baptist’s calloused feet are firmly planted in the proclamation of this promise. I have come to think of John the Baptist as the first bell of Christmas, the one who rings out and announces Jesus’ arrival.

Bells are a mainstay in the Christian church dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries calling people to worship. They serve as a witness and invitation to come and experience the living Christ in the gathering of God’s people. Festival days, including Christmas, have become an occasion for bells to chime out from belltowers and within sanctuaries with proclamatory gusto.

Poet and abolitionist Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) famously wrote “Christmas Bells” in 1864 as a proclamation and hope for peace amid the heartbreak of the Civil War and the evils of slavery. His third stanza sounds much like the vocation of John the Baptist:

Till, ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!⁷

7. <https://www.nps.gov/long/learn/historyculture/christmas-bells.htm> (accessed 8.31.25). The National Park Service website has information on Longfellow’s life in addition to his works, including “Christmas Bells.”

To ring out the word of peace for all humanity—indeed for all creation—is the messenger’s task! John, who is not the light, came to testify to the “light that shines in the darkness,” or as Longfellow wrote, so that “the world revolved from night to day.” Whatever and whenever the context, the world must hear and know that truth erupts with the light of God’s saving grace. John proclaimed it first, and Longfellow has joined the choir of the communion of saints to testify to it as well.

Worship on this Christmas Day calls for chimes and chants, ringing and signing out the Christmas promise. John may have been the first bell of Christmas, but we are called to join the communion and be messengers of this same promise, for “we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). We too ring out like bells making “a joyful noise to the Lord” and breaking “forth into joyous song” (Psalm 98:4). Bells may just be the message of Christmas! How, then, might we include bells in worship on this festive day? A few suggestions to consider:

- If you have a church building with a belltower, let it ring!
- If you have an organ with a Zimbelstern, ask the musician to let it sing!
- If you have handbells or a handbell choir, let them chime!
- If you can, pass out little bells as people arrive and make sure children let loose! (It may be helpful to print instructions in the bulletin at specific times to invite the ringing.)
- If you preach, encourage the assembly to make bell noises throughout the sermon! (Again, a specific prompt may be needed.)
- And if nothing else, sing out “The Bells of Christmas” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 298; text by Nikolai Grundtvig, music by Carl C.N. Balle). Gather alongside the beautiful feet of John the Baptist and bellow out:

The bells of Christmas chime once more;
the heav’nly guest is at the door.
He comes to earthly dwellings still
With new year gifts of peace, good will.

Justin Lind-Ayres

First Sunday of Christmas December 28, 2025

Isaiah 63:7–9

Psalms 148

Hebrews 2:10–18

Matthew 2:13–23

Big. Beautiful. Belonging

On July 4, 2025, President Donald Trump of the United States signed the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” (OBBBA) into law. Because this was a reconciliation bill related to tax, spending, and debt limit legislation, it only needed a simple majority and was immune from filibuster. It passed on a razor thin majority in both the Senate (51-50, with the Vice President casting the tiebreaking vote) and the House (218-214). Much can be said about this wretched bill as it cuts taxes for the wealthiest in the U.S., increases the budget deficit by an estimated \$3.4 trillion dollars over nine years⁸, undermines Medicaid and food assistance programs for the most vulnerable, and undercuts climate justice programs and initiatives. But on this First Sunday of Christmas with Matthew 2 challenging our quaint holiday sensitivities, we are called to name the ongoing threat to immigrants and refugees.

Global Refuge, formerly Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, is a non-profit started in 1939 and rooted in the Lutheran church with the purpose of providing safety and support for newcomers to the United States.⁹ Executive Orders from the Administration upon President Trump’s inauguration in January of 2025 froze federal funding to Global Refuge along with many resettlement organizations steeped in the Christian tradition. The mechanisms of welcome and hospitality have been severely hindered while the OBBBA dramatically increases U.S. federal spending on draconian immigration related measures. As Global Refuge published, “This includes nearly \$47 billion in new spending on border wall and barrier construction, \$45 billion for adult and family detention capacity, and nearly \$30 billion for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).”¹⁰ These realities in tandem with images of unidentifiable masked ICE agents terrorizing and seizing people in communities across our country have revealed cruel and inhumane treatment of people who are, by definition, refugees.

Without question, Jesus and his small family unit were

8. Estimate provided by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office. See <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61570> (accessed 8.31.25)

9. Global Refuge information and history can be found at <https://globalrefuge.org>. (accessed 8.31.25)

10. Global Refuge, <https://globalrefuge.org>.

refugees. The angel of Joseph's dream in this Sunday's pericope instructs him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to flee the wrath of Herod. The babe in the manger of Christmas Eve quickly becomes target number one in the eyes of the principalities and powers threatened by the saving ways of Emmanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23). Fearing the threat to his power, Herod launches an assault on the people killing "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men" (2:16). I wonder what kind of masks those agents of the Empire wore to carry out such atrocities? What funding was used to finance Herod's murderous efforts? Whatever the case, the wailing and loud lamentations of the mothers and fathers that echoed in those Bethlehem streets reverberate still to this day clashing with our Christmas hymns of peace and stillness.

Admittedly, this text from Matthew with the Holy Family's flight to Egypt is jarring and scatters whatever figures are still huddled together around our Christmas creche scenes. Jesus becomes a refugee, fleeing to Egypt only returning to the land of Israel when Herod is dead and gone. The biblical and theological implications made by the family's flight are front and center in the narrative. Indeed, Jesus as a "new Moses" is a Matthean theme throughout this gospel account. Like Moses, Jesus is an Israelite hiding in Egypt, whose life is threatened by a tyrant. In Exodus 2, the story of Moses' river-basket escape from the massacre of the Hebrew children at the demand of Pharaoh is as chilling as Herod's actions in Bethlehem. Like Moses, Jesus will hear God's call to save the people from the bondages of enslavement. Like Moses, Jesus will lead the people as a lawgiver. And ultimately, like Moses, Jesus will lead an exodus. Instead of an exodus through the river waters into the promised land like Moses, however, Jesus' exodus will lead the people through the clutches of death (cross) into abundant life (resurrection).

The First Sunday of Christmas may feel like a bit of let down from the hype and holiday energy surrounding December 24 and 25. Experience tells me that worship attendance will dip and the Christmas hymns may lag a bit with a little less pep. Maybe that's okay. Actually, maybe that is appropriate and necessary given the biblical text and the present-day context. Jesus is made to be a refugee by the powers of this world that are threatened by God's mission centered on neighborly love that liberates and saves. These powers continue to thrive around us and within us. But God incarnate, Christ in the flesh, calls out of these practices of bondage. The Word of God dwells among us revealing the abundance of God's mercy and steadfast love (Isa 63:7). The practices of detention centers and boarder walls and security agents stand in contrast to God who become a refugee and ushered in the liberation needed by us all.

Matthew 2:13–23 is part of our Christmas message, and we are called to proclaim it in word and deed in our worship. What might it look like to list the names of immigrant and refugee services in your area in need of support? What might it feel like to tell the stories of refugees you know or have been given in trust to share? What might it mean to pray for refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, and all who are looking for safety and security? What might Christmas teach us about the welcome, hospitality, and sanctuary of our God who makes the Divine home among us? What might one big, beautiful, bold word of belonging do for us and for all our neighbors on this holy day?

Justin Lind-Ayres

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