

Preaching Helps

January, February, and March 2026:

***Second Sunday of Christmas to
the Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday***

Tell Me a Story: Turning to John in the Season of Lent

Happy New Year! Actually, Happy Second New Year! Those of us who follow the church calendar celebrated our first new year on November 30, 2025, the First Sunday of Advent. Now we are moving into Epiphany followed by the forty days of Lent. In Year A we leave Matthew behind for most of Lent and turn to the Gospel of John. Every Sunday we will hear a long narrative from that gospel. We may not think of John as a storyteller, but Lent 2, 3, 4 and 5 feature some of the longest stories in the Bible. On Lent 2 we almost forget the story when we reach the memory verse—John 3:16—near the end of the reading. But that verse is set up by the story of Nicodemus who comes to Jesus by night. He gets confused about a word that could mean “born again” or “born from above” leading to a funny conversation with Jesus. The Samaritan woman starts in the story in John 4, the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone in the New Testament. Jesus breaks rules about race, religion, and gender in his respectful dialogue with this woman. The story of the man born blind in John 9 seems purposely laid out as a drama in several scenes with Jesus appearing in only the first and last. Lent 5 tells the very dramatic story of Jesus raising Lazarus from death. In a scene worthy of TV or film, the formerly dead man comes walking out of the tomb still bound by grave wrappings. Lent will be a season of stories.

Stories make sermons come alive if they’re *told* rather than read—and if they’re not always about the preacher’s family. As we look ahead to the stories we’ll hear in Lent, how might other stories connect to the stories John tells? Are there stories that seem parallel to the story of Nicodemus or the Samaritan woman? Do you know stories that help us understand how the blind man is feeling when people keep pestering him with questions? Stories come from many places: our own experience, newspaper articles, movies, novels, a conversation in the grocery store, something on NPR. Try to keep a computer file or note cards that help you remember stories you’re sure you’ll never forget. I’ll give a couple examples, but I know you have many more.

When our son was young, he loved the *Amelia Bedelia* books. You may not know them at all—so let me give a little background. Amelia Bedelia is a maid, a domestic worker, I

guess you could call her. She cleans houses for people, bakes, serves tea, does yard work, babysits, runs errands—but mainly she makes us laugh. She makes us laugh because she mixes up the meaning of words: people tell her one thing, and she understands the word to mean something different. It will make more sense if I give you some examples from the book *Amelia Bedelia and the Surprise Shower*:

Amelia is working for Mr. and Mrs. Rogers, helping them get ready for a a part—suddenly she remembers a forgotten chore: “The fish!” she shouted. “Mr. Rogers said to scale them and ice them.” She piled the fish on the scale. “There,” she said, “You just scale yourselves while I ice the cakes.” And Amelia Bedelia iced her cakes. “Those do look nice,” she said. “And there’s enough icing left to ice the fish too.” Amelia Bedelia picked up a fish by its tail...She iced one side of the fish. Then she iced the other side... Then she put the iced fish and the iced cupcakes in the cupboard.

No wonder Amelia Bedelia got confused: we use the word *scale* to describe removing the outer layer of a fish, but the very same word also means a tool used to weigh something (we won’t even tell her the word can also mean climbing a mountain or a range of notes on the piano!) *Ice* can mean to spread frosting, but the very same word spelled the very same way means to chill something. No wonder people have a hard time learning English! No wonder Amelia Bedelia got so mixed up!

Perhaps you’re thinking: “It’s the preacher who’s mixed up—this is not a children’s show!” No, it’s not, but in today’s gospel reading, something like an “Amelia Bedelia experience” happens to Nicodemus. [A story like this could introduce the story of Nicodemus being confused by the word *anōthen* which can mean “born anew” or “born from above.”]

A few years ago, a pastor colleague told me about a small Catholic church in France. A young man in the congregation had killed himself. His family wanted more than anything to bury him inside the Catholic cemetery. But the rules were clear: no one who took their own life could be buried in the church plot. Such rules have been common in many churches—not only Roman Catholic churches in France. In my hometown it was considered wrong for someone who took their own life to have a funeral in the church building. Such funerals were held in the funeral home instead. The priest of the parish in France couldn’t find a way around the rules, but he did the best he could to comfort the family, to assure them that their son was in the arms of a loving God who didn’t follow church rules. After the funeral service the young man was buried outside the cemetery fence. That night it rained, a gentle mist of a rain, and in the rain, the priest went out to

the cemetery. He didn't take his prayer book or his Bible, just a shovel and a pick. All night long he worked until he had moved the fence. The newly dug grave was now inside the cemetery.

Jesus moved the fence, too. He moved the fence that separated him from women and Samaritans. He didn't judge the Samaritan woman or exclude her because she'd had five husbands and was now living with a man who wasn't her husband. Jesus engaged in a theological conversation with her even if he shouldn't have been talking to a woman in public. This is our calling as followers of Jesus: "Move the fence!" [You can name specific exclusions in your community and now in the United States.] If your worship service ends with a traditional dismissal, you might change the words for this Sunday: "Go in peace. Move the fence. **Thanks be to God!**" (Or as people respond in my sister's Iowa congregation: "We will!")

You know more stories than you think you know! Many are ordinary, some are life-changing. One book that honors story telling is the book *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward. They collected stories they had heard Fred Craddock tell over the years. Did these stories really happen? Nobody knows for sure, but they're all true. Sometimes I have retold one of Craddock's stories in a sermon, acknowledging the source—something like: "Fred Craddock was a gifted preacher who also taught preaching for many years in seminaries. He remembers the first congregation he served in Tennessee..." [then go on with his story of the church that became a diner...see page 29.]

I'm grateful to the preachers who have written for this season of "Preaching Helps." We welcome three new writers in this issue—a campus pastor, a bishop's assistant, and a parish pastor who has also taught preaching. They join others who have written before from New Jersey to the state of Washington. **Linnea K. Clark** (she/her) serves as the pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church in Hamilton, New Jersey. She is also a partner and writer for Barn Geese Worship which publishes creative worship resources for congregations and ministry leaders. She holds a Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School and Yale's Institute of Sacred Music. Originally from western Massachusetts, she lives in Lawrenceville, New Jersey with her spouse and three cats. **Grant Eckhart** currently serves Jacob's Porch, the Lutheran Campus Ministry in Central Ohio, located at Ohio State University. He graduated from Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. For more information about Jacob's Porch, you can go to www.jacobsporch.com or to read his free substack you can go to ministryintheweird.substack.com. **Derek**

Hoven is an ELCA pastor in Orlando where he serves as a Director of Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop for the Florida-Bahamas Synod. He holds an M.Div. and a D.Min. from Trinity Lutheran Seminary where he explored storytelling as testimony. He and his wife, Laura, enjoy creative projects and playing games with their two young adult children. **Hank Langknecht** is a retired ELCA pastor living on the shore of Lake Ontario in Upstate New York. He served as pastor in congregations in Ohio, Ontario, and Virginia and for seventeen years taught preaching and communication at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio.

Barbara Lundblad is editor of "Preaching Helps." She served parishes in New York City and taught preaching at Union Theological Seminary before retiring in 2014. Minneapolis is now home where she is a member of Grace University Lutheran Church. **Heidi Neumark** served as a pastor in New York City for forty years, twenty of them in the South Bronx and twenty in Manhattan where she was also a founder and executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for homeless LGBTQIQ+ youth. Heidi has retired and now lives in Kingston, New York, with her husband Gregorio, across the street from her daughter, daughter-in-law and two delightful granddaughters. She is serving a congregation in Kingston on a part-time basis and writing poetry. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. A retired 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 C* are now available. (Editor's note: these three books are wonderful resources for preachers.) John and his wife Ruth live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Barbara Rossing** is professor emerita of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She loves to teach "Preaching the Gospel of John." She works on Bible and creation care, including her recent article "Kairos for Mission, Kairos for the Climate," <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/536/558>. She serves on the ELCA Church Council and the board of directors of Lutherans Restoring Creation. She invites you to join LSTC's World of the Bible travel seminar to Greece and Turkey, May 21-June 7, visiting sites of the New Testament and early Christianity: <https://tinyurl.com/yd9svmed>.

Second Sunday of Christmas January 4, 2026

Jeremiah 31:7–14

Psalms 147:12–20

Ephesians 1:3–14

John 1:[1-9], 10–18

Engaging the Text

In recent months, my method of biblical word study has evolved, especially when examining terms with broad or complex semantic ranges, such as the Greek words *λόγος* (*logos*) and *σάρξ* (*sarx*) in John 1. Using BDAG¹ via Logos Bible Software, I extracted the full entries for these words and used AI to parse every public, freely available reference listed, including both biblical and extra-biblical sources. Roughly 80% of the sources were accessible; the remaining 20% were cataloged for further exploration.

After gathering this data, I prompted the AI to synthesize the data into a 250–300 word exegetical narrative tailored for preachers. Through iterative prompts, I refined the focus toward meanings most pertinent to John 1.

Here is what it came up with: In Greek philosophy, *logos* has a rich intellectual lineage. For Heraclitus, the *Logos* is the rational order behind all change: the underlying unity in the flux of reality. Stoic thought advanced this further, viewing *logos* as the immanent rationality or divine reason (*logos spermatikos*) animating the cosmos. Philo of Alexandria, blending Hellenistic and Jewish traditions, described the *Logos* as the agent of creation and the mediator between the transcendent God and the material world calling it the “firstborn of God” and “image of God.”

Yet long before Hellenism, the Hebrew Scriptures affirmed a dynamic concept of divine speech: *dābār*—the Word of the Lord that creates, judges, and redeems. “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made” (Psalm 33:6). This Word is personified in Jewish Wisdom literature (e.g., Sirach 24; Wisdom 9) as a divine agent who dwells among God’s people and through whom all things are created.

John 1 draws from both traditions and adds to them. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (or divine)” (1:1). This *Logos*—divine, eternal, creative “became flesh” (*sarx*) and dwelled among us (1:14).

To grasp the weight of that claim, we must consider the meaning of *sarx*. In Greek usage and New Testament theology,

sarx connotes not merely physical flesh but mortal, vulnerable, embodied human life. The *Logos* became *sarx* not metaphorically, but incarnationally. The eternal Word assumed real human existence with all its limitations, finitude, and fragility.

John’s Gospel does not propose an abstract cosmic force or symbolic incarnation. It proclaims that the creative logic of the universe, the eternal Son has entered our world in human flesh. The person of Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human, is the Word made flesh.

Pastoral Reflections

What lingers with me most from this study is the bodily particularity of Jesus. The eternal *Logos* lived in one body among other bodies. That’s not just theological poetry; it’s a grounding truth. Jesus grew, felt, suffered, died, rose, and ascended—all in a single, human body.

I sometimes share with students a phrase I learned from Dr. Ian McFarland: the Triune God is three “who’s” (persons) and one “what” (divine nature); Jesus is one “who” (person) with two “what’s” (divine and human natures). By contrast, we are one “who” and one “what.” We don’t move from human body to another. We are embodied persons our memories, identities, and relationships grounded in our singular life story.

This became more than theological reflection during a conversation with a longtime acquaintance. We were grieving a mutual friend when she began sharing about her exploration of the Akashic Records. She had recently learned through a spirit guide that she had lived 450 previous lives, each with unique relationships, some of which supposedly overlapped with people in her current life. She then asked, with sincerity, “Christians believe in reincarnation too, right?”

I gently replied, “We don’t.” She vaguely recalled that from confirmation class but wasn’t sure. When she asked me what I thought of reincarnation, I responded honestly but respectfully. I said that while I recognize its place in other traditions, I find the idea personally horrifying. For me, the Christian claim that we are one person in one body with a life that continues into eternity is profound and comforting. We don’t discard bodies like costumes or forget past selves. We are known, remembered, and loved by God and one another as ourselves.

This theological vision is crucial in college ministry, where many students absorb reincarnation from online spiritualities or popular media. Some believe in past lives casually, others more devotionally. But few have considered the implications of what it means for love, identity, and memory if who we are is dissolved across centuries and a variety of bodies.

In contrast, the Christian promise is that this body, yours, mine, will be transformed but never forgotten. Our relationships, redeemed. Our memories, renewed, not wiped.

1. W. Arndt, F.W. Danker, W. Bauer, & F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* 3rd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 145.

We are not souls wandering through bodies, but persons moving toward resurrection and glory.

I don't say all this to disparage others' beliefs. A sermon rooted in this theology isn't a takedown of reincarnation. It's a pastoral affirmation that *having one body is good news*. It means your life matters. You are not replaceable or disposable. And because the *Logos* became *sarx*, we know that God doesn't just love abstract souls or cosmic energies. God loves you, *this you*, in this body with your loves, experiences, and memory and has promised that who you are will not only endure but through Christ will become even more truly you.

AI, like preaching journals, is a tool. It can't write your sermon. But it might open a new path of reflection, offer clarity in exegesis, or challenge your assumptions. In the end, *you* write the sermon. And maybe, just maybe, someone will remember it even into the life of the world to come and unto the ages of ages.

Grant Eckhart

Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 2026

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

Engaging the Text

In an earlier article in this issue on John 1, I described one way preachers might use AI to assist with exegetical work. Here is another example, this time from Matthew 2:1–12. I began by copying the BDAG entries for *Magos* and *Aster* in the Chat GPT. I then prompted it to gather all freely accessible ancient and modern references listed in those articles. I also explained that I am a Lutheran pastor writing for a preaching journal and that I wanted it to integrate a specific scholarly observation I remembered from seminary.

My New Testament professor, Mark Allan Powell, once told us that Matthew never actually says the Magi were three, or wise, or even men. He also offered a comment that stayed with me. The star in the narrative does not act like a distant celestial body. It behaves like a low, moving light that guides the travelers left and right and leads them directly to a particular house. I asked the AI to place Powell's comment alongside the BDAG material and summarize the combined picture.

Here is the substance of that summary: In Greek and Near Eastern literature the Magi are not generic sages but a known class of Median and Persian priest astrologers. Herodotus describes them as ritual leaders for kings. Daniel 2 includes Babylonian *magoi* among royal dream interpreters.

Josephus, Justin Martyr, and the Protoevangelium of James likewise portray them as court astrologers who read the heavens as a book of signs. Matthew's Magi, then, are not wandering philosophers but trained religious experts responding to a celestial event.

BDAG's entry on *aster* shows that the word is broader than our modern "star." An *aster* can be any heavenly object other than the sun: star, planet, comet, or meteor. Ancient writers speak of "wandering stars" and describe extraordinary lights that act as guides, such as the light that goes before Timoleon's fleet in Diodorus Siculus.

Jewish and Greco-Roman sources sometimes treat stars as living beings. Philo calls them rational creatures; Revelation interprets stars as angels; Stoic thinkers identify them as divine intelligences; 1 Enoch depicts some as angelic beings who go astray. In that symbolic world an *aster* can be both physical phenomenon and personal, luminous presence.

Modern scholars propose natural explanations for Matthew's star—planetary conjunctions, comets, novae. Yet, as Benedict Viviano notes, Matthew's verbs matter: the star "goes before" the Magi and then "stands over" the child, echoing the cloud and fire of Exodus. Historically the Magi read the sky; narratively the *aster* acts like an angelic pillar of fire, a mobile presence leading them to Jesus.

Pastoral Reflection

At Jacob's Porch, our Lutheran campus ministry, we ask students each semester what topics they want to explore. Last year they requested a class on ET Alien Theology. They wanted to compare Christian teaching with the alien reports and speculation filling news cycles, congressional hearings, and documentaries. The class drew students, faculty members, clergy, and several people who had never come to any church event before.

A surprising number of participants said they had been curious about aliens for years but had never felt safe admitting it in either academic or religious settings. The class created a space where Christian theology and human curiosity about the unknown could coexist and even enrich one another.

One evening our conversation turned to Matthew 2. Someone asked whether the Magi might have followed something like the object known as 3I ATLAS which is currently passing through our solar system. Another mentioned the glowing orbs that sometimes appear in videos from military bases. A tension developed in the room. Some believed that every unusual event in the Bible must be extraterrestrial. Others were sure that anything alien must be demonic.

I asked why must we choose one or the other?

Could Matthew's aster be exactly what the story suggests, a messenger sent by God, and could there also be created life elsewhere in the universe? Can the natural and the spiritual

co-exist? Perhaps public disclosure of aliens would not require us to abandon the witness of Scripture and theological tradition. Most of all, I reminded them that we often resist the strange parts of Scripture. Matthew's star is already strange. It moves with intention. It reacts. It directs. If we allow the text to be as unusual as it actually is, our imagination about God and the world can grow deeper.

When I preached this passage, I leaned into that sense of wonder. I described the star as a living light sent by God. It moved ahead of the Magi like a radiant orb. It paused above the house. It illuminated the place where the child lay. It may even have been the first being to adore him on that night.

After the service a student who is not Christian and who had only recently arrived in the United States told me, "I think I was led here by starlight and now Jesus is illuminated for me." Another student who believes in extraterrestrial life said the story made sense of his feeling that reality is both stranger and more sacred than he expected. For him Jesus, the Magi, and the unusual star created a weird enough picture of reality that it actually felt true.

Epiphany may be the right season to allow this strangeness back into our preaching. Many people in our congregations are wondering about the skies, about unexplained events, about things they fear are too odd to mention out loud. Matthew 2 gives us permission to speak honestly about the mystery in Scripture and the mystery in the world. Wherever your congregation stands, we can still announce that all kinds of creatures and all kinds of seekers are welcome to encounter the Son of God and have their lives illuminated.

Afterall, Epiphany is the season when surprising things come into the light.

Grant Eckhart

Baptism of Our Lord January 11, 2026

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Engaging the Texts

This is a Sunday when each of the texts could be the primary focus for a sermon: God's Servant who will bring justice to the earth (Isaiah); Peter's surprising announcement that "God shows no partiality" (Acts), and God's Spirit and parental affirmation resting on Jesus after his baptism (Matthew). This is a Sunday when baptisms may be part of worship so Baptism itself may be the sermon focus, perhaps preached beside the font.

Isaiah 42. This is one of four servant songs in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 52-53), all part of what we call Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-55). These chapters form a book of comfort for exiles who remain in Babylon and those who are returning. "Comfort, O comfort my people" God says as the chapter begins, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." (40:1-2a) The servant in Isaiah 42 echoes the tenderness of the opening verse: "he will not cry or lift up his voice, a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." (42:2-3) The servant isn't only for the people of Israel, but for the nations. (42:6b) Christians have come to see Isaiah's servant as Jesus. There are surely parallels between the servant and the Son. But it's also true that Isaiah spoke of a servant in his own setting. Was the servant a particular person? Or was the servant the people of Israel? Both are possible. In a later song, the servant seems to be communal rather than individual: "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." (49:3).

Act 10. The verses from Acts 10 are a small snippet from the story about Peter and Cornelius. If you choose to preach on this text, you'll need to retell the story of Peter's vision of the sheet filled with unclean foods which he refuses to eat. But a voice from heaven corrects Peter: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (10:15) This vision is a prelude to God sending Peter to meet Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter's words in today's text show that he got the message: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality..." (Acts 10:34a).

Matthew 3. John the Baptist is reluctant to baptize Jesus, but Jesus says it is necessary to "fulfill all righteousness." After Jesus comes up out of the water, he hears a voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Matthew is the only gospel where God speaks in the third person: "This is my Son." In Mark and Luke, the voice speaks directly to Jesus: "You are my Son..." (Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22) John's account doesn't include any words from heaven, only John the Baptist's description of what he saw when Jesus was baptized" (John 1:32).

There are only two places in Matthew where God speaks directly as a character in the story: one is here at the Baptism of Jesus, the other is on the mount of Transfiguration (17:1-9). In the church calendar these two instances frame the Sundays of Epiphany — today, the Baptism of Our Lord, and on Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in Epiphany. In Matthew the voice from heaven seems meant for others, not just a private word to Jesus. This becomes even clearer on the mount of Transfiguration when the voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (17:5b). The voice from heaven has interrupted Peter's plan to build three booths. "Listen to him!" Those words are surely meant for the three disciples. And for us.

Pastoral Reflections

There are many connections between Isaiah 42 and Matthew 3. Without putting words in Isaiah's mouth, the sermon can point to *continuity* between the testaments. The goal is not to prove that the New Testament supersedes the Old, but that God is active in both Old and New. Jesus understood himself standing in the shadow of prophets such as Isaiah. Jesus knew that the meaning of righteousness needed to be filled in from the writings that shaped him: Torah and the prophets. When John argued against baptizing Jesus, Jesus answered, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Righteousness is very important to Jesus in Matthew's gospel. He affirms this in his Sermon on the Mount (5:10, 5:20).

In Isaiah 42, righteousness is closely tied to justice. Sometimes in our lives, righteousness takes on a more private, internal meaning; justice is more communal and gets lost along the way. But Isaiah won't let us forget that God is calling the servant to bring forth justice. The servant will not grow faint or be crushed "until he has established justice in the earth." (Isaiah 42:4) What does that justice look like? It looks like this: to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (42:7).

In the Affirmation of Baptism service in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the presider questions people who are affirming their faith or perhaps becoming members of the congregation. The questions begin this way, "Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism..." and the last question is: "to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?" Sometimes I want to shout, "Wait! Did you hear that question?" Baptism is connected to justice. "I do, and I ask God to help and guide me" is the right answer.

Barbara Lundblad

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 18, 2026

Isaiah 49:1–7

Psalm 40:1–11

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

John 1:29–42

Engaging the Gospel Text for Preaching

On this Martin Luther King weekend, I want to focus on Jesus' invitation to "come and see" in John 1. This first chapter of John goes downhill fast. We heard the first verses on Christmas Day: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). This Word, *logos*, in Greek, was known to philosophers as the

wisdom behind all creation. Yet, this mysterious *logos* is soon identified as a person. By the time we reach verse 14, John says it clearly: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."—literally, "*pitched a tent*" among us.

From there, it's all downhill, or rather, down to earth. John the Baptist appears, talking about sandals — you can't get much more down to earth than that! "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal," John says (1:27). Who is John talking about? The next day, we finally hear his name: the Word made flesh is named Jesus. (1:29, 36) John also calls him "the Lamb of God." When two of John's disciples heard that, they turned to follow Jesus. Then, for the first time in John's gospel, Jesus speaks: "What are you looking for?" Jesus asks. They said to him, "Rabbi,...where are you staying?" Jesus said, "Come and see." Not a very profound conversation! "They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon." We've gone from the beginning of time to four o'clock in the afternoon! What happens when we come down to earth? Come and see.

Pastoral Reflections

Come and see. These words are important to John and to Jesus. But seeing isn't simple. Seeing someone, really seeing, takes time. Is your smile delight or cynicism? Since seeing is hard work, we develop shortcuts. We make assumptions. Suppose we see a man and a woman in the church kitchen. Which one will we ask to help us *carry* a table? Which one will we ask to help us *set* the table?

I have a friend who is a pastor in New Jersey. Several years ago, when I was a pastor in New York City, my friend brought a parishioner into New York for cancer treatment at Sloan Kettering Hospital. Rather than return home, she spent the waiting hours in my apartment on the third floor of the church. I left for a morning meeting and she stayed into the afternoon. As she was walking downstairs to leave, a long-time member of the church was walking up. "Oh, hello," she said to my friend. "Were you here to clean Pastor's apartment?"

Now, why did she ask that question? There were many things she could have said. She had no way of knowing that my friend is a gifted guitarist and song writer. She graduated with honors from Girls' High in Philadelphia and later from the Lutheran seminary in that same city. She's a caring pastor and a passionate preacher. So why did our church member assume that this woman had come to clean my apartment? You've probably already guessed: my friend is African American. Nobody has ever assumed that I've come to clean their apartment. The problem isn't cleaning—it's the assumption that certain people always do certain jobs, never others. You could probably tell me about a time somebody made assumptions about you. Maybe it was your accent, your weight or your gender. But in this country, there is nothing so defining

as the color of our skin. I can walk into any store, and no one suspects that I'll shoplift. If I get a promotion, people will assume I deserve it. They won't say, "Barbara is surely a credit to her race." My whiteness gives me a step up. It's an accident of birth, but also a structure built into our culture. It was written into the first laws of our nation, kept in place through real estate codes and bank loans. Today, the leaders of our country are erasing black veterans from military archives, black heroes from museums, and black faces from children's books.

"Come and see," said Jesus. But it's not easy when you come down to earth where people hope and struggle, question and dream...down to earth where the Word named Jesus came to pitch his tent.

Tomorrow, January 19, is a federal holiday in the United States honoring the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King believed that the Word became flesh and that made all the difference. If the cosmic, eternal Word became flesh, then flesh isn't bad. My flesh and your flesh. Dr. King wanted us to see each other fully in the flesh and love each other even when we don't like each other, to treat each other with respect and dignity.

"Come and see," said Jesus. Dr. King's message came not only from his experience as a black man, but from his deep faith in the Word made flesh. The gospel of Jesus shaped him even as the color of his skin shaped him. When white people demeaned him—whether with fire hoses or FBI files—he heard the voice of Jesus saying, "Martin, I see you. I know who you are." When he marched in Chicago against segregationist housing policies, Dr. King was unabashedly honest: "Yes, I'm tired of going to jail," he preached. "I'm willing to stop marching. I don't march 'cause I like it; I march because I must. And because I'm a man. And because I'm a child of God." How can we help people see one another more fully?

Barbara Lundblad

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 25, 2026

Isaiah 9:1–4

Psalms 27:1, 4–9

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Matthew 4:12–23

Engaging the Texts

The authors of Scripture make extensive use of the juxtaposition of darkness and light. In the opening verses of Genesis and through the wanderings of Exodus, light and darkness are used in their plainest, literal sense. And there, darkness isn't morally deficient or evil, it simply impedes seeing, movement, and travel. But soon and often enough,

through the prophets (especially Isaiah), the Gospels, and the epistles, darkness becomes a metaphor for spiritual troubles, for ignorance, lostness, sin, and evil. And light—God's metaphorical light—stands for knowledge, direction, and good. Sometimes those in darkness are innocent victims, and sometimes the darkness is willful, self-inflicted, and even treasured (see John 3:19).

Sadly, these last metaphorical connotations have been falsely extended to people of dark skin, cruelly intimating their essential ignorance or moral deficiency. In response, some shy away from exploring the dark/light polarity at all, while others have helpfully lauded the beauty and fecundity of darkness (especially of the womb and soil).

All this settles around lectionary preachers in the darkness-and-light-washed season of Epiphany, where biblical texts are joined by imagery from liturgies and hymns. It's easy to get overwhelmed and "retreat upward" into banal generalizations: light is good, darkness is bad. On this third Sunday, my invitation is to stay close to the poetics of Isaiah and Matthew; be constrained by the shadows their metaphors cast and see if that opens ideas for your preaching.

In v. 1 of our first reading, Isaiah uses darkness (or gloom) to describe both the people's anguish—possibly over the prospect of living under cruel Assyrian rule—and God's contempt—directed at the North for its faithless, doomed politics (introducing the notion that the people are sometimes partially responsible for their gloom). This is communal darkness. In v. 4 Isaiah switches metaphors and confirms the political aspect of darkness by evoking the anguish of being "under the yoke" of the oppressor (and perhaps also of God's contempt?).

Isaiah then proclaims that the shine of God's light engenders feelings comparable to the joy of the harvest and the exultation of "dividing plunder." We want to distance ourselves from the violence that yields plunder, but we can still affirm that both harvest and spoils are the fruit of careful, patient, and hopeful labor. In addition, the joy and exultation are heightened by the reality that in both agriculture and—let's just say—"campaigns," faithful work can be undone by factors beyond our control. This beyond-our-control aspect of darkness is balanced on the light side by Isaiah's reference to "the day of Midian." In this iconic story, Gideon's army is reduced to just 300 men wielding trumpets, jars, and torches so that it's clear that God alone secures the victory (Judges 6–8).

To summarize: Isaiah prophesies that when God's people are in the darkness of political, economic, or ideological oppression, they can trust that God will bring light by divine leverage of the work of God's surprisingly weak but diligent and patient people. The result is joy, vindication, and exultation.

The Gospel reading today makes two things clear: Matthew believes that Jesus is the light prophesied by Isaiah, and Matthew sees an analogy between Isaiah's prophecy and the story he wants to tell. But what analogical points of contact does Matthew intend? Capernaum sits in the ancient territory of Zebulun and Naphtali. Was that coincidence all Matthew needed from Isaiah? Or does the phrase "Galilee of the Gentiles" signal a deeper dive toward mission? Matthew chooses not to include Isaiah's metaphors of harvest, plunder, and the yoke of foreign (and divine?) oppression; does that mean that the economic and political oppression of Rome is not part of the darkness Jesus comes to lighten? Is Matthew therefore thinking only of "spiritual things" when he later quotes Jesus saying, "my yoke is easy"? And does Matthew's analogical use of Isaiah end at v. 16? Or does the coming of the light include Jesus' teaching, proclamation, healing, and the call to follow (as one would a beacon!)? Matthew also ignores Isaiah's reference to "the day of Midian" though given the slim qualifications of the disciples, a shout out to the slim odds at Midian might be warranted!

Pastoral Reflections

From the written testimony of Scripture and the proclaimed testimony of the Church we inherit a rich typology of God's presence and action in creation. Matthew draws on that typology when he spots the analogy between the prophecy of Isaiah and the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. This week it's your turn. When I'm sitting in the pew on January 25, I want to hear about the darkness and light. What are the political, ideological, and economic yokes that cause us anguish? Where have we allied ourselves with the wrong worldly powers? Conversely, where are the people of God tending to things that will bear future harvest; in what campaigns are we engaged that promise spoils of justice and mercy? I want to hear the good news that as God stays true to type, we can trust that God will leverage our faithful efforts—even given our meager qualifications—into the blessed relief and joy of light.

I elected not to dig into the second lesson, but the day before my deadline I had conversations with two different ELCA pastor friends. One of them dismissed a mutual friend as "no longer Christian" because the friend espouses Christian nationalism. The other questioned whether yet another friend, who embraces Christian pantheism, is still "in the fold." Then I was reminded by a podcaster that my tribe—Protestant denominations that ordain women and people who identify as LGBTQ+—represents a tiny irrelevant sliver of world Christianity. Paul speaks beautifully in 1 Corinthians 1:10–18 about our essential unity in Christ and the proclamation of Christ's Gospel (not that Paul, himself, always practiced accordingly!). When I'm sitting in the pew

on January 25, I want to hear how you have wrestled with Christian division. How does God enable us to be what God has made us: one with all who claim Jesus' name? Are we one in Christ or not?

Hank Langknecht

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany February 1, 2026

Micah 6:1–8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Matthew 5:1–12

Engaging the Texts

Before we turn to today's readings, a detour. In the first story in *Bel and the Dragon*—an extracanonical addition to Daniel—the issue of false worship is drawn to its cynical conclusion. In a daily public liturgy, the priests of Bel offer food for their god's consumption, presumably to ensure that the people of Babylon stay in Bel's good graces. But the priests *know* that the liturgy is a lie. After the postlude, the priests and their families secretly eat the food from the altar themselves, a treachery that Daniel ingeniously reveals. I have felt like an imposter in my service as an ordained pastor. But when I do, I have still assumed that our faith and its practices are real, that they are attempting faithfully to point, however feebly, to the living God. The imposter problem is with me, only! I'm doing what I think I'm supposed to, I just don't know any better. The cynical priests of Bel are real imposters. They do know better and they do it anyway. As we come to the liturgical trial presented in Micah 6, I'm inclined to extend charity and assume that God's people didn't know any better. But according to Micah, they did.

The trial in Micah 6 is audacious, and the trajectory of the testimony is absurd. God has called the mountains and the foundations of the earth to judge between God and God's people. God testifies that Israel somehow sees itself "victimized" by God's grace and favor, "*How* have I wearied you, my people? By liberating you, redeeming you, instructing you. By providing leadership, countering the curses of your enemies with my blessings (the Balaam and Barak reference), and by forgiving your idolatry and leading you home (the reference to "from Shittim to Gilgal")."

In response to God's guilty-of-grace plea, Israel adopts a tone of injured ignorance, "We're trying to be worthy. We're trying to repay. We're trying to satisfy you! We have adopted (mostly) plausible practices, but nothing seems to work." Perhaps they could go on, but their testimony is interrupted and someone, God(?) the prophet(?), says, "Stop! God has told

you, O mortal, what is good. You *know* that your worship wins you no favor. God's mighty acts are expressions of God's lovingkindness. God's favor is your starting point, not something to be won." And as for what God "requires"? The people already know: justice, mercy, and walking humbly with God. I put "requires" in scare quotes to encourage you, preacher, to investigate the breadth of meaning of the Hebrew word, *daras*. It *can* mean, "require," but also "what does God seek" or "what does God desire" for you?

We are created good, our truest nature is justice, mercy, and humility (and their cousins: community, generosity, hospitality, and forgiveness). Micah 6:8 is Micah's version of Jeremiah's promise that the law is written on our hearts (Jer 31:33). And in a sense, Jesus echoes this promise in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5. We are blessed—happy, good, no longer imposters—not by aspiring to worthiness, but when we rest in our created identity as God's humble, merciful, peacemaking people.

Paul's reflections on the cross in 1 Corinthians relate here. Paul reminds us that we preacher-theologians channel the priests of Bel whenever we presume to make plausible the mystery of the cross. "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Preaching on the cross is an impossible paradox because any attempt to explain its weakness and foolishness removes its wisdom and power. The crux of our faith is the eternal foolishness of a sovereign God that always confounds us, the eternal weakness of God that always disarms us. And the hardest part of it for me (and God's people on trial in Micah) is this: whatever comes from being foolish and weak cannot come from the hope of future vindication. The author of Hebrews stumbles as a theologian of the cross when they write that Jesus "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross ..." (Hebrews 12:2). Promise of future joy or reward makes "sensible" what is meant to be eternally and mysteriously foolish. Being foolish and weak is the reward.

Pastoral Insights

The British journalist Oliver Burkeman writes,

I struck a chord ... the other day when I observed that many ... seem to feel as if they start off each morning in a kind of "productivity debt," which they must struggle to pay off through the day, in hopes of reaching a zero balance by the time evening comes. Few things feel more basic ... than this vague sense that I'm falling behind and need to claw my way back up to some minimum standard ...

What if you worked on the basis that you began each day at zero balance, so that everything you accomplished ... put you ever further into the black?

... what if there's nothing you ever have to do to earn your spot on the planet? What if everything you actually get around to doing ... is in some important sense surplus to minimum requirements.

<https://www.oliverburkeman.com/donelist>
(accessed on 11/28/25)

Burkeman could be channeling Micah 6:8, Jeremiah 31:33, and Jesus' happy litany in Matthew 5! Just make these edits to the second paragraph: "in God's favor" instead of "at zero balance"; "magnifies the joy of living in God's grace" instead of "puts you in the black"; and "the joyful fruit of your God-given life" instead of "surplus to minimum requirements."

When I'm in the pew on February 1, I want to hear two things. First, I want to be revealed as an imposter. Show me where I am inventing ways to earn the grace that is already mine. Show me where I have shaped my offerings to God into the image of things that I like to consume. Remind me that our God feeds us, not vice versa!

Second, I want to hear stories of the *dis-imposter-ed*: people who have been *beatituted* by living in the grace of foolishness and weakness. People who have laid aside their rights and prerogatives and forgiven others. People who have released grudges. People who have found peaceful pockets in the midst of war, more to give from their empty pockets, and refreshing breezes even in hell.

Hank Langknecht

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 8, 2026

Isaiah 58:1–9a [9b–12]

Psalm 112:1–9 [10]

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 [13–16]

Matthew 5:13–20

Praise the Lord! Happy are those who give thanks to the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandment.

—Psalm 112:1

Salt and Light

Having begun his sermon on the mount with a kiss of benediction to the woebegone of the world with his beatitudes, Jesus gets down to business by announcing to his disciples gathered about him, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world (5:13a, 14a). As we'll soon learn from Jesus, close-to-hand images from everyday life are the stuff of his preaching and teaching and populate the little stories he so likes to tell.

But salt is a polyvalent word, so it isn't easy to pin down

precisely what Jesus might have meant by calling his disciples “salt of the earth” however much the phrase has come to mean, over time, the finest or noblest or most down-to-earth kind of people simply because of Jesus using the term here. The Danish writer Isak Dinesen once said that the cure for anything is salt water — sweat, tears, the sea. Could this be Jesus’ meaning here, that his disciples would be God’s panacea for the world’s woes? I suppose that’s one possibility, but another use for salt is to be a preservative. Was Jesus telling his disciples they would be God’s life preservers for the people of the promise? Perhaps.

But most likely Jesus was thinking of salt as a seasoning agent that brings out the flavor in foods, for he went on to say, “but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (v 13). Are the disciples being told that they will function as God’s influential agents in bringing zest to life, to enhance life’s true flavor bringing out the best in life, careful, of course, not to overwhelm life’s natural taste by making it “too salty” as we say? This may be speculative imagining, of course, but this is where Jesus’ open-ended image-making leads us. I even remember once having a NT Greek professor who claimed that salt might be connected in first-century Jewish minds to the salting of animal sacrifices that had formerly occurred in Jewish ritual and that there might therefore be some kind of sacrificial connotation to Jesus’ invocation of salt. (I do reject the anachronistic idea that Jesus’ use of salt could have referred to salt as a de-icer with which we native Midwesterners are all too familiar, however fun the implications might be!)

Jesus’ second image is less equivocal, “You are the light of the world,” light being an almost universal image used in many religions, some of which centered on worship of the sun. “Enlightenment” is a word that describes not only an important era in Western civilization but is a word used by Buddhists and Sufis and many others.

This season following the Epiphany, light imagery is encountered again and again in our readings, our hymnody and the liturgy (take today’s lection from Isaiah 58, e.g.). This is the time in which we bask in the warm afterglow of Christmas and consider the impact of incarnation upon our present darkness. But Jesus gives us more than a hint to light’s meaning as he goes on to speak of how “a city built on a hill cannot be hid,” an image much-loved by our Puritan forbears in their self-conscious “errand into the wilderness.” “No one,” Jesus goes on, “after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all the house.” Only then does he move finally from the indicative voice, “You are”—to the imperative voice “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (vv 14–16). We hear these as baptismal words spoken over the one just washed, as words

of co-missioning, as a taper is lit from the paschal candle and given to the sponsors. Then, perhaps, we sing together the words of the old, African American spiritual, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna’ let it shine” (ELW #677).

Jesus’ images of salt and light are his entree into his brief, but in Matthew’s theology, weighty declaration: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” so that of his followers it will be said, “your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” (vv 17, 20).

For the evangelist Matthew, Jesus functions as the new law-giver in which Torah is not abrogated but is intensified in the lives of his followers—not as demand but as the Spirit’s gift as St. Paul suggests in our second reading. Here too our reading from Isaiah suggests yet another metaphor for our daily calling to live out the implications of Torah as a kind of fasting that transcends its original religious meaning and instead embraces God’s intention for “shriven” lives that go beyond sackcloth and ashes, not refraining from food and drink but instead choosing a fast that aims to “loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. . . to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (58:5–7).

We’ll hear this text again on Ash Wednesday as the church enters onto its forty-day pilgrimage toward the paschal mysteries, but today we embrace Isaiah’s immediately following words of the promise: “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...” (v 8a).

John Rollefson

Transfiguration of Our Lord February 15, 2026

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2 or Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

*Extol the Lord our God,
and worship at his holy mountain
—Psalm 99:1a*

Mountain Tops

Mountains figure prominently in scripture. Remember, for example, the role that Mt. Sinai plays as the place that Moses received the twin tablets of stone from YHWH as in today’s reading from Exodus. Or Mt. Ararat on which Noah’s ark landed after its forty-day cruise through the del-

uge. Or Mt. Carmel where the prophet Elijah on behalf of YHWH defeated the prophets of Baal in the so-called “battle of the gods.” Or think of the mountain to which Abraham took Isaac to be sacrificed at God’s command, Mt. Moriah it was called, and later became home to Solomon’s temple, what Jews ever after would call Mt. Zion. In the NT, of course, there’s the nameless mountain on whose slopes Jesus was found preaching the sermon we just spent the past few weeks hearing as our Gospel readings. Or maybe you’ll remember the mountain in Galilee to which Jesus had directed his disciples following his resurrection and from which he gave them their marching orders, the great commission, before ascending to be with his Abba.

And then there’s Calvary as we sing in the old hymn “Come to Calvary’s Holy Mountain.” Only Calvary, truth to tell, was likely no mountain at all for the word is simply a Latin translation of the Aramaic word “Golgotha” which means “the place of the skull.” Christian tradition, based probably on the prominence of mountains in so much of the rest of scripture, has led us to think of Golgotha as a small mountain or hill. But much more likely it was a relatively low place outside the city walls, perhaps even a dump—a landfill we’d call it—in which the dried, bleached bones of thousands of those crucified by the Romans lay scattered as a mocking reminder to passersby of where disobedience to their Roman overlords would lead. It’s, of course, ironic and yet somehow fitting that Jesus’ death should have occurred not on a mountain top but a low place, not much of a “religious” site at all.

Today’s Gospel reading on this last Sunday of Epiphany, this season of light as we said last week that basks in the warm afterglow of Christmas, contains the story of a mountain-top experience to end all mountain-top experiences. In fact, it is the event that defines the very genre, Jesus’ transfiguration. So taken with the experience was the author of our second reading from 2 Peter, probably one of the NT’s latest writings and much too late to have been written by Peter himself. Though arguably based on Peter’s own recollections, he boldly asserts to have been one of the “eye witnesses to his Majesty. . . when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” Leaving no doubt as to the importance of the transfiguration experience to the Petrine tradition, the author of 2 Peter confirms, “We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain,” and then goes on to interpret its impact as having the prophetic message more fully confirmed which can now function as a kind of “lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (vv 16–19).

This, then, is the function of this mountain-top experience of seeing Jesus metamorphosized in his “majesty,”—as well as all those mountain-top encounters with God’s mysti-

cal presence claimed by the faithful through the ages. They are not a cause for religious “institutionalization” as Peter at first proposed in his excitement at what he had experienced (v 4), an attempt to ritually freeze the moment as the church has so often been tempted to do (and as so many sites in Israel purporting to be scenes of Jesus’ life and ministry are remembered in brick and mortar, and are even fought over by various Christian groups!). But rather this epiphany to end all epiphanies (anticipating the resurrection itself) lifts the veil over the present ordinariness of life so as to remember the story of Jesus in his moment of need, standing in council with those two great shades of the past, the law-giver Moses and the prophet Elijah. And most of all—most of all!—to remember that resounding voice spoken from above that is so reminiscent of the voice from Jesus’ baptism back near the beginning of this Epiphany season again expressing divine delight in Jesus: “This is my Son, the Beloved” but here on the mountain adding the all-important directive, “Listen to him!” (v 5b). Paying attention to Jesus’ words—and not becoming preoccupied with the accompanying religious fireworks—is our calling as followers of Jesus as we descend from the mountaintop to the plains of our everyday lives where we ourselves are called to bear the light of Christ.

Brian Wren’s “Jesus on the Mountain Peak” (ELW #317) sings freshly the story of transfiguration while “Oh, Wondrous Image, Vision Fair” (ELW #316) weds an old fifteenth century Sarum text to an even older English ballad tune. If your choir’s up to it, Knut Nysted’s gripping “You Are My Beloved Son” is well worth the effort and works as well for the Baptism of our Lord.

John Rollefson

Ash Wednesday February 18, 2026

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

or Isaiah 58:1–12

Psalm 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

What’s in it for me?

In the Ash Wednesday gospel, we find people who practice their spirituality in order to be seen and praised by others. As a posture of prayer, this approach seems to wonder, “What’s in it for me?” This question can be carried into the other texts for the day. In Joel we find a call to worship that begins with a frightening account of the day of the Lord but moves to a fast and an assembly that look to God’s grace, mercy, and love with hope for forgiveness. In Isaiah the prophet accuses the

community of using the fast day to serve their own interests at the expense of others. What's in it for me?

This question can also be applied to God's work. The Joel text finishes with what seems like an appeal to God's public perception. When the prophet says, "Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:17, NRSVue), it is as if the prophet is asking God to consider, "What's in it for me?" Isaiah pushes against such thinking by framing God's desired fast as one that does justice, frees the oppressed, and feeds the hungry. In these narratives we find that the people do not have to worry about "What's in it for me?" because God has been focused on restoration and repair for them all along. We find God relenting from punishment in Joel, promising healing and renewal in Isaiah, and rewarding faithful practice in Matthew.

These are relevant stories in a culture that encourages us every day to dwell on the question, "What's in it for me?" Social media algorithms have reduced advertising to a market of one to help each of us answer this question. Our entertainment services seek to feed us content based on our own preferences. Our politics and economics encourage us to look to our own interests.

Our lives in the church exist in tension with this same question. Our congregations can have a bit of a consumer slant as we try to shape worship and community life in ways that we hope will attract people. Much of our connectivity as the church comes in the form of Bible studies and fellowship within the congregation, pericope studies and conferences with colleagues, and other invitations to shared events. How often have you wondered, "What's in it for me?" when contemplating participation in such activities?

Ash Wednesday invites us to consider a different posture for prayer and service. This posture begins with confession, to which we are invited in Psalm 51. The psalmist calls us to pray for a clean heart and a new, right spirit. This is, in part, a prayer for better motives. It is a move from asking "What's in it for me?" to "What do I have to offer?" The answer in the psalm is a "troubled spirit; a troubled and broken heart" (Ps 51:17, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*).

The passage from 2 Corinthians begins with an understanding of what is "in it" for us. We have already been reconciled to God through Christ. This reconciliation allows us to approach our spiritual practices in the ways envisioned by Isaiah and Matthew, focused less on ourselves and more on others. Paul also shows us what it looks like to ask, "What do I have to offer?" He gives us a whole list of the things he and his partners in ministry have offered to others: "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God" (2 Cor 6:6-7, NRSVue). This list parallels the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians. Our reconciliation with God provides a rich store of

treasures to share.

At the same time, Paul gives us a second list of things to which they have commended themselves: "great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger" (2 Cor 6:4-5, NRSVue). What's in it for me? When we follow the way of Jesus in love and service toward others, this will inevitably lead to suffering with and for others. This is the story of Jesus, the story of the cross, the story we are headed toward on Good Friday. It is also the story of new life.

Those who come forward to be marked with ashes as we begin Lent will carry their own suffering even as the world encourages them to wonder, "What's in it for me?" The words that accompany the ashes will remind them that death is part of that answer. We live in times where people do not necessarily need a reminder of our mortality—we see evidence of this all around us. Most seasons of human history have probably experienced life this way. If we look to the imagery from the gospel for the day, we see the treasures on earth breaking down. But death is not the final word. The ashes will be in the shape of the cross, the shape of the one who brings reconciliation and hope, the one whose focus is always on us. Then we will gather at the table in remembrance of Jesus, remembering that this is not for his sake but for ours, to be reminded that we are the treasured people of God.

Derek Hoven

First Sunday in Lent February 22, 2026

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12–19

Matthew 4:1–11

The Free Gift

It is easy to look at the texts for the first Sunday in Lent and reflect on resisting temptation. The people in the garden gave in to it, Jesus did not. Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we pray for God to lead us away from temptation or save us from the time of trial. What happens when temptation leads us to do things we ought not do or leave undone things we ought to have done?

When the humans eat from the one tree from which they are forbidden to eat, their eyes are opened to their nakedness. Their actions lead to a physical manifestation of their disobedience: they cover their bodies with fig leaves. In Psalm 32 we find a psalmist reflecting on a time when they kept quiet about their own sin. This silence is another form of cover up, and it also has a physical manifestation. The psalmist feels

as if their bones are withering away and the pain they feel is expressed in groaning. The cover-up of their sin has physical consequences.

With some exceptions, the posts that people share on social media can feel like the cover up versions of their lives. The same can be true when we gather as congregations for worship. People carry into the pews the burdens of their brokenness but sit silently in their deepest struggles with guilt and shame. To have their own experiences with addiction, abuse, incarceration, dishonesty, or infidelity known publicly seems unfathomable. Past experiences with gossip and judgment, including our own judgment of others, can lead people to believe they are unworthy, unforgivable. Better to keep quiet, but that quiet has consequences just as it did for the psalmist who groaned in pain.

The NRSVue translation of the first verse of Psalm 32 reads, “Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” It is clear from the movement of the psalm that “covered” here does not mean “covered up”; it means “forgiven.” The *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* translation uses the words, “put away.” The psalmist’s reflection is an invitation to confession, to speak our transgressions to the Lord. This confession moves the psalmist from a place of painful groaning to a place of rejoicing.

In the Romans text we find Paul celebrating the gift of forgiveness. It is free, it is abundant, it is life-giving. On the cross, Jesus covers us, but not by covering up our sin. Rather, he puts it away to make us right with God and with one another. By being who he is, Jesus is able to give us a gift of life, a life in which we can be authentically who we are. Paul calls this justification, a justification that makes the many righteous like Jesus.

All of this leads to the gospel for the day, where Jesus does resist temptation. His resistance seems beyond our human capacity, especially when we are exhausted and hungry as he was. Yet, his responses to each of the temptations are quite accessible—he draws on his faith and quotes scripture. In the end, he is served by others. With the free, abundant, gift of life we have in Jesus, we are also given the Body of Christ, a community of faith that can shape us and anchor us in the face of all sorts of temptation.

The movement between these texts provides a shape for the type of authentic Christian community that can be this kind of anchor. The Genesis story invites us to see in our human condition the possibility that we will fall short of being who God has created and called us to be. The psalm moves from a third-person recognition of this possibility to a first-person claiming of its reality. This can be a personal as well as a communal journey, just as the Psalms can be engaged personally and corporately. The shared aspect of this movement is important. Without honest vulnerability about our

failures, we will not create the sorts of communities where we can welcome people to be authentically who they are. Paul grounds our confession and repentance, not in our own work, but in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew reminds us that we have the Word of God and communities of support to carry us through the trials of life.

We find all of this in the shape of our liturgy. We cry out for mercy in the kyrie and confession. Absolution calls us back to the waters of baptism, to the righteousness we have in Jesus. In the hymn of praise, we rejoice as the psalmist does in Psalm 32. We hear the Word where we are reminded of the great works of the Lord and given hope of further transformation. Our repentance is given practice as we seek reconciliation in the sharing of the peace. We gather around one table to be reminded, yet again, that Jesus freely feeds our hunger for grace and life. Cleansed, fed, and cared for, we head out together into mission and ministry to share gifts of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation with the world.

Derek Hovan

Second Sunday in Lent March 1, 2026

Genesis 12:1–4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

John 3:1–17

Exploring the Gospel: Nicodemus and Jesus

Nicodemus needs the darkness of night in order to come to Jesus. A leader of leaders, he makes his way through the shadowed back streets of Jerusalem to meet this teacher from God who will turn his world upside down. Together they speak of what it means to be a teacher, and the signs God is doing in the world. Jesus’ latest sign had turned tables upside down, challenging the economic emporium system in the Temple. Jesus’ signs inaugurate God’s reign.

The conversation starts with what Nicodemus knows. But Jesus takes him out to the deep end, to talk about really seeing—seeing the kingdom of God. More than night vision is needed for that. What is needed is birth from above, from heaven to earth, birth by water and the spirit—by the spirit of God that blows like a wind wherever it wills. Double, even triple meanings, drip from these words. Wind, spirit, birth, eternal life, seeing, trusting—all carry layers of intense ambiguity and meaning in this conversation.

“Can you go back into your mother’s womb to be born when you are old?” No, of course you can’t. But yes, we want to interrupt. Yes, you can, Nick, listen to Jesus! Go back into the dark of that womb, into the dark waters, to trust that you

will pass through the dark waters into the light, the life for which you are longing. Eternal life.

Exploring the Gospel: Jesus and All of Us

We enter the story of Nicodemus and Jesus. In verse 11 Jesus makes a crucial shift from a singular to plural pronoun. He is no longer talking only to Nicodemus, but also to us. We can't hear the difference in modern English, since "you" plural is the same as "you" singular. The King James Version makes the distinction: "thee" and "thou" are singular, while "you" is always plural. Jesus' singular address to Nicodemus in verse 11—"Verily I say unto thee, Nicodemus," (KJV)—suddenly shifts in the next moment to plural, addressed to all of us: "If I have told y'all earthly things and y'all do not believe, how can y'all believe if I tell you heavenly things?" The stakes are high. Eternal life is at stake, Jesus says. Death is at stake too. This passage foreshadows the reality that Jesus will soon be lifted up on the cross, lifted up for the healing of the world.

The most famous verse, John 3:16, introduces words we sometimes associate with the hereafter: perish, cosmos, save, and eternal life. But we can interpret these words not in terms of life after death, but life in the cosmos, here and now. Eternal life is an amazing and wonderful term in John's gospel. Literally it means "life for the ages" or "life that can last." Brian McLaren suggests translating it as "Aliveness" or "true Aliveness." It is a quality of life, abundant life, that is different from contemporary culture.² Eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3)—a kind of mystical knowing this gospel wants us to enter. Jesus says that anyone who believes/trusts in God already "has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:25).

Exploring the Gospel: Personal and Political

Eternal life also carries political overtones. The Roman Empire's slogan was *Roma Aeterna*—advertised on coins and monuments. We might frame John's gospel as "eternal Rome vs. eternal life." John says a tacit "no" to all imperial claims and calls us to choose life.

For God so loved the world. God so loved the cosmos. Nothing less than love for everyone and everything in God's world, God's cosmos, is at stake—a life and death encounter. God does not want us to perish. God is at work healing and mending the wounds of the cosmos.

"Perish" is another ambiguous word. Perishing is not primarily about death, nor about punishment after death. Rather, perishing means squandering our life while we're still alive—"be lost" translated in 6:12, and in Jesus' prayer for us in 17:12, "none of them is lost." It's the Greek verb *apollumi*,

in the middle voice, difficult to translate into English, since "I perish myself" doesn't make sense. Jesus does not want anyone to lose themselves or be lost.

And finally, the marvelous word "save" in John 3:17. Save can mean "heal." Salvation, as enacted by Jesus, is a vision not so much for heaven after we die, but for the healing of this world and each one of us. We could translate John 3:17 as "For God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be *healed* through him." Healing of the cosmos includes not just humans but also animals, as the psalmist declared: "You save humans and animals alike, O Lord" (Psalm 36:6).

Like eternal life, salvation also has a political dimension. By calling Jesus "savior" (4:42) and claiming that Jesus saves, John's gospel was challenging another Roman imperial propaganda term. "Savior" (*Soter* in Greek) was an honorary title given to emperors after they defeated enemies.

Exploring the Gospel: Time of Decision

As an individual character in the narrative, Nicodemus may represent a group the gospel writer wanted to persuade in the late first century—Jews and others who were sitting on the fence about Jesus. John's gospel may have been written to persuade those closeted Christians to come out openly into the daylight, into the beloved community, whatever the consequences.

It's a long coming out process for Nicodemus, but he makes the move from private to public, courageously. We will see him twice more in this gospel: defending Jesus publicly from the authorities' accusations (7:50) and burying Jesus after his crucifixion. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' body down from the cross and bury him (19:39). It takes so long for Nicodemus and for crypto-Christians in John's time, I think, because fence-sitting has great appeal.

Perhaps that's why I myself am so drawn to Nicodemus. He's the patron saint of people who like to keep their options open. On the Myers-Briggs personality scale we're called "P's"—perceivers, people who don't like to make decisions, as opposed to "J's" or judgers who do like to make decisions.

Sometimes you have to move off the fence. You have to make decisions, the gospel says. Nicodemus can be a model for us of deep questioning, struggling to understand faith, and publicly acting on faith in key moments.

Barbara Rossing

2. Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014) xv, note 1.

Third Sunday in Lent March 8, 2026

Exodus 17:1–7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1–11

John 4:5–42

It shouldn't have taken me until college to learn that church can be a place for questions. I don't mean technical questions about theology or history; I mean questions that come hand-in-hand with doubt. I grew up in a typical congregation as one of only a few young people surrounded by many older adults. Everyone seemed to have everything figured out. I realize now that my pastor would have welcomed my crunchiest questions, but as a child, it never occurred to me that church was a place to be doubtful or imperfect.

In college, I found a campus ministry that practiced house church-style worship, with a circle of students around a coffee table in the living room and a shared meal afterward. No one preached at us: instead, we discussed the texts. We learned, shared, and grew, but we did not conclude our conversations neatly. Not all questions were answered. Plenty of them opened the door to doubt or raised serious issues with organized religion. The space of worship was resilient enough to hold them all. No bolt of lightning struck us.

These days, I try to bring a similar all-questions-welcome energy to the congregation I serve, hoping that people of all ages will bring their questions. At our informal Wednesday night service, we wrestle with scripture together. Lifelong Lutherans, former Catholics, our resident agnostic, and me, the alleged expert: we all puzzle through the Bible, and together, we encounter a richer, more nuanced Jesus than we could have met otherwise. Questions are key.

Engaging the Texts

Questions pervade the scripture for this Sunday: sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background. In the Exodus text, Moses and the Israelites bat questions back and forth with increasing frustration: *Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us with thirst? Why do you quarrel with me? What shall I do for this people?* The questions culminate in God's action. Instead of responding directly to any of the questions, God sends Moses to the rock at Horeb, and with a tap of the staff that split the sea, fresh water overflows. Moses names it Mas-sah and Meribah, "Test" and "Quarrel," as a reminder not of the sudden flow of water, but of the quarreling questions that brought it forth. The names evoke a final rhetorical question with reverberating significance for God's people: "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7)

Questions lurk in the background behind the Romans text, unwritten but present between the lines. *Why is our community suffering? What's the point of struggle? Does God even notice?* Perhaps the text evokes other questions for you. Though the background concerns may be specific to their context, they have a universal dimension. Today, our communities still ask about the meaning of suffering, struggling, and waiting—seemingly invisibly—for the day of God's justice.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman follows shortly after the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3, last Sunday's gospel text. Both the woman and Nicodemus have question-laden encounters with Jesus, but Nicodemus' visit is bathed in the deep nighttime shadows of the late hour. The questions he asks Jesus bring him confusion, not the clarity he seeks. In John 4, the woman and Jesus encounter each other in equally unusual but opposite circumstances: by chance, not design; in shimmering noonday heat, not the chill of midnight. At the well, robust questions and genuine curiosity lead to faith and, ultimately, the whole community's conversion. Noon is not an ideal time for the woman to be carrying water, and Jesus is exhausted, yet she bubbles over with questions like a fountain. Some of her questions are explicit. Others are framed as statements, offered to elicit further conversation with Jesus. The overflowing questions saturate the thirsty air between the two and point the way toward the living water. The metaphor of living water itself is a familiar one for both parties: ancient Jews and ancient Samaritans both practiced cleansing rituals that required a source of fresh, renewing water.

Pastoral Reflections

What role do questions play in your worshipping community? Do your people view questions in church as acts of faithfulness or faithlessness? What would it take for questions to cultivate deeper faith?

Many of us seek rapid answers to our questions. Our broader cultural relationship to questions and answers has been changing since the release of ChatGPT in late 2022. Without thoughtful review, AI-generated answers to our questions can transmit errors present in the source material. Additionally, AI models are trained on existing content and adapt to user preferences, generally giving us only what we want to know. In contrast, the role of the questions posed in the conversation between the woman and Jesus, between Paul and his Roman audience, and between Moses, the Israelites, and God is to lead God's people into wonder, surprise, curiosity, deeper faith, and even some discomfort.

It is challenging to ask questions without easy answers. Waiting for an answer that may not come, grappling with the space yawning between question and response, and readjusting our assumptions at a surprising answer are all experiences

that can destabilize us, even when growth lies on the other side. This phenomenon is particularly acute in our contemporary culture, in which presumed answers are readily available, but it is by no means new. In his 1908 piece *The Unanswered Question*, composer Charles Ives offers a musical representation of a question posed over and over by a muted trumpet. Six attempted answers spin out of control until only the question remains. The questioner persists, refusing to take the answers at face value. The silence when the music concludes holds the question more richly than the quick “answers” did.³

Closer to home, the hymnal *All Creation Sings* offers two hymns as helpful counterpoints to the cultural desire for ready, simple answers. “Ask the Complicated Questions” (David Bjorlin) reminds singers that “in the knocking, asking, seeking, we are opened, answered, found.” “Faith Begins by Letting Go” (Carl P. Daw Jr.) teaches that “though the way feels less secure, pilgrimage both right and odd,” challenging questions open a pathway toward the experience of God’s grace.

Linnéa Clark

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 15, 2025

1 Samuel 16:1–13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8–14

John 9:1–41

“The most harmful ableism I have experienced has been inside the church,” writes Amy Kenny in her 2022 book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*.⁴

Kenny is disabled.⁵ Throughout her book, she recounts ableist incidents in religious settings: people who theologize about the cause of her disability; strangers who approach her in public to pray aloud for her healing; pastors who argue with her request not to use disability as a negative metaphor because it’s scriptural; church buildings that are physically impossible for her to enter. Kenny believes that rather than displaying brokenness or sin, her disabled body reveals the image of God, just as it is—no healing miracle necessary. What our society considers disability is part of God’s created goodness.

Kenny’s stories of ableism in the church are searing and

painful, and I do not doubt that the church has a significant problem with ableism. After all, I have encountered sexism more acutely in the church than anywhere else. Many colleagues who are Queer or of BIPOC identities tell similar stories. As a preacher, I approach biblical texts such as John 9, the story of Jesus and the man born blind, with caution and care, praying that they will reveal good news for all people, not just for me.

Engaging the Texts

1 Samuel 16:1–13 tells the story of the anointing of David, youngest son of Jesse, as he becomes king. While the text can’t help but compliment David’s appearance—“he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome” (1 Samuel 16:12)—it’s a story about Samuel the prophet, Jesse the parent, and God turning their expectations upside down. Samuel does not know in advance which child God has chosen; neither does Jesse, who has sent his youngest to keep the sheep. As each son walks in front of Samuel, he figures that *this one* must be God’s new king, only for his confusion to deepen. In order to find out whether God has actually chosen David, Jesse and Samuel have to retrieve him from the pasture. I doubt David has the opportunity to shower and change first, despite his supposed good looks.

The episode is surprising to Samuel, but it should not be. After all, God begins with a caution: “Do not look on his appearance... the Lord does not see as mortals see” (16:7). Still, even the biblical author can’t help but fall into the same trap, complimenting the attractiveness of Jesse’s sons throughout.

The author of John’s gospel could have chosen to tell the story of the man born blind as a brief healing story, one among many in Jesus’ ministry. Instead, the text explores the social context of one person’s healing. In her book, Kenny describes a religious person who explains the cause of her own disability to her (she isn’t believing hard enough). I find echoes of this encounter in the words of the disciples, who speculate about the cause of the man’s blindness with horror and pity. After the healing, the community continues to discuss the man born blind as if he isn’t even present, like people in wheelchairs often experience. Even when the community addresses him directly, they ignore or reject what he says. When they drive him out, unable to tolerate the challenge to their assumptions, it is left to Jesus to track him down. Jesus refuses to abandon him even though the whole community does so.

In her book, Kenny writes about the social model of disability. In this model, disability is the result of a society’s unwillingness to be accessible to them, not a person’s medical diagnosis. Kenny’s use of a motor scooter does not “disable” her until she encounters inaccessible buildings and programs

3. You can listen to one performance of *The Unanswered Question* here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tNA_DbpJjU

4. Amy Kenny. *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 26.

5. This commentary follows Kenny’s lead in using the identity-first term “disabled person.” Some in the disability community prefer person-first terms like “people with disabilities.”

that treat her like an afterthought. The social model of disability is clear in John 9. Blindness would not disable the man born blind if his community centered him. Instead, he is left to beg until he is healed. The community's failures are age-old.

Pastoral Reflections

Blindness is a common metaphor. Often, biblical "blindness" represents ignorance of God, sometimes willful, sometimes not. Though the metaphor is powerful and occurs throughout the Bible, it is highly problematic for non-disabled preachers to equate a bodily condition with a moral or spiritual failing. John 9 offers preachers the resources they need to subvert the blindness metaphor. The man born blind embraces Jesus' message fully, his own body a locus of revelation. The disciples fall short as they speculate about the cause of the man's disability. So does the sighted community: they failed the man born blind while he was still unable to see, and they fail him again after the healing occurs.

Metaphors of light and darkness also pose a challenge this week. The contrast between darkness and light suffuses Paul's message to the Ephesians to "walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8) and to "take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness" (5:11). Though the metaphor is scriptural, many black theologians, preachers, and teachers have implored white preachers to examine the ease with which they equate light with good and darkness with evil and the ongoing harm they cause by communicating that dark things are always physically, morally, and spiritually inferior to lighter things.

As you plan worship this Sunday, examine your broader liturgy, not just the words of your preaching. Where do hymns and prayers rely on ability-based metaphors, such as "see" and "walk"? Which simple substitutions can you make to decrease ableism, such as "perceive" or "understand" for "see" and "move" or "travel" for "walk"? How do worship texts rely on darkness as a metaphor for evil, and how can you name evil more directly?

All of this takes practice and conscious effort over time. Light and darkness, illness and healing, blindness and sight: these metaphors occur throughout the Bible, and they are baked into the English language. But when I, a white non-disabled preacher, ignore the requests of people with identities different from mine, I become one of the community members in John 9 who turned the medical blindness of the man born blind into a disability by failing to provide him with access, affirmation, and full inclusion. With curiosity and openness rather than defensiveness, all of our worship can model the inclusion Jesus imagines for the man born blind.

Linnéa Clark

Fifth Sunday in Lent March 22, 2026

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6–11

John 11:1–45

Exploring the Gospel Reading

Jesus says that his hour has come, and his hour is love. Love for Martha and Mary, love for their brother Lazarus, love for the world. In this beautiful story Jesus discusses theology with Martha; then he enacts the most dramatic of his seven life-giving signs. He raises his friend from death.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' signs proclaim a two-fold mission of love: enacting abundant life and dismantling oppressive systems that subvert God's will for creation, systems with the stench of death. In this story death is not the last word. To live is more than biological life; it is life participating now in resurrection.

Resurrection presents an enormous threat to the authorities. From this moment, the religious leaders "took counsel how to put Jesus to death," and how to kill Lazarus as well (12:10).

The disciples had tried to convince Jesus to stay in Galilee, in safety. Yet he insists on going to visit his close friends in Bethany near Jerusalem, to give them a sign of life because he loves them—a love mentioned twice (11:5, 35). Jesus loves Martha and Mary, and he openly weeps for their brother.

Take note of the positive references to Jews in Bethany—verses 18, 31, and 36. Mary and Martha are Jews, and so are the neighbors who come to console them. On the other hand, those who plan to arrest Jesus are specifically the Jerusalem Temple authorities, the chief priests and others who are Roman puppets.

"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" (11: 21). Martha says it, and later Mary echoes her words (11:32). "If only..." When catastrophe strikes, when we are overwhelmed with grief, we replay "if only's" in our minds. If only the child had not run out in the street, if only I had gone to the doctor sooner. The sisters' words speak the devastations in our own hearts.

In "the great 'I AMs'" of John's gospel, Jesus uses powerful images to reveal his identity: Light of the World; Good Shepherd; Door; Vine; the Way, the Truth and the Life. "I am" brings to mind God's name revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). In John Jesus calls himself "I am" in his conversation with Martha: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

In this chapter of John, Martha plays a starring role, speaking out the way Peter does in the other three gospels. Here it is Martha—not the male disciples—who proclaims, “You are the Messiah (Christ).” Martha is brought step by step to this powerful statement of faith. At first she expresses faith in the traditional doctrine about resurrection on the “last day.” Jesus does not tell her she is wrong. He simply adds, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Gently, Jesus puts resurrection’s promise into the “now” without removing it from the future. Resurrection in the gospel of John is both a future hope and a present experience. Resurrection transforms life right now.

Lazarus will die. All of us will die. But this gospel presents a vision of resurrection in which death does not have the last word. In the very week of his own death, Jesus puts death’s power aside saying we live in eternal life, resurrection life, in a marvelous community of love with God and with one another.

“Lazarus, come out!” ... “Unbind him and let him go.” (11:43–44) But it’s too late! Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. Yet, Jesus calls Lazarus to come out. He does not personally remove the trappings of death. He calls the neighbors, the community, to unbind Lazarus. Jesus started a process toward life that all the neighbors and family were invited to join. Resurrection calls us to stand against the powers of fear and oppression. Verse 43, with its loud “...come out!” has become key for the LGBTQIA community. They hear those words as affirmation of their own processes of “coming out.”

The Word Today

This meaningful story is often read at funerals. Here Jesus comforts us by showing how deeply he loved this family and loves all our families and friends.

With Jesus’ declaration “I am the resurrection and the life,” we are drawn into participation in life in Christ and resurrection. Each of us is part of Jesus’ love and his resurrection, in a community of love. Resurrection calls us to stand against the powers of fear and oppression. It empowers us to witness against the power of death. Resurrection inspired Archbishop Oscar Romero who was murdered in El Salvador forty-six years ago while celebrating mass. He was confident that even in death his life would continue in the life of the Salvadoran people.

Resurrection inspired Guatemalan poet Julia Esquivel’s 1980 poem, “Threatened With Resurrection.” It was written during the worst of the military dictatorships in Central America, the disappearances and killings, after six people had been killed. She writes about resurrection as our summons to witness, to keep vigil, to watch:

Join us in this vigil
and you will know what it is to dream!
Then you will know how marvelous it is
to live threatened with Resurrection!

To dream awake,
to keep watch asleep,
to live while dying,
and to know ourselves already
resurrected!

To live is more than biological life, as Romero and Esquivel knew, as we know. It is hope for our community, it is life eternal, and it is experienced NOW in mystical communion with Christ and with one another.

Barbara Rossing

Palm Sunday March 29, 2026

Zechariah 9:9–10

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Matthew 21:1–11

We are grateful to Heidi Neumark for allowing us to reprint her Palm Sunday reflections.

Engaging the Palm Sunday Gospel

I love Palm Sunday! The windowsill in my office has a line of I donkeys from around the world. When I was in college, I heard a young priest preach a sermon about how if God could use a donkey to carry Jesus into the city, God could use him, too, and all of us. At the time, I was wrestling with my own pastoral call. I found his words to be wonderfully liberating. Now I keep the donkeys close at hand to remind me.

Our text points to this as a possible direction for preaching. Jesus sends two disciples to the village of Bethphage where they will find a donkey and, in Matthew, a colt. They should untie them and bring them to Jesus, answering any objections with “The Lord needs them.” How many have been labeled as too young (Bethphage means “house of young figs”), too queer, too black, too different in some way and unwilling to be restrained by a church’s limited vision to serve God? How many of us have internalized feelings of inadequacy when facing all the challenges before us? Like the disciples during the final week of Jesus’ life, there are times when we just don’t measure up. Nonetheless, “Untie them and bring them to me,” says Jesus, “because I need them.” Such liberating words! We might even hear echoes from the Gospel of John where Jesus uses the same word—“Untie him and let him go”—at

the raising of Lazarus, the reading from John 11 last Sunday.

Matthew has the odd detail of Jesus riding both a donkey and a colt, taking the parallelism in Hebrew poetry and making it literal. I have not encountered any clear explanation for Matthew's decision to do this, but I like the inclusivity of ages represented by an older donkey and a younger colt and the indication that carrying Jesus forward is a team effort.

Another Palm Sunday theme in Matthew is lifted up by the Spiritual, "Ride on King Jesus, No Man can a Hinder Thee." Some churches shy away from facing difficult topics and realities. I was once invited to speak with a group of Christian and Jewish seminarians who had just read Martin Luther's "On the Jews and Their Lies," a 65,000-word anti-semitic treatise used by many, including Hitler, to inflame and justify murderous violence. One of the Christian students noted that many congregations are not familiar with Luther's hate-filled words. "Wouldn't it be better not to educate them about it because it would just be very upsetting and perhaps create bad feelings?" She is not alone in not wanting to raise uncomfortable conversations in church.

A few chapters before Palm Sunday, Peter raises a related concern when Jesus broaches the unpleasant topic of undergoing great suffering, being killed, and on the third day be raised (Matthew 16:22). Peter rebukes Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you"—or by proxy to him and the other disciples. The third day can seem far away in the midst of conflict and suffering. Although Jesus' response to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," can seem harsh, it's a reminder that we are not dealing with the hindrance of human powers "but against the rulers, against the authorities...against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." It can point us away from demonizing one another in order to direct our focus and energy where they belong.

Jesus could have avoided a trip into the heart of conflict, but he rode on into Jerusalem and entered the temple where he knocked over tables and cast out those who were cheating the poor. For nearly four decades, I served churches where we took our Palm Sunday procession outside the church building and into the streets of New York City, first in the South Bronx and later in Manhattan. It's a reminder of our call to public ministry and presence to face the authorities of this world with a vision of the world as it should be. Our processions were led by a cross-bearer, followed by a child riding on a pony—because donkeys can just be too cantankerous—one year we had one who wouldn't budge! If the pony walking down Broadway wasn't enough to grab our neighbors' attention, we had a mariachi band with us. Along with waving palms we carried signs to announce reign-of-God-values: justice for immigrants, Black Lives Matter, queer is beautiful, workers' rights. Even if we were to simply parade around the church, it's possible to feel powerless before the principalities and powers of our day, while wanting to make a real differ-

ence. Palm Sunday reminds us that we do not go forth to face any death-dealing powers alone.

Jesus is within reach. He rode a donkey. Low to the ground. The mounted police of the NYPD ride tall horses, as did the legions of imperial Rome. Besides being visually imposing, the height of a horse offers a better vantage point to control a crowd. Jesus chose the donkey, closer to the people—not to control, but to accompany. A contrasting use of power is described in the Philippians reading: "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, "the whole city was in turmoil." Matthew actually says that the city was shaken, part of one movement with the Easter earthquake soon to come (Matthew 28:2). This is why churches avoid discomfort at our own risk. It's part of the path to resurrection—the agitational, seismic shifting business of Easter. Ride on, King Jesus!

Heidi Neumark

Passion Sunday March 29, 2026

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Matthew 26:14–27:66 [or 27:11–54]

Will We Say Anything?

It is now customary in many congregations to focus on *Passion Sunday*. The Palm Sunday text is heard at the very beginning but is left there. Heidi Neumark's commentary gives fuller attention to the Palm part of this Sunday. Preaching on the Palm Sunday text is important and the liturgy could conclude with the first part of Matthew's passion story (Matthew 26:1–13). These verses include the beautiful story of the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus for burial. She is left out of the Passion Reading assigned for today—even though Jesus said, "Truly I tell you wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (16:13).

If the Palm Sunday gospel gets fuller attention on this day, then Matthew's Passion could be read in its entirety on Good Friday. The synoptic gospels and John could be heard in a four-year rotation rather than hearing John every Good Friday.

If Matthew's passion story is read without a sermon, it is still possible to add poetry just as we often insert a hymn verse that engages the text. It is also possible to add a sentence or two as counterpoint to verses that are especially dangerous. Perhaps there is another voice, different from those who are reading Matthew's account. That voice or voices could bring a

poem or brief reading to help us hear the text in a deeper way or argue against something dangerous. These responses would be brief, not paragraphs or pages but a short poem, a contemporary news article, nothing longer than a hymn verse.

Unique Dangers in Matthew's Passion

"His blood be on us and on our children" (27:25). This quote from the crowd comes after Pilate washes his hands and says, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." It's not clear who's in the crowd but this verse has fueled the belief that the Jewish people killed Jesus. But Jews had no authority to crucify anyone. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment and thousands of people were crucified. Bodies were left on crosses as a warning to anyone who dared to challenge Roman power. This verse is only in Matthew but it has been amplified by later Christian teaching and passion plays. For centuries Jewish people lived in fear of Good Friday. On that day Christians often attacked Jews as "Christ-Killers." The Mel Gibson movie "The Passion of Christ" presented this same dangerous interpretation. (As of 2018 it was the highest grossing R-rated film in the United States.)

After Matthew 27:25 is read, the preacher might say: "But Jews had no authority to crucify people. Only Rome had the power to do that. There are some verses we need to leave behind." Then, go on with the reading.

Those who fled or simply stood by

"Then all the disciples deserted him and fled" (26:56).

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of people willing to be co-workers with God

—Martin Luther King Jr.,
Letter from the Birmingham Jail

Jesus enters our pain and suffering

"Eli, Eli" by Miriam Kessler

My God, my God, he cried
if he is quoted right.
Somehow that moan is comforting
to us, alone at night,
who tremble, daring dawn,
that He, so wise and strong,
should weep and ask for aid.
Somehow, my lovely distant god,
it makes me less afraid.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
It sounds for all the world like the end of faith. Instead,

it is the beginning. Jesus died talking to his Abba, who would not talk back to him. Is there any other definition of faith? In his suffering, he is the comfort of those who have no comfort. In his abandonment, he is the God of those who have no God. Hearing no voice of love, he cried out, making a sound that — for many — became the voice of love.

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *"The Voice of Love" in Home by Another Way*)

Some explanations are dangerous

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson challenges the traditional interpretation of Jesus' death as "required by God in repayment for sin." Such a view," she says, is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent sadistic father..."

Rather, Jesus' death was an act of violence brought about by threatened human men, as sin, and therefore against the will of a gracious God. It occurred historically in consequence of Jesus' fidelity to the deepest truth he knew...

(Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 158)

And still, we can't let go of this story

...there are people who say that Good Friday means more to them than Easter does. They have nothing against the lilies, the trumpets, the lovely children. It is just that Good Friday, as awful as it is, is more recognizable to them. They know about suffering. They know about death. They know their way around this wreckage and there is some sort of comfort in the fact that God knows it.

(Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon,
"The Silence of God")

There is such power in the passion story itself that it's not a bad choice to hear it in one piece. For many people that will happen on Palm/Passion Sunday rather than Good Friday. It is my hope that more of us will encourage people to follow the arc of Holy Week, moving from Jesus' entry into the city to his last meal with friends to his arrest and crucifixion. One week out of the year. That's easy for me to say: I'm retired, not serving a congregation. But it would be quite wonderful if Holy Week could be as important to us as Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. For now, let us hear these stories and let them sink into our bones and into our hearts. Maybe even change us.

Blessed Holy Week to you and the people with whom you worship.

Barbara Lundblad