Preaching Helps

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost — First Sunday after Christmas Day/ New Year's Eve

Martin and Mark: The Reformation and a New Church Year

This issue of *Currents* is a treasure for preaching in "The Year of Mark" that begins on December 3. New Testament scholars and preachers offer insights into several key texts in Mark's gospel including Holy Week and Easter. What will it mean to preach Mark's unfinished resurrection story on April Fool's Day—Easter Sunday in 2018? The last time that happened was in 1956! You may have preached on these texts from Mark three years ago or many lectionary cycles before that. How can we hear these texts as though for the first time? Be sure to save this issue of *Currents* so you can find it in when the new church year begins.

But Advent and Easter may seem a long way off. A year ago in Advent, I was surprised to see Martin Luther's face on the side of city buses. Perhaps Minneapolis was the most likely place where people waiting for a bus would shout, "Oh look! There's Martin Luther!" You may know that Luther's picture advertised a special exhibit "Martin Luther: Art and the Reformation" at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Many of the artifacts in the exhibit had never left Germany before, including the pulpit from St. Andreas Church in Eisleben where Luther preached his last sermons. His life had come full circle from his birth in Eisleben to his death in that same town. He preached his last sermon on February 15, 1546, and died three days later. His text for that final sermon was Matthew 11:25–30, ending with Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." As is true with many sermons the preacher may have been preaching a word he longed to hear himself.

Luther was passionate about preaching. He wanted to reach ordinary women and men who had never been to the university. We remember Luther for translating the Bible into German, but he knew that most people would never be able to read the words he translated. The printed words needed to come to life from the pulpit. "The church is not a pen-house," he wrote, "but a mouth-house."[1] For someone who spent years translating written words, Luther was clear that what was written had to get off the page through what was spoken. As we mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Luther would want us to know that our sermons matter.

The writers of this issue of "Preaching Helps" share Luther's passion for getting written words off the page. **Paul Bailie** is Youth and Family Minister at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Conneaut, Ohio. A graduate of Augustana College and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he previously served for six years as pastor of Iglesia Luterana San Lucas in Eagle Pass, Texas, a Spanish-speaking ELCA congregation near the United States-Mexico border. In 2016 Paul received the Emerging Voice Award from his alma mater LSTC. **Christa M. Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a B.A. in English and a Masters in Teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa taught high school in Columbia, South Carolina. She was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a Ph.D. from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2013 and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey.

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1. Jarislav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works: American Edition,* Companion Volume, 63.

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Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 1, 2017

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32
Psalm 25:1–9
Philippians 2:1–13
Matthew 21:23–32

Reflections on the Texts

These texts have shared themes of identity, integrity, and faithfulness. The selected verses from Ezekiel are from a chapter dealing with individual responsibility for sinfulness. The opening verse quotes a proverb about grapes and teeth suggesting that the consequences of sinfulness are hereditary. The prophet emphasizes, however, that individuals are responsible for their own situations. This oracle invites the Israelites in Babylon into repentance and away from their transgressions. Written in a context of exile, these transgressions are most likely idolatry and worship of other gods. The current generation is not judged by the actions of their ancestors, but by their own behavior and faithfulness.

By hearing that the child's teeth are not set on edge by their parent's diet of grapes, the Israelites learned that their exile was not caused by the sinfulness of past generations, but that God still judges their actions. This text could be a helpful entry point for preachers to explore the themes of White privilege and generational poverty. This text calls for careful conversation about how blame gets given and taken in our lives and in society. There needs to be a distinction between retribution and consequences. Naming individual responsibility becomes a key component to the prophet's message. These issues of the balance between personal responsibility and inherited tradition become challenging for us in this century as we think about privilege and systemic injustice.

In Philippians 2:1–13, Paul is quoting an ancient hymn, perhaps more like a poem, describing Jesus and his path of humility. The community of Jesus-followers was having a leadership crisis, and Paul, writing from prison, is encouraging them to be of the same mind, focused on Jesus. We encounter the core of Jesus' identity in the world. It is a story of transformation and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. It is a message of humility and finding meaning in the midst of suffering. However, great pastoral care is needed in dealing with this text, lest suffering is glorified to the detriment of vulnerable people. Too many pastors have used it in counseling sessions to encourage women to stay in abusive relationships. Too many preachers, plantation owners, and politicians have used it to justify a system of slavery. The story of Jesus is not a rags-to-riches story, but rather a riches-to-rags-to-riches one. God enters the world as Jesus. Jesus forsakes his privilege to be the baby in the manger, to be the homeless refugee child, the carpenter, and the one who is happy to eat with tax collectors and sinners.

The reading from Matthew has two sections: an encounter with religious leaders about authority and a parable about two sons. This pericope takes place in the context of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He had already been welcomed with branches on the ground and shouts of "Hosanna!" He had already challenged the social and economic systems of the temple by turning over the tables of the money-changers. Perhaps threatened by changes to their way of life, they ask Jesus about his authority. Jesus then makes connections between his ministry and John's baptism. This forces the leaders into silence, with them not wanting to acknowledge their own lack of response to Jesus nor acknowledge the crowd's favor of John.

Jesus then tells a parable about two brothers. One says he will work in his father's vineyard, but doesn't go to work at all. The other says he will not work, but eventually changes

his mind and goes to the vineyard. Jesus' audience recognizes that the one who did work, even though his words said otherwise, did what the father wanted. Jesus continues and tells them that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of those who did not believe John and his way of righteousness and repentance.

From a pastoral perspective, this text can help congregations match their actions to their mission statements and professions of faith. Does what we do match with what we say we believe? Do we make promises we cannot keep? It's easy to hide behind fancy religious documents and written statements. We say words that sound pious, we sing holy songs, but then we get jealous. We try to be somebody we're not. Congregations may fervently sing "All are welcome in this place," but then act in ways that exclude, discriminate, and marginalize. With an emphasis on actions and deeds, it might be tempting to focus on what the congregation needs to do. However, these texts also provide ample opportunity for proclaiming what God does and for celebrating who Jesus is. God's reign welcomes those who are marginalized. Do our congregations do the same?

Paul Bailie

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 8, 2017

Isaiah 5:1–7
Psalm 80:7–15
Philippians 3:4b–14
Matthew 21:33–46

Engaging the Texts

One thing we learn from this week's texts is that vineyards are hard work. They require digging and clearing and planting and building and hewing. But even with all that hard work, the results are unpredictable. We can imagine the frustration—the anger, even—of the vineyard owner in Isaiah 5 who had such high expectations for what the vineyard would yield, only to discover wild grapes growing where he had hoped to find nice domesticated ones. No wonder he lets the vineyard become overgrown.

The Isaiah passage and the selection from Psalm 80 are easily placed in conversation. Isaiah fulfills his prophetic vocation by proclaiming well-deserved judgment on the people of God, and the psalm provides words of supplication that seek restoration and replanting. The psalmist trusts in God's gift for gardening in impossible places. "Restore us," the people cry, knowing that God can prepare the ground for new growth. There are still threats—a ravaging boar, among others. But the God of hosts can help the vines remain rooted and strong.

Today's Gospel is perplexing. It also has a higher-than-normal homicide rate for a Sunday morning story. It helps to place this parable in context, noting that Jesus shares it as part of his showdown with the local religious leaders. They've questioned his authority; he's told them that tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom ahead of them. With that charged backdrop, Jesus launches into the story of the wicked tenants. He does not hold back.

This parable highlights the awful truth that when sin runs rampant, violence begets more violence. Sin always leads to self-deception and death. Note the absurd aspirations of the tenants, who are deluded enough to think that by killing the son they will inherit the vineyard. That's not how inheritance works.

Philippians gives us the clearest proclamation of the good news this week, reminding us that it is not our own righteousness that offers the hope of a more promising vineyard. It is the righteousness that comes from Jesus, rooted in faith and dependent entirely on his mercy.

One note of caution: We must be careful not to present these texts in a way that invites an anti-Semitic interpretation. Our listeners will likely not know about the intra-synagogue conflicts that would have been familiar to Matthew's audience. It might help to frame how today's readings, especially the Gospel, reflect historical conflicts both at the time of Jesus and at the time that Matthew's gospel was being recorded. And we must ask ourselves what they say to us today.

Pastoral Reflections

We would all like to be a magnificent vineyard with rows upon rows of shimmering vines weighed down with grapes that promise a smooth, buttery Chardonnay. We'd love to bear the kind of fruit that makes the world better. But, of course, that's not how we really are. We have weeds that grow as tall as the vines—weeds of greed, selfishness, apathy, and resentment and countless other invaders that threaten to overrun the healthy parts of the vineyard. We produce as many wild grapes as useful ones, often more.

Humanity's collective harvest is an awful mess. We are no better than those wicked tenants who keep slaughtering people, including countless slaves and the son of the landowner himself. We know all too well the dreadful momentum of a violence that's thirsty for blood.

Violence threatens our modern-day vineyards. These days it seems to be escalating at every turn—another mass shooting, another police killing of a person of color, another mob of white supremacists looking for a fight, another family torn apart by rage and abuse.

Jesus draws a clear connection between this shocking story and the rejection he faces on the way to the cross. He

knows what's coming. We like to tell ourselves that if we had been there, we wouldn't have been among the ones shouting, "Crucify him!" His blood wouldn't be on our hands. Except we don't know that. The power of the mob can be strong. Even if we hadn't done the nailing ourselves, would we have intervened? Probably not. Would we have remained silent and scared? Probably so.

In our own time, we often remain silent and scared when violence springs forth from our deepest, ugliest places of sin and prejudice. We try to ignore the racist joke because we don't know what to say. We avoid difficult conversations with friends and family members. We "unfriend" people on social media rather than engaging with beliefs that clash with our own. Meanwhile, our silence is complicity. It nurtures soil in which the ugliest weeds can run wild and choke the vines.

We would like to be magnificent vineyards, but, in reality, we are works in progress. That's the promise of which Paul reminds us in Philippians. We aren't what we were, and we aren't yet what we will be, but we keep going in faith. Our righteousness, our anticipation of a good harvest, rests entirely in Jesus Christ and our faith in him. That's what allows us to press on, even in the midst of violence. That's what gives us hope.

Christa Compton

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 15, 2017

Isaiah 25:1–9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1–9
Matthew 22:1–14

Engaging the Texts

There are lots of dinner parties in these texts. Who can resist the beauty of the Isaiah 25 passage that we sometimes read at funerals? If the kingdom of God is a feast of rich food and well-aged wines, count me in. We can get distracted by the menu, though, and overlook the guest list. This feast is for all peoples. *All peoples*. No one is left out. That's how the party goes when the host is a refuge to the poor, a shelter from the storm, and a shade from the heat.

Psalm 23 is another funeral favorite, but once again its familiarity can blind us to its amazing promises. I keep returning to the image of a table prepared with enemies all around. It may not sound like the ideal circumstances under which to feast, but that image of nourishment in the midst of danger is one we need right now. And here's the kicker: If God's feast is for all people, shouldn't we invite our enemies to the table to share the meal?

The dinner party in the Gospel is stranger than any wedding banquet I've attended—and that's saying a lot. Here's a banquet with a body count. It's hard for us to understand the king's irrationally violent response to the indifference of the first round of guests. However, we know all too well how easy it is to take for granted the feast that God puts before us week after week. We go about our business and forget to take our faith lives seriously. We actively reject the bounty that God offers. If you have any doubt, just look at recent trends in worship attendance.

We also understand that this strange parable is telling us something about God's guest list. It's going to end up being more eclectic than we expect. The directive to the slaves was to "invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." It's not the most discriminating set of standards, however much we might prefer place cards and seating charts.

The party goes on. Presumably vows are made, and the celebration continues. I have no idea what the newly married couple thought about the strange assemblage at their reception, but it happens nonetheless. This party does, however, raise some questions about the dress code.

Pastoral Reflections

Over the years I've dreaded wedding invitations with designated dress codes. "Black tie" meant finding a fancy dress I could not afford and would be unlikely to wear again. Even worse was "black tie optional," which usually meant that I wore a less fancy frock and ended up feeling underdressed the whole evening. And don't get me started on contemporary designations of "festive attire" and "casual chic." What's a conscientious wedding guest to do?

In a gospel text with many strange details, one of the strangest is the eviction of the man who isn't wearing a wedding robe. He's not just shown the door. He's tossed into the outer darkness. It seems blatantly unfair given that he had no time to prepare for the banquet.

I can't say with certainty what that guest represents, but his fate raises this question: How will people know that we are part of God's great banquet? Let's be clear. I'm not saying that God's kingdom has a restrictive dress code. The parable already reveals that we'll be amazed at how inclusive the feast really is. But having been fed at God's table, how will we go about our daily lives in such a way that we wear God's mercy? I don't mean to suggest that we showcase a kind of holier-than-thou wardrobe, but we *can* bear witness to God's inclusive love out in the world.

Remember all those baptismal images related to clothing, the putting on of everything from a robe of righteousness (Isa 61:10) to the armor of God (Eph 6:11). The fancy gown a baby often wears when baptized reminds us that this person

will forever move through the world in a different way, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

How will we "suit up" as Christians? I pray that we will be dressed as bearers of extravagant mercy, as warriors for justice, as defenders of the poor and oppressed, as advocates for the vulnerable. If we feel uncertain about what that dress code looks like, Philippians gives us some clarity. Stand firm in the Lord. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. (And let's not mistake being gentle for being wimpy.) Do not worry. Pray and give thanks. Pursue what is true, honorable, just, and pure.

Make no mistake. To wear the garments of baptism means we will run headlong into the forces of sin, the devil, and all his empty promises. It won't be easy, but God is with us always. God nourishes us with a holy meal again and again so that we go out with a strength beyond our own.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus.

Christa Compton

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 22, 2017

Isaiah 45:1–7
Psalm 96:1–9 [10–13]
1 Thessalonians 1:1–10
Matthew 22:15–22

Engaging the Texts

For preachers and congregations who are weary of all the political drama and controversies that have marked elections and political leadership over the past year, the appointed readings for this Sunday may not be welcome news. From Cyrus to Caesar, one central theme that emerges from these readings is the relationship between human leaders (emperors!) and God, and the inescapable political realities shaped by this relationship.

From its initial utterance, the Isaiah passage has been charged with political and religious controversy. The mere idea of a foreign leader (in this case, Cyrus) called by God to be an agent of God's purposes in liberating the Jewish people from exile in Babylon and restoring the city of Jerusalem is quite unusual. That Cyrus, a foreigner, would be identified as God's "anointed" (Messiah) is practically inconceivable. But the God "for whom nothing is impossible" is sovereign and free to will and work in accordance to God's own ways, even if that includes working through the pagan ruler of a superpower.

At the same time, any facile analogy between Cyrus and political leaders of today cannot go unchallenged. While God is free to choose whomever God wills, God's purposes are not ultimately concerned with the elevation of any particular leader or the advancement of a political agenda, but rather for the glory of God and the liberation and well-being of God's people. We cannot narrowly limit God's agency and activity; nor should we seek to make simplistic correlations, linking God's rule directly to human leaders as an unqualified endorsement of them. All human leaders are just that—human, limited, fallible. In contrast, the God who made the heavens and the earth, is, as the psalm declares, "greatly to be praised and to be more feared than all gods."

The political landscape shifts in our Gospel Reading from Matthew. Appearing on the scene are Pharisees and Herodians, unlikely political bedfellows who pose this question to Jesus: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Given the political minefield that defined life under Roman occupation, theirs was a loaded question that sought to put Jesus in a difficult position—between a rock and a hard place.

Here's the dilemma: if Jesus endorsed paying taxes to Rome, he would undermine the popular support he had among the common people within the Jewish community. He would be viewed as friendly toward the empire and its occupying forces that oppressed his people. On the other hand, if Jesus declared it unnecessary to pay taxes, he would be regarded as a threat, a political subversive defying the authority of the Roman Empire.

Jesus refuses to capitulate to fear. His answer reveals that he neither fears the empire or popularity polls. He avoids either/or splitting between that which is the emperor's and the things of God and instead reveals the breadth of God's divine claim upon the whole of our lives and God's authority over all leaders.

Pastoral Reflections

A member of a former congregation where I served was fond of saying that he was "not looking for answers but rather for better questions."

When approached with theological humility and genuine curiosity, the Isaiah and Matthew readings in particular provide rich opportunities to raise and ponder better questions to help guide our congregations and faith communities in understanding the relationship between the authority and agency of God and our political leaders amid the concrete socio-historical realities of today. These readings, with their politically charged realities, challenge us as followers of Jesus to be wise and discerning about these dynamics. We owe it to ourselves and to the communities we serve not to offer simplistic answers or predictable endorsements that reinforce political divisions within our country, communities, and church, but to ask better questions that evoke thoughtful,

informed actions and conversations.

Here is a starting point:

- How do we go about discerning God's activity and involvement in our civic society?
- In what ways are God's power and agency enacted among us today?
- Who are God's unexpected agents among us?
- Who are those people doing God's work and enacting God's purposes in the socially and politically complex world we live in, whether or not they are aware of it?

Of course, speaking about political power and agency from the pulpit can generate much fear within the preacher as well as among those assembled. We have not devoted ourselves enough to developing a capacity for engaging such important topics. In this year commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the appointed readings provide a wonderful opportunity to refresh ourselves with the resources offered by our theological tradition that have guided biblical interpretation for centuries and engage them with fresh eyes.

Luther's writings on the two kingdoms of God, for example, provide a framework for understanding the ways in which God provides and cares for temporal life in this world, including good government. Rulers and others in authority have responsibility for the care, preservation, and flourishing of all life. They are charged to govern by employing all the resources of human reason and wisdom, not for their own glory and benefit, but in the best interests of those they are called to serve. Luther's explanation of the petition "Give us this day our daily bread" in his Small Catechism further supports the necessity and created goodness of government and just leaders.

As we expand our collective imagination about the ways in which God is at work preserving and sustaining this good creation, we come to recognize more fully God's absolute authority and claim upon our lives. As bearers of God's image, we, too, are anointed by God for service and love in the world.

Laura Thelander

Reformation Sunday
October 29, 2017

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

Engaging the Texts

"Continue in my word," Jesus says, "and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." In recounting the good news of Jesus Christ, the writer of John's gospel demonstrates a persistent concern for truth. By rough estimation there are over forty references translated as "true" or "truth" in this gospel alone. These references make it abundantly clear that the matter of truth lies at the heart of the gospel. So what are we to make of that? Or, to echo Pontius Pilate's question later in the gospel, "What is truth?" (18:38).

In this day and age when we have witnessed the emergence of "alternative facts," sorting out what is true from false is critical, demanding work. In their exchange with Jesus, the Pharisees offer their own version of alternative facts, claiming to have never been slaves to anyone. I imagine that their ancestors who suffered bondage under Pharaoh's rule would beg to differ! Even in Jesus' day, the Jewish people were living under the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire.

So what is truth?

Too often religious folks see truth as a possession, something we are charged to protect and defend. From this perspective truth becomes something that can be contained and expressed through a set of propositions and beliefs to which we hold on tightly and seek to defend, no matter the cost. But Jesus speaks of truth not as some kind of knowledge we can grab and hold on to, but as the "truth that will make you free." This is a truth that has transformative power—a truth that makes a difference in our lives and world.

Ultimately, this truth, as the writer of John's gospel presents it, is not a set of propositions or a possession, but rather a person. Jesus says, "I am the truth" (14:6). The truth that is revealed in Jesus the Christ is not something that we possess but the very life of God in which we participate. This truth is love as we dwell in God's presence made known to us in the One who is the way, the truth, and life.

In Paul's theological framework that structures his letter to the Romans, this truth is expressed as God's love poured out for us in Jesus who redeems us by freeing us from the powers of sin and death. It is the truth that sets us free from the bondage of self-centeredness and liberates us to live the truth that we belong to God.

When we come to know and participate in this kind of truth, we have encountered the truth that will certainly set us free.

Pastoral Reflections

Let this Reformation Sunday as we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation be a truth-telling Sunday. Let it be a day on which we proclaim the truth about ourselves, the church, the world, and, above all, the truth about God.

The truth about ourselves is encapsulated in Paul's trenchant statement: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:22b–23). It would seem impossible to wriggle out and escape this word of judgment.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet-era prisoner and outspoken political dissident, captures the essence of Paul's message for an audience many centuries later. He writes:

> If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.
>
> —*The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*, (HarperCollins, 1974), 168

This hard truth about ourselves fortunately does not end there. In Paul's words, we are made right, we are justified by God's grace through Jesus. The word of judgment becomes transformed by the gift of God's unconditional love and forgiveness that comes through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Here the gospel speaks the truth about God: God's love for us comes through the gift of forgiveness with no strings attached. God loves each and every one of us unconditionally. This truth about God is also announced by the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah describes God's unrelenting effort to create in God's people new and responsive hearts—hearts that are willing to love, serve, and trust God above all others gods, and to love and serve God's people in the world.

The truth-telling work of the gospel does not end there. On this historic day as we give thanks for the faithful witness of Martin Luther, we are also mindful of the ever-present ways in which sin continues to find ways of creating division, separating us from God and one another. This day is no time to claim theological superiority over any other part in the body of Christ or to assume a moral superiority over and against the world that God so dearly loves. Rather in light of the ever-renewing and ever-reforming work of God's Spirit, we take into account the truth about the church, recalling Dietrich Bonhoeffer's admonition that we must confess that the church is not only the "community of saints" but also the "community of sinners." As the church, we too stand under the judgment and grace of God that sets us free to seek unity within Christ's church and to love and serve our neighbor whom we encounter in the world.

Laura Thelander

All Saints Sunday
November 5, 2017

Revelation 7:9–17
Psalm 34:1–10, 22
1 John 3:1–3
Matthew 5:1–12

Engaging the Texts

The church year is moving toward the triumphant crowning of Christ as King and Sovereign of all. Even as the remains of the northern hemisphere's harvest are safely gathered in, we are called to remember that God's harvest will be reaped as well. Apocalyptic texts abound and we are reminded that the end time is always near, yet comes only at the time of God's own choosing. In one way or another, our texts for All Saints Sunday remind us of such times, too. The passage from Revelation, written to early believers during a time of great oppression, pictures the saints gathered around the throne of God singing words similar to the Hymn of Praise from Revelation 5:12 that we sing on many Sundays. Echoes of this text, "Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain" are present in today's lesson: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Acknowledging the goodness of God to the saints, especially in times of affliction and crisis, the psalmist sings God's praise as well: "I will bless the Lord at all times; the praise of God shall ever be in my mouth." Saints however, are not just those who have died or who lived in the past. To the writer of 1 John, all the baptized are saints, beloved children of God, set apart to do that which we say during the Sacrament of Baptism: "to proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace" (*ELW*, Holy Baptism, p. 228).

Ironically, we almost never encounter our Gospel lesson from Matthew except in the context of All Saints Day, on which it is read every year; and we generally do so in our remembrance of the dead, not the living. The only notable exception occurs on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany in Year A where it seems to be better placed. Situated here, it comes at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and is spoken to his

living disciples almost immediately after Jesus has called them to their new vocation. In effect, Jesus is saying to his recruits, "If you want to follow me, here are some of the implications of the journey: 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'" Blessed? I doubt that the prospect of being reviled and persecuted was something those first disciples hoped for when they left their nets and followed Jesus.

These lessons capture various images of the saints and provide a wonderful kaleidoscope from which to view the baptized people of God, living and dead, who are the body of Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

All Saints Sunday is one of my favorite days of the church year. Perhaps it's because we almost always sing the glorious hymn, "For All the Saints," the third stanza of which has much to say about our earthly sojourn: "Oh, blest communion, fellowship divine, we feebly struggle, they in glory shine; yet all are one in thee, for all are thine. Alleluia! Alleluia!"

All Saints Sunday—a time to remember that we do indeed belong to the "communion of saints," making real what we confess each Sunday in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Yes, we belong to the communion of saints—those baptized saints of God still living, and those who are part of the Church Triumphant. This latter group, described in our lesson from Revelation, belong to that "great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." What a powerful image of the multicultural, multilingual family of faith for whom God yearns. Sadly, such a vision only reaches its fulfillment in heaven, perhaps with glimpses now and again in the church on earth. Still, we do have a long way to go, not only within the ELCA but also within the increasingly polarized human family across the globe.

How might our preaching draw attention to this diverse and beautiful humanity for which God longs? In what ways are we living saints of God to be repairers of this breach in which we live? How do we remind our hearers of the paradoxical nature of our sainthood—that we are to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering and comfort those who are mourning because of the violence inflicted on them by virtue of their color, creed or country of origin? How might our hunger and thirst for justice lead us to repent of the often self-centered ways in which we live so that those who are truly hungry and thirsty might receive their daily bread?

All Saints Sunday provides us an opportunity to thank God for the witness of those who have gone before as they struggled with the important issues of their time, and to commit ourselves anew to bear witness to God's saving and healing word in our day.

Gladys Moore

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
November 12, 2017

Amos 5:18–24
Psalm 70
1 Thessalonians 4:13–18
Matthew 25:1–13

Engaging the Texts

Today's lessons continue the eschatological trajectory noted in last Sunday's lessons. Both the Amos and Thessalonians texts are correctives. Amos seeks to correct a misunderstanding about the meaning of the day of the Lord, which heretofore the Israelites had thought to be a day of judgment on their enemies and victory for the redeemed. 1 Thessalonians rectifies a mistaken notion about believers who have died before Christ's second coming. Will they too be raised when Christ comes again? In dramatic fashion Paul declares that they will indeed be resurrected from the dead: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first." In each case the end of time is a central theme.

The God about whom Amos preaches is not concerned with right liturgical practice but with right ethical behavior. The day of the Lord will not be a time of celebration for God's chosen; it will be a calling to account because of the chosen peoples' moral laxity. To serve the Lord without serving the Lord's people, especially the poor and needy, is not what God demands. In fact, God is angry with those who sing praises and give offerings but do not live justly. Singing cannot replace serving—God seeks justice that flows down like waters!

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew also speaks of end times and seems to be an answer to the unasked question, "How are we to wait for the One who is to come?" Or, in the words of the Nicene Creed, how do we prepare for the One who will "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and whose kingdom will have no end"?

Are we to wait like the five wise virgins? The Greek word here is *parthenos,* the same word used in the first chapter of Matthew: "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son." The word could be translated as "young woman" so some translations say "maidens." This series' editor, Barbara Lundblad, humorously wonders about this translation: "How the NRSV got

to "bridesmaids" is a mystery that presents a picture of ten women in matching gowns carrying lamps instead of flowers."

Humor aside, the question of how to prepare for and await Christ's second coming was one of great importance to the early church. Their trust in the promise that Christ would be returning soon helped them to endure the persecution they were suffering. As years went by however, the concern about the *Parousia* became less and less significant in the lives of the believers.

For us living in the third millennium, waiting seems to be more figurative than literal; and though we weekly assert its coming, I suspect that most of us do not really believe that the kingdom's coming is imminent. How then do we wait and what shall we do while we're waiting?

Pastoral Reflections

Sometimes when presented with texts such as these I confess that I'd rather preach on the righteous indignation of Amos, especially in this fraught and frayed social time in which we live. Making sense of virgins carrying lamps with lots of olive oil (or a lack thereof) as they await the return of Christ the bridegroom at the end of time takes much more theological acumen. I may or may not choose this path on the Sunday when these lessons will be heard, but for today, Amos' words are on my heart, mind, and spirit.

As I write these reflection months before November 12th, a rally and counter-rally is happening in Charlottesville, Virginia over the pending removal of the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from the town's Emancipation Park. The ELCA Conference of Bishops has issued a prayer for those standing against "bigotry, hatred and violence." Yet not once does the prayer mention the root cause of such bigotry, hatred and violence, namely, white nationalism and supremacy. As church, our inability to name and confront the pervasive and persistent sin of racism that was spawned by white notions of superiority over others, especially but not exclusively Black and Native Americans, is part of what makes this sin so intractable. Thus, while we may pray for those who stand against injustice, we must do more than pray.

In thinking about the implicit questions that Matthew's text raises ("How shall we wait?"), I wonder: What wisdom, what oil do we need in our collective lamps that will enable us to interrupt and dismantle racism as a daily and life-long commitment? What will enable us to speak truth to power as we hear rumbles of "fire and fury" and fear possibilities of nuclear war? To advocate for those in Somalia, Yemen, and other places who are starving to death while we throw away massive quantities of food in this country?

While all ten maidens fell asleep as they waited for the bridegroom's return, it was the wise ones who brought extra oil for their lamps. As we consider encouraging our hearers to be like the wise maidens, we might note the importance of staying together as we wait. Maybe we can even consider the radical alternative of sharing our oil with others so that all might be included in the wedding feast. Even so, "Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus."

Gladys Moore

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 19, 2017

Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18
Psalm 90:1–8 [9–11] 12
1 Thessalonians 5:1–11
Matthew 25:14–30

Engaging the Texts

The Gospel text for this Sunday is often misused to preach on economic prosperity—and not just on television or in books at the front of the bookstore. Many a stewardship sermon mid-November has strayed into this territory. But this Parable of the Talents is not about financial practice or theories of capitalism. This parable is about our lives and our calling as children of God, co-creators, and co-sustainers with God.

Context is important. Matthew 24 and 25 immediately precede the story of Jesus' passion. In Chapter 24, Jesus tells his disciples of the upheaval that is coming—the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem is foretold, implying the end of human history. The disciples ask frantic questions—*When? What will be the sign this is about to happen?* Jesus answers those questions with vivid, if not comforting, language from the Hebrew scriptures about the end of an age and the beginning of a "new age." Then in Chapter 25 Jesus tries to teach them in another way—in parables.

Parables are complex, elusive, and sometimes downright tricky. One of the easiest, though not necessarily most fruitful or faithful, ways to read parables is to assume they are allegories. When read this way, we might assume the master in this parable is God/Jesus and the slaves are the disciples/us.

This works on one level. The abundance that is depicted is staggering. A "talent" has been estimated to be 15–20 years wages for a laborer. These slaves are given enormous sums—even the slave receiving just one talent has received a huge gift. It's not theirs—it's not wages paid. We're told that the slaves are "entrusted" with the abundance of the master. They're not told what to do with it—they're simply entrusted.

But where the allegorical reading falls apart is at the end when the master is described as harsh—then demonstrates that description, reaping where he had not sown. This is not

the God/Jesus we know and preach, is it?

So, what are we to do with this parable? For those of us following the rhythms of the church calendar, this is the time of year when we look to the end to see the beginning. We're being set up for Advent and its glorious message of Emmanuel, *God with us.* So how can this parable teach us and inform our days these two millennia later as we prepare for Advent and its dual-stories of the first and second coming of Christ? *How shall we wait? How do we live in this meantime? How are we to be? How are we faithful?*

Pastoral Reflections

Three servants. Three differing amounts entrusted to each "according to his ability." Two results: two double the original amount they were entrusted with; one safeguards the one talent he was given, yielding no increase. Two reactions from the master: "well done good and faithful servant…" and "you wicked and lazy slave!"

The phrase "according to his ability" is interesting because the one given the least amount is also the one who does not increase that amount. What do we make of that? And what do we make of the master's responses to each? "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." What is that "joy of the master"? This is an eschatological parable, it cannot be denied, so what do we learn about last things?

This sermon could require some preaching courage. Will you explain the parable in such a way that the uncomfortable bits sit easier? Or will you, in a word, *grapple*? Will you talk about how metaphors can be both expansive and limiting—sometimes at the same time? This is a parable that spawns many questions—will you give voice to them in your sermon? Will you have the courage to admit how troublesome texts like this can be with their unfamiliar images, cryptic language, and insistence on challenging our more comfortable ideas of who God is?

And will you ask the questions that the parable asks of us? Because there does seem to be a call here. How are *we* called to live and serve in the Kingdom of God, this interesting place in the space-time continuum of the here-and-not-yet? How will we invest what we've been given? What will we do with the abundance of gifts entrusted to us? How will we embrace risk? How will we protect and safeguard those gifts? How will we share them, increase them?

In Matthew's gospel, faithfulness is depicted as following and emulating Jesus. Faithful disciples of Jesus feed the hungry, care for the poor, reach out to the lonely and disenfranchised, and tell others about God's grace, love, mercy, and passion for justice. How will we go about these things? *This* is the stewardship of our gifts, if you're preaching stewardship this Sunday. How will we *live*?

Eschatological texts look to the future for the purpose of the present. The Kingdom of God is both here and now *and* still coming. We might have our eyes on the coming full fruition, but our feet and hands, minds and hearts, best be in the immediate moment. There's work to be done.

Melanie Heuiser Hill

Christ the King/ Reign of Christ Sunday November 26, 2017

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24
Psalm 95:1–7a
Ephesians 1:15–23
Matthew 25:31–46

Engaging the Texts

This Sunday, the season of Pentecost/Ordinary time comes to an end. Next week, Advent begins. Our Gospel text for this in-between day, this Christ the King Sunday, is the wrap-up of Jesus' eschatological discourse in Matthew (Chapters 24 and 25).

People have questions about this text—*many* questions, some of them. What's with the sheep and goats? Is that supposed to be us? What's with the judgment? the undertone of radical obedience? Where's the grace? The forgiveness? Why is this text so—unsettling?

Indeed, grace and forgiveness seem, at first, to be lacking—this text seems harsh. The picture painted is largely a frightening one. If this is a preview of The Great Judgment, as many Bibles title it, many in the pew might be—confused and afraid. What are we supposed to take from this text?

The Son of Man has arrived in splendor, described with images borrowed from apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament, and is now seated on the throne. He is called King. There is drama—this text leaps off the page in its dramatics!—and there is discomforting imagery. One suspects there is a booming voice, people groveling in response. Jesus is Son of Man, King, Lord, Shepherd, and Judge all at once in this text. Art depicting these verses would not be something you'd hang in the nursery.

"The nations" gather before him. Who are these nations? Are they all the cultures and countries of the world gathered together? Or are the nations simply those who are not a part of Israel? (Gentiles, in other words.) Whoever they are—scholars argue on both sides—the King separates them like sheep and goats, the sheep at his right hand, the goats at the left.

Then the sheep are declared blessed by God and told they inherit the "kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world… ." Why? Because they fed and gave drink to the King when he was hungry and thirsty. They welcomed him as a stranger. They clothed him when he was naked and cared for him when he was sick. They visited him when he was in prison.

These are exactly the sorts of things Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and demonstrating throughout his ministry, of course. Care for those who are in need, kindness for those who are despised.

This text is an other-worldly depiction of the *parousia*. Placed within it are affirmations of the vital importance of this-world deeds. It's a cacophony of provocative images and imaginative metaphors.

Pastoral Reflections

Today's text concludes the eschatological discourse of Chapters 24 and 25, but there is another "bracket" to be found between the fifth and twenty-fifth chapters of the gospel. Matthew 5, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, is full of upside down blessings—blessed are the poor in spirit, the mourners, the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who make peace, and who are persecuted for it. Blessed are the "pure in heart."

The *pure in heart* (5:8) is an interesting phrase. What does it mean? Perhaps a description of a person who is focused on what is good and right and pure, without thought for accolades or rewards? Someone who does not labor under "mixed motives" as my Bible's study notes say. Could the pure in heart be the sheep in today's text?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' teaching might be boiled down to this: God's will is that we care for others who are in need. It appears that this is exactly what the "sheep" have done—yet they seem to be almost unaware that they've done it. *We didn't see you*, they cry when Jesus says they've cared for him. And Jesus says "…ah, but when you cared for those in need, you cared for me." The sheep, it would seem, took care of those who needed to be cared for without considering reward. In so doing, they cared for Christ the King himself.

When the goats ask the very same question, however, it comes off as defensive. *We didn't see you! When did we see you in need?* Implication: *If we had seen you, of course we would have cared for YOU!* The goats, it seems, take care of those who need care when there's something in it for them.

This is a text about the radical importance of compassion, kindness, and mercy. In this crazy kaleidoscope of images of The Great Judgment, Jesus makes the point (one more time) that any motivation for serving others needs to be that *they* need to be served, not that *we* have to serve so we can add to our tally of "good works."

This is entirely consistent with the rest of Matthew. Jesus *blesses* those who hunger and thirst for justice, he does not *command* it. He tells his followers they *are* (already) the salt of the earth and the light of the world, not that they *should* (strive to) be. There is grace and blessing to be found amid the call to obedience—things are softer, more grace-filled, and far more nuanced than they first appear in The Great Judgment.

Melanie Heuiser Hill

First Sunday of Advent
December 3, 2017

Isaiah 64:1–9
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19
1 Corinthians 1:3–9
Mark 13:24–37

Reflections on the Texts

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new liturgical year. It also marks our yearly confrontation with apocalypse. As every preacher knows (and dreads?) our three-year lectionary appoints texts from the apocalyptic tradition at the beginning and ending of every liturgical year. On this Sunday we have been assigned a passage from the thirteenth chapter of Mark, often known as "the little apocalypse," in which Jesus sounds as if he were quoting the book of Revelation: "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken." This comes to us along with a passage from Apostle Paul that looks for the "revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ," and lines from Isaiah that begin with the cry, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down…."

Not everyone who gathers in our churches on Sunday morning will know the word "apocalyptic"—but most will know that the Bible contains some scary stuff, and that these readings are frightening. What's a preacher to do? For me a perennial temptation is to let it alone and quickly move on to other themes. After all, it is Advent!

Every once in a while, however, I find it helpful when a sermon thoughtfully and seriously explores apocalyptic themes. This is especially important when what people know of apocalyptic is shaped by popular culture and the fringe theology of the Left Behind novels.

It seems most important to stress that apocalyptic literature grew out of the suffering and longing of oppressed peoples, and that its deeply symbolic language functioned as a critique of injustice, entrenched power, and the status quo. For the oppressed, it's a call to hope in a God of justice who

has the power to change earthly realities. At the same time, for those in power it's a warning that their lives are not nearly as secure or as "good" as they suppose. As Gail Ramshaw writes, "If evil is as pernicious as apocalyptic imagery says, it follows that much of the world's value system will have to be destroyed to make way for justice to reign."[2] The Advent and apocalyptic cry for the Lord to "come" is a plea for justice and radical change. It should make those of us with even relative privilege and wealth more than a little uneasy.

At the same time, this Sunday's Gospel text is a prime example of the way Scripture also plays with and subverts the typical apocalyptic expectation of a forceful, violent God who plans retribution and vengeance. In this text the gospel writer Mark intentionally evokes the imagery and language of apocalypse—the judgment of God, the end of the world, the need to be alert for the signs of the times. However, Mark compresses these enormous and evocative themes into just one chapter (the "little apocalypse") and places them in a startling place: just before the narrative of Jesus' betrayal and crucifixion. Mark also makes subtle literary connections between these apocalyptic expectations and the passion narrative. Jesus tells the disciples to keep awake and watch for the Son of man, saying, "…you do not know when the lord of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn…" Donald Juel notes the remarkable connections to Jesus' upcoming passion: "The listing of the various times when the master might return are suggestive of a structure of events: evening (the meal); midnight (the garden and arrest); cockcrow (Peter's denial); in the morning (the final gathering of the Sanhedrin and Jesus' trail before Pilate). Even clearer is the connection between the warning to "stay awake" and the disciples' sleep while Jesus prays in Gethsemane"[3]

What if we took seriously the apocalyptic reversals hinted at here? That the apocalypse is to be looked for not in some far off future, but that the coming of God is at hand—in Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection? (Provocatively, Jesus himself states that, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.") What if God's ultimate, final, decisive coming-among-us already happened—and it looks like Jesus' own forgiving love?

What if, when we are charged with watching and waiting for the coming of God among us, Scripture is inviting us to watch and wait for things that look like Jesus—not great and awesome works of power, but acts of compassion and solidarity? And what if we are being invited to look for God's revealing among those who have been betrayed, or among those whom the world has crushed? What if—this Advent—we are being invited to watch and wait for God's coming amid the cries of our neighbors, near and far? What if "apocalypse" means God coming to us in a cradle and on a cross, and being revealed to the world in astonishing mercy?

Erik Haaland

Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2017

Isaiah 40:1–11
Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13
2 Peter 3:8–15a
Mark 1:1–8

Engaging the Texts

Each of the texts for this Second Sunday of Advent contains announcements of divine hope and promise in the face of human uncertainty and despair.

"Comfort, O comfort my people," says the God of Israel to a people in bondage in Babylon. These are the first words of the prophet known as "Second Isaiah," (Isaiah 40-55) announcing a section of some of the most hope-filled preaching in all of scripture. The hope and comfort, however, is proclaimed amid one of the darkest periods of Israel's history. Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed, and most of the people carried into exile. In bondage in Babylon the very existence of the people of Israel seemed at risk. Yet this becomes the occasion for the prophet's words of tender comfort and hope.

Claus Westermann points out an interesting translational issue: the placement of quotation marks in vs. 6–7 is purely speculative.[4] Quotation marks don't exist in the Hebrew text and must be inferred. Westermann thinks it best to extend the second quotation all the way to the end of v. 7. "All people are grass…" then becomes the lament of the prophet rather than a declaration from on high. The divine answer to such despair then follows in v. 8: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." The prophet stands with the people in the midst of their hopelessness and despair—and in that very place the promises of God are made known.

This same theme of hope in the midst of uncertainty is present in the reading from 2 Peter. There the writer attempts to give comfort in the midst of the uncertainty caused by the "slowness" of God's coming. God's slowness is patience, the

2. Gail Ramshaw (2002) *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 138.

3. Donald H. Juel, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 185.

4. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 41.

epistle writer asserts, and points to the hopeful possibility of lives lived in anticipation of a righteousness yet to come.

The selection from Mark's gospel contains something of the same contrast. The reading begins with the sudden announcement, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ," and then goes on to describe how people "from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" were coming out to be baptized by John. Such a situation surely implies that all was not well in Jerusalem and its environs. What could have caused so many people to stream out into the wilderness to receive John's baptism? A sense of hopelessness under Roman occupation? Dread over the consequences of individual and collective sin? The story doesn't say. But the people were certainly yearning for *something* as they came out in droves to John in the wilderness. Such yearning marks the beginning of the gospel story.

Pastoral Reflections

It's interesting that the opening scene of Mark's gospel takes place in the wilderness—*outside* the holy city. The city, of course, is the place of power: the place of the kings, of imperial authority, of wealth, of official religion. The gospel of Jesus Christ begins *outside* all of that, in the wilderness. At the same time, the significance of "the wilderness" is not something invented by Jesus or the New Testament writers: it is a critical theme throughout scripture. In Exodus, the people of God learn how to become the people of God in the wilderness. The Babylonian exile was itself a terrible experience of wilderness—and it is a highway through the wilderness that will lead the people home.

There is something about the experience of being on the outside—of wandering in the wilderness—that is critical for the formation of biblical faith, and for becoming the people of God.

Advent is a good time for us to ponder these things. It is a season of waiting and yearning—a season of anticipation, acknowledging the great "not yet" in which we live. I think it's important to be clear that we're not simply waiting for "baby Jesus to be born." Such language may be useful for teaching children the stories and rhythms of the church year. But for most of the household of faith this season's most profound meaning won't be found in pretending that Jesus hasn't yet been born. Advent waiting is about so much more than the coming of the Christmas festival (as lovely as that may be). This season is an invitation to acknowledge that our world—and our lives—are so terribly far from the righteousness and justice that God desires. Advent invites us to yearn for "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter 3:13). But in order to do that, we begin by acknowledging the truth of the wilderness in which we find ourselves.

A biblical corollary is this: our truest perceptions of reality come from the perspective of the wilderness, rather than that of the holy city or the promised land. We see the world more clearly "from below" than "from above"—through a theology of the cross than a theology of glory. It is in the Advent practice of "calling a thing what it actually is" (Luther) that we find ourselves in a place to hear the truth of the law, and of the gospel. It's there, in the wilderness, that we hear the divine voice crying out with healing, comfort, and hope.

Erik Haaland

Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2017

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11
Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b–55
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24
John 1:6–8, 19–28

Engaging the Texts

Like many biblical texts, these four consider encounters of our commissioning God with particular people. The texts acknowledge that which is contrary to God's love, they consider the reality of resistance but fundamentally they undergird hope.

In the Isaiah text, pay attention to the shifting speakers—the joyful words of the one commissioned to speak and act on God's behalf are interrupted by God's own words of justice and affirmation (vv. 8–9). What the people are announcing and celebrating is not merely positive experience or desired gifts. The commission is evidence of the nature and will of God. Note that the talk of commissioning and the celebration of God's victories carry the shadow of what has been defeated—oppression, broken-heartedness, captivity, imprisonment, opposition to God, loss, mourning, devastation. The joy here comes to those who have known the opposite. God is at work for good, overcoming evil, inviting thankful praise.

Psalm 126 also focuses on the nature of God's work with people, but I suggest using the lectionary alternative, the Magnificat, for a fuller commissioning story. The poem sings Mary's response to Gabriel's annunciation and to Elizabeth's affirmation (the gospel text for Advent 4). Mary experienced a life-changing encounter with God—an amazing promise of pregnancy, which she understood in the context of God's disruptive, ameliorative work across the ages. This song is about the God who commissioned Mary to motherhood. It's not about her. It's not even prophecy about Jesus the disrupter—that word is left to Simeon in Luke 2.

With metaphors of sleep and alertness, sobriety and drunkenness, night and day, 1 Thessalonians speaks of

encountering God and the complexity of response to that encounter. God's commission should and could lead to a community of encouragement and building up, of respect, peace, admonition, help for the poor, patience, prayer, rejoicing and more. Paul didn't imagine this was easy or inevitable. His admonitions show awareness of tension, disrespect, and despising in the community. Paul saw the need for weighing various counsels about responding to God. The effort to stay awake is crucial, but Paul ends with promise, focusing on God: "the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

The John text is about Jesus and John the baptizer, of course, but it is fundamentally about God: John was a man "sent from God." There are unmistakable allusions to God's creation of light and, in omitted verses 9–18, to the rejection of God's light. People were given the power to be children of God, to be born of God. The glory of God was seen in the Son. The evangelist lets John summarize his own identity and message with, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the LORD (*kyriou)*.'" Modern hearers may forget that for Isaiah "Lord" referred to God, but the evangelist and his readers would not have forgotten. John the baptizer was known as one who pointed to God made known in Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

This third Sunday of Advent is only eight days before Christmas. To maintain Advent tension, you might invite the congregation to hear all the texts through the Isaiah reading or the Magnificat—God commissions for self-revelation but, implicitly or explicitly, God commissions for the facing of evil. God's encounters with people point out evil, they reveal reluctance and resistance. Yet God persists.

The commissioning in Isaiah could be a starting point. In the midst of the growing Christmas joy and excitement that shape Advent in our culture, you might make good use of Isaiah. His words anticipate the joy brought through Jesus' birth but give substantial occasion to speak of the problems of life and world. The other texts for this day give entrees for illustrating the positive outcomes of God's work but also for illustrating God's opposition to evil.

I'm often concerned that I and others are careless and shallow when we toss the word "God" into our sermons and conversations, assuming we all know what it means. It is tempting to use the word with less content and power than it deserves. The texts for this Sunday might be useful for shaping and reshaping our sense of who God is by seeing again what God does and what God resists. That might be an unspoken objective of your sermon. Commissioning, the opposition to evil, persistence for good—all this tells us about God. We are all commissioned—be it a call to preach (I'd not focus my sermon on that one), a call to be a parent, a call to resist some specific evil, a call to nurture a community of goodness, kindness, and mutual respect, a call to point humbly beyond ourselves to the astonishing, persisting, light-giving work of God. Show also that God commissions communities, not only individuals.

What bits of contemporary history and real-life stories might you use to tell of God-encounters and thereby to encourage, admonish, and build up those who will be listening? What's dawning on you as you watch for God's commissionings today? Don't make the sermon about you, but you might prepare for preaching by reminding yourself of evidence, small and large, by which you know that God is commissioning you for daily life. This is a good Sunday to use the language of vocation. What stories will let your hearers encounter the God who calls them and all?

Stan Olson

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017

2 Samuel 7:1–11,16
Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26
Romans 16:25–27
Luke 1:26–38

Engaging the Texts

Second Samuel is a great story. King David got things wrong and the prophet Nathan affirmed that wrong course. However, Nathan had to go back the next morning or maybe even late that same night and retract his affirmation. In the night God had spoken with wonderful irony. *Did I ever need or ask for a house that you could build? I had no house, yet you've experienced my presence everywhere you've been.* The prophetic words go on, playing with David's term "house." God's choice of David and of Israel is affirmed. Instead of a grand, godly house from David, God promised Israel a place, a place of rest. And God promised David a "house"—descendants. The story reminds us who's in charge—not David, not Nathan, but God. Nevertheless, God says clearly, the prophet and the king have work to do. They are neither passive nor puppets.

Psalm 89 picks up and details the promise to David, but first the poet offers words that might be used as a theme for this Sunday, "I will sing of your steadfast love… I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations." A particular ruler and the people under that dynasty will experience God's steadfast love and faithfulness. What is the appropriate response individually and communally to the promise of an active, gracious God? It's confession, praise. *We recognize you*

as wonderful parent, source of good, the ground of our salvation!

The peroration of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians is fittingly breathless in its expression of trust and praise. The grammar is challenging. Textual evidence is ambiguous. Yet the point of celebration is crystal clear. Paul's most reflective, theological letter concludes with an ejaculation of humble confidence in God who is self-revealed in Jesus Christ, who creates faith, who incarnates wisdom, and who is still actively strengthening the people of Jesus Christ.

The letter is about changed lives. The phrase translated "the obedience of faith" is found also in the opening to Romans. It could mean faith which is the obedience one owes to God. It could mean the obedient life which is the fruit of trust in God. Both are grammatically possible. Both can be supported from the ways Paul wrote about faith. It's not necessary to choose one or the other. The richness is there and fits the tone of astonished gratitude.

From Luke, we hear the story of the Annunciation. God is faithful to God's promises, including the promise to David. God engages individual people, astounding them. Nothing is impossible with God. Trust is invited and encouraged. Mary's response exemplifies the trust to which all are called. Would Paul have suggested that Mary shows the obedience of faith?

The persistent presence and steadfast goodness of God is a good and persistent theme in all four texts.

Pastoral Reflections

Though it is Christmas Eve in people's lives, the church has gracious reasons to speak still of Advent. To maintain the tension, the mood of waiting and preparation, I suggest reading all these texts through the lens of the first reading and perhaps the Psalm—texts that help us think about God's actions and God's call to ordinary people.

Be sure you have a good reader for the dramatic story from 2 Samuel, so that the irony comes through. "Did I ever say… 'Why have you not built me a house?'" You might explore the theme of getting it wrong, in deep faith. Since Nathan was as wrong as David, this might be a good time for a bit of self-deprecating humor by the preacher. Though we know God's goodness in myriad ways, we easily miss the deep truth if we focus on wonderful pieces. We church professionals sometimes lead the way in treating a part as though it were the whole of God's amazing goodness.

However, don't let any humor distract from that deep theme of God's steadfast goodness. And, don't let the mistake by two great leaders of Israel discourage your congregation from trying to live out their faith. Nathan and David were called to continuing service, despite failing. This story can set a congregation free to explore lives and words of appreciation, even knowing they will often be in error and inarticulate. God is persistent in love that empowers us for exuberant service.

Most congregations will gather today for Christmas Eve worship, remembering the birth of Jesus. But for morning worship, the text from Luke announces the impending pregnancy. The lectionary gives a chronological disjuncture that can focus on the activity of God and the persistence of God's promises.

You might meditate on commissioning truths that seem unlikely to be true in daily life, contemporary parallels to a young woman facilitating the salvation of the world, a government official rescinding a major proposal and moving forward, you and I being sent. Even in our amazement, we can rest in the faithfulness of God, responding "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." Can you use the house image, the place image? As I did last Sunday, I'll again suggest the theme of vocation—our lives are the God-given *places* where God calls us to serve our neighbors. Sure, that's about us, but fundamentally it tells us about the nature of God. Nothing will be impossible with God.

Stan Olson

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2017

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

Engaging the Texts

Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome. Quirinius, Governor of Syria. Luke frames the birth story of Jesus with the names of these earthly rulers. "In those days (*not 'once upon a time'*)—a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." All the world! Rome was "all the world." Everyone went to be registered, each to his home city (and it was surely "his" hometown rather than "hers"). *Do you have a green card, Joseph? Is your passport in order?*

Caesar Augustus and Quirinius are seldom included in the crèche we assemble each Christmas. But without them, Luke's story can become nostalgia rather than gospel. Luke doesn't care much for nostalgia. He doesn't mind shocking readers in the first century, or the twenty-first. The angel's message to the shepherds was shocking indeed. Shocking because it came to unknown shepherds on a work night—surely a royal audience would have gotten more press. Emperor Augustus and Quirinius the Governor didn't get the news. The angel's greeting was shocking not only because of the audience, but the content of the message: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." But

everyone knew there already was a Savior, known as "son of God," and his name was Caesar, Emperor of Rome.

Luke's story is counter-speech to the rhetoric of empire. It is a decentered story far from the halls of power. It is a story many people don't want to hear, especially on Christmas Eve. In the United States many Christians are concerned that "political correctness" is destroying Christmas. Children can't sing Christmas carols in school, we can't put a crèche in the city park, we don't even dare to say, "Merry Christmas" for fear of offending someone. But the message of Christmas is not destroyed when we remove the crèche from the courthouse lawn. The message of Christmas is lost when we reduce it to a nostalgic baby story.

Pastoral Reflections

The more I read Luke's story the more surprising it becomes. Strange, though familiar. Complex rather than simple. This is a story deep enough to hold us when memories cannot be relived and our grown-up selves long for meaning in the present. There are things in this story I didn't hear or see when I was a child.

When I was growing up, I knew where Jesus was born. On winter nights, my sister and I had the task of bedding the cattle shed. We carried bales of straw to the shed, snapped the twine, and shook the straw around to make a bed for the milk cows. On Christmas Eve I walked into that old shed with its post beams and the smell of cattle, and it seemed to me exactly like the place where Jesus was born. The story was as real as bright Venus overhead, as certain as the feel of straw in my hands. It isn't just the memory of the cattle shed I long for, but everything that went with it: our tree heavy with fat colored bulbs and bubble lights, the tinsel thrown onto the tree by children too impatient to separate the strands, the early morning *Julotta* service when the choir sang one song in Swedish, Mom or Dad or Grandpa reading the story from Luke. I could see the holy family in the cattle shed. All was calm, all was right.

But Luke's story outlives childhood if we dare to wonder. The sermon on this night could well focus on wondering. I wonder why the birth of Jesus gets only one verse. I wonder why Jesus' birth was announced to shepherds who were considered the lowest of the low in society. I wonder why Luke calls the angels a "heavenly host" for that word *host* is the word for army. But they didn't sing "God will fight for you against the Romans!" That wasn't their song at all. Their song was peace. "Glory to God in the highest and on the earth peace."—I wonder "Who did they tell on their way back to the fields?" I wonder why all who heard them were "amazed"—did that mean they believed or they thought the shepherds were crazy? Some of your friends may think you're crazy for being in church tonight.

Whoever God was to us before this birth in Bethlehem, God is now different. God can no longer be god of the constellations, mechanically ticking away the universe but completely uninvolved with life on earth. God can no longer be so strong that life will always go right. Or so unchangeable that every question can be answered by saying "it was God's will." God can no longer be so holy that parts of this earth and its people are untouchable. There is no part of you or me that is unredeemable or ugly or worthless. Whoever God was for us before, God now comes to us in the sign of a child. Decentered. Wonder-filled. A story deep enough to hold us even when we've grown up.

Barbara Lundblad

Christmas Day
December 25, 2017

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

Engaging the Texts

In many ways John 1 is a wonderful text for Christmas Eve (though most people will be expecting Luke 2). John's image of light coming into darkness will be reflected in the candlelight of an evening service. It would be meaningful to include the Isaiah 9 text appointed for Christmas Eve: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light…"

But before getting to the light, we return to Creation. We hear the cadences of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Listeners can't see the capital W on "Word" so it's important to help them see what they cannot hear. You aren't trying to prove you're smart by sharing the Greek word *logos.* We speak forms of that word when we say *logic* or *logical.* The philosophers would have nodded at John's Word. They knew *logos*—the perfect wisdom of which this earth is but a shadow. Perhaps they were on the edge of their seats waiting. Then John said something utterly ridiculous: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us…" No! That's impossible. The cosmic, eternal Word cannot become flesh. When John wrote, "lived among us," the Greek word literally means, "pitched a tent" among us. John is borrowing from the Wisdom literature of Sirach:

> "…the wisdom of God came forth from God's mouth to cover the earth but eventually pitched a tent

> in Jerusalem to be present in a special way as God's torah." (Sirach 24:8)[5]

We've gone from time before time, from galaxies and constellations, to the down-to-earth image of pitching a tent. In her book *The Rapture Exposed,* New Testament scholar Barbara Rossing writes: "…there is no rapture in the story of Revelation, no snatching of people off the earth up to heaven… it is God who is Raptured down to earth to take up residence and dwell with us—a Rapture in reverse."

Pastoral Reflections

But how do we preach this Word that seems more idea than story? There is no specificity of time, no Roman rulers, no Mary and Joseph, no baby. Perhaps an image sermon can give shape for preaching this text. "The light shines in darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." John reached back to the creation story where God's first word was, "Let there be light and there was light." What happens in a dark room when you light just one candle? Or when you're stumbling in the darkness and someone shines a flashlight to reveal the path? Even a small light makes all the difference. You could close your sermon or the worship service with the first stanza of this poem by Jan Richardson:

> Blessed are you who bear the light in unbearable times, who testify to its endurance amid the unendurable, who bear witness to its persistence when everything seems in shadow and grief.

Another image comes into view if we pick up the image of pitching a tent. John is borrowing from the wilderness experience when the tabernacle/tent moved from camp to camp as the Israelites journeyed toward the promised land. The Ark of the Covenant was in that tent, a reminder of God's unfailing presence. But the tent is also fragile and impermanent, not as strong as wood or stone. The tent may not be as beautiful as the sanctuary where people have gathered on Christmas Day. What will it mean for people to believe the Word goes with them as they leave the sanctuary? Where will the Word pitch a tent in their daily lives?

Perhaps your sermon will be an altar call even if the congregation doesn't do such things. Pay attention to the interruption in the flow of John's Prologue: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John." That interruption seems abrupt and changes the tone from poetry to prose. Years ago when I preached on this text on Christmas Day I knew there would be very few people–mainly older folks who didn't dare to come out at night. I knew I could name all of them. "There was a man sent from God his name was Peter, David, Ted… There was a woman sent from God her name was Carolyn, Pam, Gertrude…There was a child (yes, one child was there), her name was Elena." When I finished the naming, Elena shouted out, "Barbara!" I have no idea if she wanted me to know this gospel was also for me, but I've never forgotten. The promise of this gospel is for each person in the sanctuary: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God…" (1:12) What a strange power! We might expect power to overcome enemies, power to be strongest or best; instead, we are given power to become children of God. Perhaps the preacher will invite each person to come forward to hear the words of Baptism: "_____, child of God, you have been marked with the cross of Christ forever."

Barbara Lundblad

5. In the Appendix to *The Gospel of John: Volume I,* Raymond Brown writes extensively about the Word. Almost everything John says about logos is borrowed from Wisdom traditions where Wisdom is personified as *Sophia.* Why didn't John say *"Sophia became flesh…"*? Because Jesus was male and *Sophia* wasn't!

First Sunday after Christmas Day December 31, 2017

Isaiah 61:10—62:3
Psalm 148
Galatians 4:4–7
Luke 2:22–40

Engaging the Texts

These texts, particularly Galatians and Luke, are focused on adoption, being presented, and claimed by God. They are about being named children of God. We are the beloved and because of that adoption God chose to put skin in the game, as Jesus, and came to live among us, teach us to love each other, and died a brutal death on the cross to take away the sins of the world. We were redeemed by this act of grace and sacrificial love. This is the profound theological claim in these texts.

"Redemption" has always been a 50-cent word that I didn't use much before seminary and I must admit that I probably have not used it a lot since. It means that we have been released or delivered from the bondage of sin. Maybe we do not feel that bondage but that's because of the salvific act of Christ. That freedom allows us to live our lives fully and completely without being weighed down by the baggage of the mistakes we have made in our pasts. Being freed from sin means we are freed to live into the lives God has in store for us. Preaching this "freedom from" to "freedom for" new life is a theme many people need to hear today in concrete ways.

There is a significant tie to the Hebrew roots of the people

to whom Jesus was sent. The story in Luke is a Jewish ritual tying Jesus to the obligations of Leviticus 12:3-8 and the ancient covenant between God and the people of Israel. The obligation to be part of a holiness rite was important to them and was part of their understanding of redemption. First-born sons belonged to the Lord and had to be redeemed by ritual. This is the act in which Mary and Joseph were participating. It was a Jewish temple to which Mary and Joseph brought their son Jesus. This is one of the very few stories from Jesus' childhood in the Bible and it has great significance to the reader. It is into this mix that the Gospel passage brings us a word of grace.

We get so few insights into Jesus as a boy—this story, the birth narrative, the slaughter of the innocents, the magi's visit from the East, and Jesus at the temple at the age of 12 are the few we read. Reading this text reminds us of both the divine nature of who Jesus will grow up to be and the human side of his life as the son of these two loving parents. Help your people to see both sides of this amazing Jesus.

Pastoral Reflections

When my spouse and I adopted our son in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 1998, he was 9 months old. It felt like a monumental decision. However, deciding whether to have him circumcised or not was almost a bigger decision than the decision to adopt. There were many things to consider—cultural norms, religious norms that were not our own, "locker room taunts" he might be subjected to if we chose not to, etc. It was a difficult few months trying to decide what to do. In the end, we felt comfortable with our decision but it was a very private choice.

This text, however, is a public story about the Jewish tradition that Jesus' parents were living into when he was presented in the temple for circumcision and naming. This is a huge deal for families of his faith tradition and of that time. His mother and father proudly presented him at the temple for this public ritual. And it is followed by blessings and portentous prophetic announcements by Simeon and Anna about who Jesus will become and about the Jewish people. Nothing like this happens for most of us at the naming of our children. My mother told me when we were deciding what name to give our son to go to the back porch of our house and yell it out like we were calling him to dinner and see if it felt right. We did that and his name stuck. But in the Jewish tradition, this happens at the presentation ritual. Talking about the importance of names and naming would be an intriguing thing to do in your sermon.

Jesus' father, Joseph, presents him as his son. I find this an important moment as an adoptive mother. He does not claim a partial parental obligation or a "special" relationship. He claims him as his own son. He is his father. He has raised him. He has probably taught him carpentry skills, to care for his tools, and to care for his family. He has taught him his faith and about his traditions. He is not merely his "adopted dad." He is his father. And God is his Divine Parent.

In the Epistle passage we also hear a claiming of all individuals as God's own children. This is an act of divine adoption that is done through the redeeming acts of Jesus. We are fully brought into the family of God. That makes all the difference in the world—to be part of the family of God in a time of such division and animosity. God's family includes all. That'll preach, preachers!

Karyn L. Wiseman

New Year's Eve
December 31, 2017

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13
Psalm 8
Revelation 21:1–6a
Matthew 25:31–46

Engaging the Texts

In Matthew 25 Jesus draws a picture of the final judgment. Most of us don't like to be judged but in this case, it is also an image of Christ's kingship and divinity. Jesus is the judge in this text and will be the one who separates the people who have been faithful from those who have not. He will separate those who have welcomed his followers from those who have not. The image he uses is one of a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats who have been in the same pasture together. I wanna be in the sheep pen myself!

In this text, Jesus lays out clearly what it means to be righteous. Jesus describes what it looks like to be a sheep, to be a faithful follower. It means to live in kindness with one's neighbors. He talks about what those who follow his word needed to have done for him. He responds to questions from those who were surprised at his praise: "When did we do those things for you, Lord? Surely, we've fallen short?" But no, Jesus assures them. If you've done any of these things for the least, the last, the lost, the left behind—then you've done it for me.

But then the text turns. Here is where the judgment comes in. If you did not do it for these others, then you did not do it for Jesus. The image of being cursed for the failure to reach out to those in need is pretty dire. Eternal fire and judgment is what's in store. Is this loss of life or endless torment? I don't want any part of either one of those. The choice is clear—care for others. Show mercy and compassion for the least of these. That is what Jesus is calling us to. Period.

As followers of Jesus we are to serve others. But we're also

both sheep and goats at different times in our lives. There are moments when I am good at serving my neighbor, whether I think I might be serving Jesus or not. Other times, I get caught up in my own needs, busy schedule, and judgment of those in need and I fail miserably. Trying to help those in our congregations understand that doing our best to live up to the righteousness we are called to is important. Challenge them to do what they can to serve others, even if it's something small. Living righteously means serving others and that means going where the sick and poor are. We must get beyond the four walls of our church buildings.

Pastoral Reflections

One of the realities of the postmodern era is the multiplication of questions about faith. I don't think this is a new phenomenon but it is an increasingly important one for the church today. My oldest niece left the church several years ago. When I asked her why, she responded, "They're answering questions that I'm not asking." Her response blew me away. No one had asked her what questions she was asking. When I talk with millennials or read research about "the nones,"[6] it's clear that they are tired of the church telling them what they should believe when they aren't even sure what they are wondering about. The church would do well to periodically ask their members what their questions are, what they are struggling with, and what is keeping them up at night, especially as we are entering a new year. Questions are important. Jesus knew that. Encourage people to ask questions of the text, about their faith, and about the church.

When children ask their parents questions—often the same ones over and over and over again when they are little—it can be quite annoying. However, this is how they learn. In school, we are told the only dumb question is the unasked question. I remind my graduate students all the time that if they need answers to questions, they should check the syllabus first, but if they do not find the answer there, to definitely ask me.

"The nones," when asked why they don't want to be part of the institutional church, cite three primary reasons: the church is judgmental, hypocritical, and too obsessed with issues of sexuality. In today's Gospel, we are dealing with a text on judgment, specifically the final judgment. This is sheep- and goat-separating judgment. When younger folks or people who don't look or live like we do come to our churches, we need to welcome them with open arms, not judgment. Taking this opportunity to preach a sermon of welcome in the midst of a judgment text would be a reminder that despite what will happen in the final judgment, we must live in the interim as people of welcome and grace. This just might be the best sermon your people and others could hear in our polarized climate. Preach the gospel that living as neighbors means we are living into the way Jesus calls us to live as disciples in the world.

Karyn L. Wiseman

6. There is an abundance of research about these individuals—spiritual but not religious people who have either left the church or opted never to engage the church because of their belief that the church is judgmental, hypocritical, and anti-gay, among other things. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/ (Accessed 8/14/17)