

Preaching Helps

Epiphany of Our Lord — Vigil of Easter

Fifty Years without Dr. King (1968–2018)

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday comes every year during Epiphany. This year the Monday holiday honoring Dr. King falls on January 15, the exact date of his birth. He would have turned 89 this year if he hadn't been assassinated on April 4, 1968. His birthday this year is especially poignant for we have now lived 50 years without Dr. King. It is fitting that his birthday falls during Epiphany, the season of light—light of the star and Jesus, the Light of the world. Dr. King often called us to be bearers of light:

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that (*Strength to Love*, 1963).

We will never know how the United States would be different if Dr. King's light had been allowed to shine for more than 39 years. He faced death threats many times and was often afraid for himself and for his family. The night before he was killed he seemed to sense that death was near: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land" (Memphis, April 3, 1968).

The FBI thought he was dangerous. Some within the Civil Rights movement abandoned him when he spoke out against the Vietnam War. Many thought he was downright foolish to insist on non-violence. But Dr. King marched to a different drummer and believed what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom; and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25, reading for Lent 3). Dr. King was willing to be foolish for the sake of the gospel. In many sermons and public addresses, he called us to the foolishness of being "maladjusted."

Now we all should seek to live a well-adjusted life...But there are some things within our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the inequalities of

an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence.

It may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted...As maladjusted as Jesus who could say to the men and women of his generation, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you."¹

This is a good season to be maladjusted, to dare to be foolish for the sake of the gospel. From Epiphany we move into Lent on Ash Wednesday. This year that happens to be Valentine's Day. Should we mark foreheads with ashes in the shape of a heart instead of a cross? Do they mean the same thing? "What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul." As usual the Lenten journey moves toward Easter, but not-so-usual this year, Easter falls on April 1—April Fool's Day. What better way to prepare for Easter this year than to proclaim that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom! When the powers of state and religion thought they had gotten rid of a trouble maker by condemning Jesus to death, God pulled off the greatest April Fool's joke of all: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:6–7). Go! Dare to go to Galilee even if everyone says you're foolish. Dare to call others to be maladjusted for the sake of God's good news.

Our writers for this edition of "Preaching Helps" include long-time favorites as well as several new voices. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is co-lead pastor at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Reno, Nevada, where she is actively engaged in the interfaith community and social justice advocacy. She also teaches adjunct courses at the University of Nevada-Reno and Truckee Meadows Community College. Further lectionary reflections can be found regularly at Political Theology's lectionary blog, "The Politics of Scripture" (<http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/tag/politics-of-scripture/>). She holds an MDiv from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and a PhD in New Testament and Early Christianity from Vander-

1. Dr. King's quotes are from James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1986)

bilt University. **Justin Lind-Ayres** serves as the Seminary Pastor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, as well as a member of the Augsburg University Campus Ministry Team in Minneapolis. He and his family are members of Edina Community Lutheran Church where he joyfully teaches 3rd Grade Sunday School (Truth be told, they teach him!).

Brenda Bos serves a small ELCA congregation in south Orange County, California. Her church worships on the beach every Sunday morning, welcoming one-time visitors and transients as well as long-time members. Every Sunday, they know there are people who attend that one time and move on. So, they've got a sense of urgency. "We *must* deliver the gospel in our worship." She and her wife, Janis, met and adopted their son, Joshua, when he was fifteen years old. **Shauna Hannan** is Associate Professor of Homiletics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary of California Lutheran University. She also serves as Core Doctoral Faculty in "Religion and Practice" for the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, California). She received her MDiv from Luther Seminary and her PhD in Practical Theology (Concentration: Homiletics) from Princeton Theological Seminary. **Ron Luckey** received a B.A. from Lenoir-Rhyne University, MDiv from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and a DMin from Lexington Theological Seminary. Now retired after forty years of ministry, Ron served as a pastor in North Carolina, campus pastor at Clemson University, and pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Lexington, Kentucky, for twenty-five years. He has been involved in community organizing in Lexington with the founding of BUILD (Building a United Interfaith Lexington through Direct Action). He has been a member of the ELCA Community Organizing Advisory Team, board of Directors of DART, and co-chaired the ELCA Indiana-Kentucky Synod Community Organizing Resource and Engagement Team. Ron also received training through the Gamaliel Foundation and National People's Action. He and his wife, Pacita, a retired public school teacher, have four grown children and six grandchildren. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John's book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C* is now available, along with Years A and B. (Editor's note: these three books are wonderful resources for preachers.) John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Erik Strand** is a recently retired ELCA pastor having served thirty-eight years in active ordained ministry; most recently for twenty-eight years as Co-Pastor at Edina Community Lutheran in Minnesota. He is a graduate of Pacific Lutheran University and Yale Divinity School. He is still exploring what his next life adventures will

be with his wife, Deborah, but being "Papa and Nana" to their grandchildren is high on the list. **Carol Tomer** is lead pastor of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. Ordained in 1988, she has served in college/university settings, an international congregation, a downtown urban congregation, and a mountain retreat center, as well as teaching college prior to pastoral ministry. She has degrees from Luther College and Harvard Divinity School and a passion for ministry with the de-churched and "hungry minds and souls" who live at the edge of the Christian tradition, which has led to being co-creator of Celtic and Nordic contemplative evening worship services at Pilgrim.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, *Preaching Helps*

Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 2018

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalms 72:1–7, 10–14

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

Engaging the Texts

On festival days such as the Epiphany of Our Lord, we unapologetically read Scripture passages through a particular lens. Since an *epiphany* is an appearance or manifestation or revelation ("epiphany" is related to the word "theophany"), this is the lens through which we might view these passages.

Isaiah 60 reveals the forthcoming fulfillment of what Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55) had been proclaiming. The sixth-century BCE prophet proclaimed comfort in the hope that God would one day bring the exiled Israelites home. In Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66), the Israelites have indeed returned from exile to begin their new life in Jerusalem. The difficulty of that transition (even though it is what they had been waiting for) is evident in the chapters prior to Isaiah 60:

Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes (59:9–10a).

But in the last verse of chapter 59 good news emerges:

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my

words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, from now on and forever (vs. 21).

And, finally, yes, finally, the epiphany: "Arise, shine for your light has come" (60:1). One can feel the release, the joy in this poetic and celebratory refrain. The big reveal is that God has come through as *the* light to all nations just as First Isaiah had announced: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa 9:2).

Note the gifts that are presented (60:6). This event is not the last time gold and frankincense will be offered. As the "wealth of the nations" and "all those from Sheba" followed this light, so too will the magi follow the light of a star in order to pay homage through their presence and presents for the newborn king, Jesus.

The day of Epiphany marks the time when this new king, a different kind of king, is revealed to the world. This day starts us off on a journey to explore what this new reign is like. It is worth comparing the various (and competing!) characteristics of kings and kingship in all of these passages and then highlighting the unexpected and even subversive reign of God in Jesus.

This King is the light in people's darkness (Isaiah).

This King prompts all other kings to bow down before him (Ps 72:10-11).

This King has a proclivity for the needy, the poor, those who have no helper, the weak (Ps 72:12-14).

This King is for Gentiles as well (Eph 3:6-8).

This King exposes the narcissism of earthly, charlatan kings such as King Herod (Matt 2).

This King leads the magi to heed the warnings of their dreams, risk not following King Herod's comment, and to set out in a new direction (Matt 2:12).

Pastoral Reflections

One goal of preachers this season might be that which is clearly stated by Paul; that is, "to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:9-10).

A good place to start would be to proclaim as Isaiah did: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." Help us understand how that light has come even to us. The days have begun to lengthen (in the northern hemisphere, at least), the Gregorian calendar says it is a new year, and most significantly, we've celebrated once again the long-awaited Messiah who has come into this world as a human, a baby, born of a poor young woman with

out royal credentials. Indeed, revelation and newness are in the air. Arise, shine, our light has come.

Prepare us for this Epiphany season by reminding us that our light, Jesus, has come. Invite us to be open to the transformative power of the wisdom of God "in its rich variety." Teach us how the reign of Jesus is utterly different than the oppressive systems at work around us. Help us see the reign of Jesus in the moments of justice that break through such oppressive systems as light breaks through darkness. Challenge us to resist those systems and set out in new directions led by the light of Christ. Lead us in praying with the psalmist, "may righteousness flourish and peace abound."

Shauna Hannan

Baptism of Our Lord January 7, 2018

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

Engaging the Texts

There is something about that voice. God's voice, that is. When God speaks, something happens. God speaks creation into being: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." And that's only the beginning of what God speaks into being. *Deus Loquens* is a Latin phrase worth knowing. *Loquens* is the word from which we get the English word, "loquacious," which means talkative. We have a chatty God, and thank God for that, for when God speaks, things happen.

There is something about that voice. The psalmist does not want us to miss the power of YHWH's voice; "the voice of the Lord (YHWH)" is repeated a perfect seven times in Psalm 29 in order to tell us where God's voice is (over the waters), what it is like (powerful and full of majesty), and what it has the capacity to do (break the cedars, flash forth flames of fire, shake the wilderness, cause the oaks to whirl and strip the forest bare).

Most noteworthy on this Sunday is the presence of God's voice at Jesus' baptism. We do not find out what this voice is like, but we do know this voice comes from the heavens and we do know that the voice claims a relationship with the baptized and even delights in the baptized. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Indeed, there is something about that voice!

The reading from the book of Acts suggests God works through others' voices. When these other voices, such as Paul's, invoke God's name, things happen. "On hearing this,

they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5). The power and majesty of God’s voice empower other voices to speak which, in turn, compels even more voices to emerge. “When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (19:6–7a). This progression echoes the movement in the psalm from the voice of the Lord to all in his temple saying, “Glory!” (29:9).

Two other elements are worth noting. First, note the presence of the Holy Spirit in these passages. The Holy Spirit “descended like a dove” at Jesus’ baptism and came upon those who were baptized on that day in Ephesus. Even more, the Spirit was present when God spoke creation into being: “. . .while a *ruah* from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2b). The word *ruah* is often translated as “wind” or “breath” but can also be translated as “Spirit.” Second, water is an apt motif that flows (!) through all of these passages. In addition to the baptisms in Acts 3 and Mark 1, note the presence of water in Gen 1:2 and Ps 29:3.

Pastoral Reflections

Ordinary things such as a voice, water, and breath become extraordinarily provocative and powerful as we begin this season of revelation. This year I am especially interested in voice; in our world of constant chatter, we pray God’s voice might break through and we might hear it.

What does God’s voice sound like to you?

I often ask sermon preparation conversation partners to explore a biblical passage with me by setting a particular passage to music.

- What key is it in?
- Does a particular verse signal a key change?
- What is the time signature? Is the tempo *adagio* or *molto allegro*, for example?
- What instrumentation might depict this baptism scene?

We are almost always stumped when it comes to instrumentation for the voice of God. Numerous composers have offered their own interpretations of the voice of God and now it’s our turn. Consider inviting your people to be contemporary interpreters in this creative way. If necessary, prompt their imaginations by highlighting the characteristics of God’s voice offered in these Scripture passages as well as in our traditions and baptismal liturgies. For example,

- what key signature depicts nearness, intimacy even?
- what tempo suggests a gentle power?
- which instrument affirms that this voice calls us by name, claims us?

By first considering the voice of God at the baptism of our Lord we are compelled to consider God’s voice in our own baptisms and the difference that holy voice has made in our own lives. I encourage preachers to acknowledge the former but focus more on the latter. In other words, yes, invite me to consider the particulars around my own day of baptism (e.g., where it was, who was present). But then bring me to an affirmation of the present gifts of baptism. Remind us what our traditions say about the benefits of baptism. For example, for Lutherans we recall the words of Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: “[Baptism] works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare.” And we thought breaking cedars, flashing forth flames of fire and shaking the wildernesses was something!

We’ve moved from reflecting on Jesus’ baptism to affirming our own in order to move us to a place similar to those in the psalm; that is, to a willingness to shout, “Glory.” God’s voice prompts other voices to speak, which, in turn, inspire us to give God the glory. What a fitting way to begin this Epiphany season.

Shauna Hannan

Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 14, 2018

1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20)

Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18

1 Corinthians 6:12–20

John 1:43–51

Engaging the Texts

Epiphany is the season in which the church focuses its attention on the ways God reveals Godself to humanity, particularly in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Both the Old Testament and Gospel readings for this day can be seen as revelation stories. In the Gospel reading, Jesus reveals himself to Philip and Nathanael with such clarity that Nathanael is convinced that Jesus is “the Son of God . . . the King of Israel.” The God we meet in the third chapter of First Samuel is closer to most people’s experience of the divine. In the beginning of this text, God is presented as hidden, not nearly so obvious as in John, chapter one. God has been silent for as long as anyone can remember, and there have been few recent “sightings” of divinity. Yet the text indicates that God is present in God’s apparent absence.

This paradoxical aspect of God’s character was central to Martin Luther’s thought. Luther addresses the hiddenness of God in nearly every aspect of his theology. More than one

theologian has made the case that the “*Deus absconditus*”—the God who hides—is Luther’s greatest contribution to the Christian understanding of God. The Old Testament reading provides plenty of grist for a sermon, but I think the hidden presence of God in God’s silence is a worthy focus for a sermon on this Sunday during Epiphany.

It is a cogent subject since many who attend worship on this Sunday will readily identify with the experience of God’s hiddenness in their lives, seeing it as God’s abandonment and perhaps blaming themselves for it. What is needed is a word from the pulpit that honestly addresses the mystery of God going quiet sometimes. This experience is especially ironic when one thinks that everyone else seems to have something to say these days. Facebook postings and presidential tweets, twenty-four-hour news and talk radio—everybody seems to have a word to say about virtually everything under the sun. Everybody but God.

The story of Samuel’s call addresses the paradox that God’s silence masks God’s presence. In its own way, the Gospel reading also speaks to this. Jesus walks up to Nathanael and speaks to him like he’s known him all his life. When Nathanael asks him: “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus says: “I saw you earlier under the fig tree.” To which Nathanael must have been thinking: “I had no idea you were watching me. Why didn’t you SAY anything?” The fact is, Jesus didn’t have to. Watching was enough. It begs the question, what do we need the most? A God who is a non-stop talker or a God who can’t take God’s eyes off us?

Pastoral Reflections

Some years back, Mary Chapin Carpenter wrote a rollicking song called: “Never Had It So Good.” It’s sung from the point of view of a woman whose man has left her for one of his former girlfriends. “You’re out of my life with a wave of her hand,” she laments. But as the song nears its end she sings to this guy: “So, you just go where you go and do what you do and be who you want to be, but when she burns you again and your phone doesn’t ring, baby, it’s me.”

I hear the writer of First Samuel saying that about God in the first reading today. “The word of the Lord was rare in those days,” it says. Translation? The phone hadn’t rung in decades, and the people lamented that it was God who hadn’t called. Was God taunting them? Had God forgotten them? This once talkative God—giving commandments and telling stories; talking almost daily to Abraham and Moses; delivering pronouncements every other day—this once chatty God had clammed up. The Bible is honest enough to say that it is not uncommon for us to go long periods of time without hearing an unmistakable message from God.

On this Sunday, there will undoubtedly be folks in the pews who see themselves in that line, “The word of the Lord

was rare in those days.” In my forty years as a parish pastor, I seldom had someone excitedly rush into my office to discuss something God had said to them the night before. Most of the time it was someone deeply troubled because they couldn’t seem to get God to say ANYthing to them.

So, what is the good news in a text like this for folks like that? I think it comes in verse three. On the heels of the discomfiting news of a long divine silence, comes the understated report that “The lamp of God had not yet gone out.” Well, what do you know? Even when God had nothing to say, God was faithfully keeping watch until finally, in the dead of night a young boy heard his name: “Samuel, Samuel.” And you know the rest of the story.

To people in sickness, grief, heartache, or just theological confusion, this story holds out the promise that God is present, not in spite of the silence but precisely in the silence. We might desire a habitually loquacious God, but what we have is a God whose silence does not negate God’s presence. Faith says that this is enough as we wait in the silence for God to speak our name.

Ron Luckey

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 21, 2018

Jonah 3:1–5, 10

Psalm 62:5–12

1 Corinthians 7:29–31

Mark 1:14–20

Engaging the Texts

Jonah is a unique prophetic book. Rather than a collection of prophetic pronouncements, it is a narrative of the prophet’s adventures. And a comic narrative it is (Repentant cows? Really?). Who can keep from smiling at this absurd contest between the light-weight prophet’s desires and the heavy-weight God’s prevailing will. God will get God’s purposes accomplished in spite of Jonah’s defiance and his puny faith and the Ninevites’ legendary depravity.

Since the lectionary for this day provides only six verses of the Jonah story, the preacher will do well to assume the audience needs a refresher of this wonderfully entertaining and meaning-laden story and will narrate it with the kind of verve it demands. Like all good comedy, this story hides some enormously significant truths. It invites the listener to consider several aspects of God’s character as well as the convoluted contours of human life and the human psyche. (Sulking because God is gracious? Really?) The story deals with issues such as God’s sovereignty in the face of human resistance, the far-reaching mercy of God in the face of human cussedness,

and the willingness of God to nimbly adapt to changing circumstances. As Donna Schaper has noted, “Everyone in the story repents, including God” who had originally planned to annihilate the city and its inhabitants. (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*, page 270.)

If Jonah was a reluctant recipient of God’s call, Simon, Andrew, James, and John are the epitome of a willing response. “And immediately they left their nets and followed him.” That is not to say that they would always behave in such a ready and diligent manner. According to Mark they, like Jonah, had moments of embarrassing incompetence, scandalous infidelity, blatant cowardice, and monumental failure of will. In fact, Mark records that when Jesus was on the cross they were nowhere to be found. But also like Jonah, they were the object of undeserved mercy.

The instant decision by the four fisherman and their subsequent failures is a reminder that a decision to join Jesus in his political, economic, and religious movement as described in Mark’s gospel must be nurtured for the long haul. Such nurturing calls for the development of a robust community of disciples that supports, encourages, and corrects one another along the way. Without such a community, a decision to follow Jesus will not be sustained in a world that resists the counter-cultural attitudes and behavior congruent with the kingdom of God that has come near in the person of Jesus.

Pastoral Reflections

As Americans, personal autonomy seems to be part of our cultural DNA. Americans pride themselves in being free to choose. From breakfast cereal to toothpaste, from our career path to the church we attend if at all, we decide. Freedom to choose our destiny and the points along the way are “givens.” But then we open the Bible and discover that there is hardly anyone there who ultimately decided the course of his or her life. There are lots of words in the Bible, but “autonomy” is not one of them. From Abraham and Sarah to Moses, from Mary and Joseph to Saul of Tarsus, one would be hard pressed to find a “patron saint of autonomy.” Even when personal choices are made, it’s God who seems to be the ultimate Chooser.

On this Sunday in Epiphany, the book of Jonah and the first chapter of St. Mark are cases in point. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh to convert the Ninevites with his preaching. Jonah, no fan of Nineveh or its citizens, chooses instead to go to Tarshish. A storm and a big fish, strategic instruments of God’s deciding, upset Jonah’s chosen destiny. Even when he reluctantly ends up on the streets of Nineveh he chooses to preach arguably one of the most unpersuasive sermons in the history of homiletics. But God chooses to use the sermon to cause even the livestock to repent! In spite of Jonah’s choices, God gets Jonah where God wants him to be and accomplishes

what God wants him to accomplish.

In Mark’s gospel, the day begins for Simon, Andrew, James, and John like any other day. They choose to spend the day doing what they have always done—making a living to feed their families, but God has other ideas. Jesus walks by the four fishermen and decides their future for them.

For all our talk about the freedom to choose, the Bible is ultimately not about our choices. It’s about God’s choices. Our choices are of secondary importance. No choice we make is necessarily determinative of our life’s outcome. Sometimes, as in the case of Jonah, God over-rides our bad choices and steers us back where God wants us. We could all tell stories about times like that. Sometimes, like Simon, Andrew, James, and John, when we’ve made choices that take us in one direction, God shows up and takes our lives down a different path. It’s not that we are mindless puppets with no freedom to choose. It’s just that as long as God is God, we are not as free as we’d like to imagine. This Sunday in Epiphany is a good time to explore this mystery.

Ron Luckey

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Mark 1:21–28

Reflections on the Texts

Having allowed for kings and rulers in Deuteronomy 17, Moses provides for the counterbalancing office of prophet in chapter 18. The prophet will speak the Word that God will provide. Hearers shall be accountable to the word; but woe to the prophet who speaks falsely—this one shall die.

And so it was that when people encountered the authoritative teaching and word of the prophet Jesus, some became patterned and shaped by this new word while others were sure that Jesus must die. Some followed and some opposed.

In Mark the intensity of verbs keeps piling up as they reveal this following and opposing. At first it is on the cosmic scale when the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit comes into him. We hear that this one is the Son, the beloved one but then Jesus is cast out into the wilderness to be tempted. Back at it in Galilee, he proclaims repent, believe, follow! Immediately, immediately, immediately! No place is safe from this intrusion. Not even our places of worship where today Jesus teaches, casts out, and heals; nor our domestic abodes as we shall hear next week.

Mark's onslaught of verbs is not simply one of style. It is a matter of theological commitment and vision. His fast-paced verbiage embodies his view of Jesus as the one who invades² a distorted human history to establish God's dominion and to vanquish the powers of evil. Mark's urgent writing is such that, in a few short verses, the dominion of God has been announced, a new community of followers is being formed, and the relentless march of disease and despair has been ebbed.

The urgent, powerful verbs of Mark pattern the belief that God is a verb and not a noun. A verb that blows where it wills and is not to be tamed by our domesticated adjectives. In the text before us we are engaged by one who embodies this divine verb. Jesus teaches with authority and we then hear the unclean spirit's epiphany testimony: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." This echo of the heavenly proclamation at the baptism leads us to be engaged by the unclean spirit's question, "What have you to do with us?"

Patterned in the verbs and shape of the Torah so carefully studied and preserved by scribes, Jesus now incarnates and intensifies the Word revealed in the Torah hope of Israel. As Richard W. Swanson writes:

it is one thing to read the Declaration of Independence; it is another to encounter Martin Luther King Jr. But the one gives rise (and bite) to the other.... The work of the scribes prepared people to hear John (and then Jesus), but Jesus is a real eruption of a long-nurtured Jewish hope.³

But there are questions. Jesus comes to the synagogue in Capernaum this day teaching with authority and casting out an unclean spirit. Yet, notice that what he says and does give rise to more questions than answers. Yes, it causes crowds to seek him out, but it will soon cause many others to seek his death.

All asking, what have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?

In response to the questions Mark's narrative answers back. God is afoot on the earth. Will you follow? Will the word of this prophet Jesus have authority in your life? Will you be accountable to this word?

Mark senses that we all are breathing in the unclean spirits of our day as we hope that we might be able to finesse our faith while still attached to the gods of this age. All the while we are breathing in the unclean spirits of greed and consumption that saturate our culture, so willing then to accommodate ourselves with the shadowed realities of our time.

Too often our questions revolve around our wondering

2. See also Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), especially chapter 5.

3. Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Mark* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 104.

about the laws of nature seemingly violated in the miracle, healing, and stories of exorcism. But the reality is that the power of these miracle events lay in their destabilizing challenge to the very structures of social existence as they disturb purity laws and all the structures that determine one's status and whether you were in or out of social structures.

Responding to our question "what have you to do with us" we are led into the unrelenting scenes that follow our text where we encounter scenes of Jesus touching and healing an outcast, a person living with leprosy, and then again, another healing on the Sabbath. We see his radical table fellowship with any and all. And finally, his Passion. All testifying in the narrative that Jesus has everything to do with us and our living. We glimpse again and again the challenge of the nearness of a God who desires to reconcile and make whole a groaning creation.

And so, the question is turned back over to us: Does this Word of God in Jesus authorize and ground our living? Does it pattern and shape our living with neighbors both near and far and with creation itself?

In this year of Mark, we will have little time to catch our breath. For Mark is convinced that what we need now and immediately is the cleansing Spirit of God offered in Jesus. Not even the death of this prophet is the end of the story.

Erik Strand

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 4, 2018

Isaiah 40:21–31

Psalm 84

1 Corinthians 9:16–23

Mark 1:29–39

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The God of the cosmos and the God of quarks and solar winds, the God of the fecund earth, this God makes a claim on our loyalty.

This one who sits above the circle of the earth and who stretches out the heavens, this one shall not only create matter and energy but this one shall also bend low and make the rulers and empires of earth as nothing. This is the everlasting God who shall not faint or grow weary and is then the one who is the hope of all the weary. All those weary of life under the empire—all those weary of the ache and turmoil of these days.

Unlike Israel in Babylon we are not confronted with idols named as gods competing with the God of Israel for our loyalty but, in a more insidious manner, we are confronted with a variety of idols wishing to be our gods.

Like Israel in Babylon, we are stuck in the middle of an empire that seeks to obtain our loyalty and our service, an

empire that seeks to illusion us with liturgies that bid us come and buy, go and want, seek and sell. Our lives are shaped by liturgies that would numb us enough to think that we can both pray and pay. That somehow, we can offer homage not only to Israel's God but also to the market place and all the empire's acolytes. We live in the middle of an empire that is fine with us keeping our God as long as we keep this God of ours at a distance up in the heavens by and by. Encouraging us to box in our God as a noun surrounded by plenty of placating adjectives.

As an abstraction it is quite easy for us to confess the God of Israel as a creator, but this abstraction makes it much harder for us to consider God not only as the author but also the authorizer of our daily bread and our daily living. While we seek out domesticated prose for God, Isaiah's poetry seeks to destabilize and break apart our reified imaginations so that we might again live as God's people. Isaiah testifies that the God of all things bends low to give power to the faint and strength to the powerless.

Mark gives witness to this same God and to the Holy One of God, the beloved one who bends low and enters in. This is the one who will touch even our domestic life but will not be domesticated. This week we are engaged by another healing on the same Sabbath as last week. Simon's mother-in-law has a fever, so Jesus takes her by the hand and heals her. We are saved from another clustering of "immediately" this and that by translators who offer us "as soon" and "at once" in verses 29 and 30. This is fine, but we still notice the continued fast pace of narrative.

However, the translators perhaps do us a disservice when they translate the end of verse 30 by offering us "she served them." Richard W. Swanson references the work of Elisabeth Moltman-Wendel, in her book *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroads, 1982) when he translates this phrase as "she deaconed to them." Swanson notes that Moltman-Wendel has observed that when the word (*diakoveu*) is used with a female subject the word is often translated serve or waited table but when used with a male subject it carries the meaning of deacon as used in the church—in part, someone who connects needs and resources. Perhaps in cultural tradition she did get up and feed the people in her house.

But Swanson wonders if we might interpret things differently. He translates then "she deaconed to them" just as earlier he translates in the wilderness temptation story, "angels deaconed to him." (end of Mark 1:13) If a deacon connects needs to resources—food to the hungry, shelter for the homeless, clothing for the naked and healing for the ill—how might we frame what comes next in the story? In particular, could it be that this unnamed woman now rises up to connect the needs of the sick and possessed in her town with this healer? Does she invite them to her door? Does she ask Jesus to minister

now to these in need? (He also then points us to Mark 15:41 where again Swanson would translate "These women, ever since he was in Galilee had followed him and deaconed to him").⁴

How then might we be those who deacon in this world? How might we embody the promise that the God of the universe bends low to give hope to the weary? How might we live in the pattern and shape of Jesus and this mother-in-law to connect needs to resources? How shall we participate in the enactment of the intentions of the creator of all things revealed in Isaiah's poetry and embodied in this Jesus, the beloved Holy One? In part we proclaim and testify and in part we deacon to the world.

Erik Strand

Transfiguration Sunday February 11, 2018

2 Kings 2:1–12

Psalm 50:1–6

2 Corinthians 4:3–6

Mark 9:2–9

Engaging the Texts

On the Sunday before Transfiguration Sunday, in the midst of Super Bowl festivities, we read in the Gospel that Jesus went out to a deserted place to pray. You can almost hear him saying: The blows and boos of all sorts, whether to quarterbacks on the field or kneelers before the game, certainly are places that need healing, but first, I need some quiet for prayer, far from the madding crowds.

Now on Transfiguration Sunday, we are reading further on in Mark's gospel about another time apart. This time Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him — hardly a Super Bowl-sized crowd. It's a prototypical mountaintop experience of sorts, complete with the yearning of the disciples to stay up there, to camp out, to turn that glimpse into a way of life, a home, a refuge. Their longing to stay is no surprise: Jesus had just told them that he would have to suffer and be killed and that those following him would have to deny themselves and take up his cross. Suddenly, there is this incredible experience of glory, where Jesus is transformed and is glowing with light. Moses and Elijah show up and God's voice comes from the cloud, naming Jesus his beloved child. But here's the thing: in all three versions of this story in the gospels, it is always followed by a story of Jesus refusing to stay on the mountain

4. Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Mark* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 107–108.

and instead returning to the places of pain and need, even to madding crowds, where he heals and loves and transforms, the very ministry that was so threatening to the powers of that day. Robert McAfee Brown wrote that this story is about the inseparability of prayer and protests, liturgy and lobbying, songs and social engagement, Bibles and ballots (*Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, by Robert McAfee Brown, 1984).

Pastoral Reflections

Here are some sermon starters:

I have for some years paired movies with the lectionary texts in the season of Epiphany. Here are some of the movies (some are books) that I've paired with the Transfiguration texts—lots of avenues of connection with the gospel vision of Transfiguration: *Selma*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Les Miserables*, *Up*, *Tale of Desperaux*.

From that great hymn for the Transfiguration of our Lord Sunday (text by Joseph A. Robinson, 1890):

*How good, Lord, to be here!
Yet we may not remain;
but since you bid us leave the mount,
come with us to the plain.*

Some years ago, I heard my mother sing this hymn while walking along a warm ocean beach in the winter. Where are the places you long to stay, your mountaintops? And where are your plains, the places of daily life where you serve and roll up your sleeves? Consider this: That pattern, from the mountain to the plain, from a time of prayer to a life of service, from a lifelong dream to the holy ordinary, is a gift to us for discerning whether a spiritual experience we have is of Christ. Does it move us toward the world or away from it? Does it make us want to keep our heads in the clouds, or does it draw us toward the people around us? Does it make us want to escape the world, or consider anew the possibilities all around?

From *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* by John W. de Gruchy, 2001:

The transfiguration of Christ . . . was not an escapist mystical experience on the part of Peter, James and John. . . . Yet this flash of brilliance on Mount Tabor prefigures the foreboding thunder clouds which soon after gathered above Golgotha, the Place of the Skull. Instead of the experience of God's beauty in the transfiguration of Jesus being a way of escape from reality, it becomes a sobering prelude to engaging the power of evil. . . . The disciples have to return from the mountaintop to the plain, where

Jesus casts out demons and heals the sick and where the disciples recognize their own lack of faith to do the same. There is, then, a direct relation between the transfiguration of Christ, the manifestation of God's glory in him, and the transformation of the human and social condition. This is corroborated by the fact that it was this gospel story, this experience of God's glory in the transfiguration of Christ, that became central to the spirituality and witness of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa. In the midst of the ugliness of apartheid and the struggle to bring about its downfall, the icon of the transfiguration opened up a window of hope through which the transformation of South Africa could already be anticipated. Transfiguration spirituality, the spirituality of seeing the splendour of God even in the midst of ugliness and pain, is a transformative spirituality and therefore one which can only be understood in the light of the gift of the Spirit.

From the Oscar-winning Best Original Song for 2015, "Glory," written by John Stephens (a.k.a. John Legend), Lonnie Lynn (a.k.a. Common), and Che Smith (a.k.a. Rhymefest) for the movie *Selma*:

The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful
We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany
Now we right the wrongs in history
No one can win the war individually
It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's
energy
Welcome to the story we call victory
Comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

From Robert McAfee Brown:

This is what Messiahship is all about: being in the midst of the poor, the sick, the helpless, those with frothing mouths. Messiahship—like Christian living—is not just "mountaintop experiences" or "acts of concern for human welfare"; it is a necessary combination of the two.

Carol Tomer

Ash Wednesday February 14, 2018

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17

Isaiah 58:1–12 (alternate)

Psalms 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Engaging the Texts

There are so many “texts” to exegete on this Ash Wednesday, that is also Valentine’s Day—love, mortality, ashes. And the scripture texts—in repentance, fasting, prayer, almsgiving, and in dying and living—beckon us into our grounding. We are grounded in God, in God’s steadfast love, in the earth, in our graves, in redemption, in the one eternal body of Christ.

Ashes remind humans that we are *humus*—soil, earth creatures into which God’s Spirit has been breathed. We are dust and to dust we shall return. In repentance, we are invited to renew our sense of humility, another word that comes from *humus*, ground, earth. With our hearts of honesty, we are grounded—stopped in our tracks—by whatever we, in our arrogance, think is beneath us. Ash Wednesday brings us down to earth, in many ways, in the fullness of this grounding.

In the embodied realities of this day, consider one more bodied way of knowing. Turn the worship space around. Invite the assembly to face the doors that lead out toward the world and toward all the places of our fasting during this Lenten season. Invite them into this turning around, to feel this *metanoia*, facing a new direction, in repentance. If your worship space has an elevated chancel platform, consider putting the altar table and the reading desk on the level of the nave, and invite the assembly to gather on the chancel platform, thereby to be grounded by all that is literally below, in the word and meal, and in the receiving of ashes. “Come on down!” chirps a game-show host. And Christ says: Come on down—to your source. I am your righteousness. I am your deepest home and final truth and your greatest treasure.

Pastoral Reflections

Kayak Morning: Reflections on Love, Grief, and Small Boats, Roger Rosenblatt (2012):

Isn’t everything dead? Nations are made up of the dead. Myths extol the dead. Laws and policies, dead. The old lies, dead as doornails. The doornails, dead, and the screws and the boards and the bricks. Sentiments dead. The statues of the dead in the parks. The anthems and parades, and the wars and the war

dead, dead. The dead are in the old movies and in the old songs, in the books, on the plaques, and in the portraits in the galleries, which too are dead. The names on the street signs, the names of the living, all dead. We stomp about in gardens of ashes.

Ordinary Grace, William Kent Krueger (2013):

We turn, three men bound by love, by history, by circumstance, and most certainly by the awful grace of God, and together walk a narrow lane where headstones press close all around, reminding me gently of Warren Redstone’s parting wisdom, which I understand now. The dead ARE never far from us. They’re in our hearts and on our minds and in the end, all that separates us from them is a single breath, one final puff of air.

We know this journey of grieving, and we stomp about in gardens of ashes. Life after death, for the living, is a garden, not a tunnel. God has given us a garden, a life of growth. And Christ shows up in the garden, sometimes as the gardener, unrecognized, as in scripture, meeting us in our grief, or as the one who points to God who prunes the branches, guiding the growth, or as the crucified One who stays with us, in our own gardens of Gethsemane. And it is the cross of Christ that gives shape not only to the ashes on our foreheads, but to the gift of life before death—a way of life through the garden, where our growth is ever interdependent with all other growth here on earth and in God’s garden of eternity. As the apostle Paul wrote, we can be sorrowful, yet rejoicing.

Carol Tomer

First Sunday in Lent February 18, 2018

Genesis 9:8–17

Psalms 25:1–10

1 Peter 3:18–22

Mark 1:9–15

Engaging the Texts

The Gospel of Mark sets the frame for our journey this Lent. The text, as we have come to expect, is Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, not too different from Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts we experience other years. Or is it? Spoiler alert: it is significantly different!

Though Mark’s gift is brevity, the details offered in this telling of the temptation are so tightly woven together they cannot be separated. More to the point, Jesus’ baptism is

necessarily explicit in our reading today. Matthew and Luke do not include Jesus' watery ascent out of the Jordan River at the Baptist's hand. Baptism and temptation are connected in these gospel readings, but not overtly so as in Mark. This provides our uniquely Markan entry into Lent—baptism.

The quick pace of Mark leaves little room to catch our breath as the story moves from the waters of the Jordan to the Holy Spirit's dove-like descent, from ruptured heavens at the voice of God to Jesus' identity declared, from Spirit-driven wilderness temptation to wild beasts and angels, from Jesus' good-news-proclamation of repentance to the nearness of God's reign. Seven thick verses rife with theological and exegetical material for many-a-sermon. But it is baptism that holds it all together as Jesus' identity as God's beloved declared at the Jordan sustains him in the wild and compels him in the work ahead.

For this reason, 1 Peter 3 serves as the pivot point from Mark 1 to Genesis 9. As First Peter asserts, "God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you" (vss. 20–21). The Genesis 9 text reminds us of God's promise never to flood the earth again, a covenant God has kept for us and for all the creatures of the earth. Therefore, the water that puts to death humanity's wickedness through God's judgment is simultaneously the water that saves Noah, his family, and all the animals through the patient re-remembering love of God. First Peter recognizes that divine judgement and salvation in the waters of the flood are theologically shared in our adjoining death and resurrection in Jesus, declared in the waters of baptism.

Baptism sets the frame for the wilderness experience this Lent as Mark takes us first to the Jordan River. Only when drenched by the Spirit's presence and dripping with his identity as God's own beloved, does Jesus tackle temptation emerging on the other side with this clear promise manifest in Jesus' very self: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Here is the sustenance for our baptismal journey this Lent!

Pastoral Reflections

In my humble opinion, the task is clear for preachers this Sunday: preach baptism. Traditionally speaking, Lent was a time for baptismal preparation for new catechumenes culminating at the font during the Vigil of Easter. Thus, a Lenten baptismal proclamation is firmly rooted in the ancient rhythms of the church. Scripturally speaking, the texts practically cry out for a message on baptism. First Peter 3 acts as the hinge helping us see and hear Genesis 9 and Mark 1 in tandem through the salvific water united to God's covenantal word.

Admittedly, Lent can feel like a heavy time in the church. It is, after all, associated with Jesus' forty-day wilderness experience of trial, temptation, and hardship. In solidarity with Jesus, we temper our own demeanor and mute our "alleluias" so as to cultivate a spiritual awareness marked by fasting and repentance. When the destination of Lent is Jesus' passion, suffering, and death on the cross, a certain heaviness ought to be assumed. Yet, I cannot help but wonder if our North American context is not already in a constant state of heaviness, our acclamations of joy buried under the weight of our political and social climate. It feels "Lenten" all the time with the heft of climate change and natural disasters, partisan vitriol, institutional racism, unchecked nationalism, renewed xenophobia, and an enduring allegiance to militarism all bearing down upon our lives. Why harness the standard wilderness metaphor this Lent when we already feel the wild animals nipping at our ankles and dragging us to the ground?

This year Lent 1 gifts us with a watery wilderness! Noah in the ark, Jesus at the river, and Peter by his letter all point to the saving waters infused with the grace of God. From these watery texts flows the promise that we are the recipients of God's redeeming grace. Amid the wilderness experiences in our lives and in the world, God in Christ nourishes and sustains us in springs of the water of life. This is the good news of our baptismal promise! This is a message we need to hear and share in these heavy days. So, preach baptism on this day and get wet. Preach God's saving word from the font, sprinkle parishioners with water (or better yet, get the kids to splash the adults!), give thanks to God for the gift of this promise that bubbles up in the parched and weary places of our lives, and—if possible—schedule a baptism for this First Sunday in Lent. Let us enter the wilderness with Jesus dripping with the waters of our salvation.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Second Sunday in Lent February 25, 2018

Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

Psalm 22:23–31

Romans 4:13–25

Mark 8:31–38

Engaging the Texts

There are several themes worth noting in the appointed scripture texts for this Second Sunday in Lent, but I am stuck on one. This single theme is identity. Identity is so pervasive throughout the readings that my attention cannot be diverted. In Genesis 17, both Abram and Sarai are given a

new identity by God's covenantal claim upon them. God declares, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (v. 7). Through the inherently creative essence of the divine word, God re-creates Abram and Sarai by way of God's own identity with them. Thus, the spoken promise is marked in their very names: Abram becomes Abraham; Sarai becomes Sarah. Their identity is forever wrapped up in the reality of God's relational word "to be God to you."

Paul's letter to the Romans is his own theological wrestling with the church's identity in Christ Jesus. In chapter 4, Paul homed in on Abraham—and by necessary extension of the covenantal promise, I would include Sarah. Paul recognized that, through the righteousness of faith and not adherence to the law, the "promise may rest on grace to all his (their!) descendants." This is an identity granted now to us through faith in Christ. Like Sarah and Abraham, we become heirs of the promise as "it will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (v. 24).

As Jesus asserts in Mark's gospel, the identity of his followers is wed to the cross. One might call it an "antithetical-identity identity" whereby denial of self becomes the realization of self in Christ. Or as Jesus stated, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (v. 34). The way of the cross is the way of Jesus—God's self-less love taking on the fullness of our suffering thereby leading us out of death into life. Trusting in God to be God for us, we follow in the way of our faithful ancestors believing in God's sure promise of holy love that knows no bounds.

This is our identity in Christ, a faith reckoned to us in righteousness. Following Christ and his cross-way, our antithetical-identity identity is precisely understood along with all who lose their life for the sake of Christ and Christ's gospel. The result is life restored and identity renewed. For the way of the cross that guides our steps this Lent does not end at Golgotha. For we believe in the God of Holy Week who, through yet another re-creating act, raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. We are believers and followers of this God, and our identity is ultimately in the resurrected life of Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

I remember deceased saint of God and preaching legend Fred Craddock once said, "Two cheers for the lectionary." As a lectionary preacher myself, I have come to recognize that Craddock's two-thirds endorsement aptly describes the beauties and flaws in our lectionary. I have a hard time preaching this Sunday without including Mark 8:27–30 as part of the Gospel pericope for the day. Dare we be bold and include these four verses excluded from the lectionary reading? After

all, this is the preamble for verses 31–38, and it provides yet another way to emphasize the theme of identity woven throughout the readings.

In verse 27, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" In other words, what is the perception of Jesus' identity among the people? The answers are varied: John the Baptist, Elijah, or some other prophet of God. Jesus then asks his disciples to stake their own claim on him by asking, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered Jesus, "You are the Messiah." Peter and the others believe Jesus to be the anointed one of God, but anointed for what? What does it mean for Jesus to be the Messiah?

The question of Jesus' identity leads to the realization of what it means for Jesus to bear the title of Messiah—great suffering, rejection, and death. That is, the Messiah is the one who walks the way of the cross. This is the message we are called to claim anew today; the cross marks our identity as followers of Jesus. But this can be too much for us to handle, Peter included. Peter promptly rebukes Jesus thus calling into question his own identity as a follower of Jesus, for Jesus in turn rebukes Peter calling him "Satan." Opposition to the way of the cross and the salvific work of God in Christ Jesus garners its own identity. This ID badge bears a devilish title, and if we are honest, we have all worn that badge from time to time. Following a Messiah is easy. But following a Messiah who suffers and dies and asks us to do the same? Well, that is worth getting in line with Peter offering up a good rebuke or at the very least shaking our heads in disbelief.

This is why our cross-centered witness ought to be bold today! Our answer to Jesus' question—Who do you say that I am?—must include the cross. The road to Easter cannot travel any other route but up Golgotha's hill. In our worship for Lent 2, we have an opportunity to make this explicit. This message can be punctuated by following a processional cross to proclaim the gospel, singing and praying the way of the cross in the liturgy, or even signing the cross throughout the service. Here's a wild idea: maybe every time "cross" is mentioned, the assembled are encouraged to make the sign of the cross somewhere on their bodies.

As mentioned earlier, the cross is not the full story. We know this. Our faith that is reckoned to us as righteousness is a living faith that holds the truthful tension of crucifixion and resurrection. For we believe in Jesus, and we are called to follow in his way of the cross trusting in the hope of his empty tomb. We are called to proclaim who Jesus is, and in doing so, we claim who Jesus has proclaimed us to be—children of God marked with the cross of Christ Jesus forever.

This truth deserves not two cheers, but our full-throated three!

Justin Lind-Ayres

Third Sunday in Lent March 4, 2018

Exodus 20:1–17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18–25

John 2:13–22

Engaging and Reflecting on the Texts

It is my prayer that each time Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple comes up (this time in the John 2 reading) preachers come to the story with fresh eyes. Generally, I get a visual of some old painting of Jesus, rage in his eyes, brandishing a whip as "bad guys" run for their lives, money and turtle doves scattered. Don't take the easy interpretations here. Where might Jesus find the buying and selling of something other than the gospel in our churches? What coins might Jesus need to pour out of our lives? What might a whip of cords look like in our spiritual life? Can there be good news in correction or only bad? How is our Father's house turned into a marketplace? What might it look like if the zeal of God's house consumed us? Is that a good thing, or a bad thing? Is it a good thing or a bad thing for Jesus in this story? (It appears at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John, and very near the end in the Synoptics.) What temples might we need to destroy? How is Christ's body, and our own, a temple?

"Zeal for your house will consume me" from Psalm 69:9 is referenced here. The rest of verse 9 is powerful: "...the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." How might the insults God experiences fall on us? And what do we do about that? How might we consider Jesus' actions in the temple as a response to his relationship with God?

It is particularly interesting to read the gospel text for this week and then immediately read Exodus 20. When I first started reading the Exodus text, I mistakenly thought only the first few commandments were assigned. Imagine Jesus chasing out the moneychangers with these commandments in his head: "You shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself an idol; You shall not bow down and worship them... I the Lord your God am a jealous God. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God... Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy... The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord."

The first *eleven* verses of this passage focus on honoring God, keeping Sabbath, separating our relationship with the One True God from everything else. Clearly God wanted us to get our relationship with God right *first* and then deal with our human relationships. It is interesting to think about this as we consider what it is to cleanse our temples. What distracts us from "zeal for the Father's house" and when might the zeal

for our Father's house become an idol? Each preacher's context and their own personal walk with God and their vocation shapes this conversation.

Psalm 19 is basically a love letter to the law and commandments. Some communities highlight the Christian theological move "away" from the Old Testament, how the law kills us and Jesus saves us. I was raised in a tradition that read the Ten Commandments aloud in church every Sunday. That practice has long been abandoned. I wonder what would happen if it returned, without political comment, but with joy and gratitude. Christians need to remember the law is actually God's gift to God's people. The Jewish tradition continues to be grateful for the Law as a means to be in deeper relationship with God. Yes, Jesus Christ frees us from the impossible task of keeping the law perfectly, but we can delight in these ideals God provides for us. Looking back at the gospel reading while holding this psalm, we wonder again at Jesus' motivation. Clearly, he was trying to return the temple to a more traditional understanding of its role and function. Clearly Jesus loved the Law and shows a zeal for his Father's house. Yet, as Christians, we cling to Jesus' *additional zeal*—a zeal for us, sinners who could not save ourselves.

The apostle Paul marvels at this new idea in his letter to the Corinthians. He acknowledges that the idea of God sending God's son Jesus to earth to die on a cross is preposterous. "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (v. 23). "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (v. 20) The Lutheran understanding of the Theology of the Cross, in which we must not avert our eyes from the blood-soaked Savior, is bolstered by this passage. In the world's eyes, a crucified Jesus *must* be a failure, an embarrassment. And yet, in God's wisdom, this battered, dying Christ is the only way to salvation, to acknowledging we are broken and dying, and are joined in our suffering by God. As we die with Christ, we are also resurrected with Christ (Rom 6:4).

How does Jesus use his power? In cleansing our personal temples. By turning the tables on our misguided plans. By pouring out coins, meting out justice and new economies. In naming sin and chasing it away. In dying. In rising. In trying to reconcile us to a deeper relationship with God and God's law. In bringing us back to holy sanctuary and prayer. Foolishness in the world's eyes is utter grace in God's wisdom.

Brenda Bos

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 11, 2018

Numbers 21:4–9

Psalm 107:1–3, 17–22

Ephesians 2:1–10

John 3:14–21

Engaging the Texts

I think it is wise to enter into a sermon on John 3:16 with fear and trembling. How can you find something new to say about one of the only texts some people have memorized? “For God so loved the world...” One of the best sermons I ever heard on this passage insisted that John 3:17 packs the more amazing message: God sent God’s son to the world, not to condemn the world but to save it. Any theology that claims God hates the world and wants to destroy it must come to terms with this statement from Jesus.

Verses 19–21 talk extensively about the battle between dark and light/good and evil, imagery that prevails throughout the Gospel of John. “Light” is a major theme in this Gospel. In John 1, John the Baptist testifies to the True Light which is Jesus. John 3 talks about those who can see the light, those who follow Jesus. In John 8 and 9 Jesus refers to himself as the Light of the world. John 11 and 12 talk about walking in light, being children of light. Having this light shine in us is a goal in Jesus’ ministry and an indication of God’s presence in our lives.

Then there is this mysterious reference to the bronze serpent being lifted up in the wilderness (vs.13–14). The Numbers passage gives the original telling of this story. The Israelites were complaining (what else is new?) and God sent serpents to bite them. When Moses prays for healing, God tells him to make a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole. Anyone who looked at the serpent would be healed. The Jewish people idolized that bronze serpent, deciding it had magical powers. King Hezekiah has it destroyed in 2 Kings 18:4.

The psalm’s opening verses thank the Lord for goodness and steadfast love. This might tie nicely to the gospel text’s proclamation that God loves and wants to save the world. The second half of the selected reading talks about people who were “sick through their sinful ways,” but God saves them from their distress. This might be an interesting jumping off point for a sermon on healing, tying back to the bronze serpent. When have our sinful ways made us sick, physically, emotionally, spiritually?

The Ephesians passage can tie beautifully with this. “You were dead through the trespasses and sin in which you once lived,” Paul announces, and then proceeds to pour out so much of God’s love and mercy and grace it is almost over-

whelming. Verses 4 and 5 are used in many liturgies of confession and forgiveness in the church. Perhaps this would make a lovely companion text to your discussion of John 3:16.

Pastoral Reflections

I understand why the Jewish people worshipped Moses’ snake—it was a strange and wondrous healer. This healing snake is pictured in our medical doctor’s symbol of a rod with snakes curled around it. The image represents Asklepios, an ancient god of medicine, borrowed from this story. The Jewish rabbis explain that the snake itself was not the healer. It was the act of looking up toward heaven, acknowledging God, that healed the Israelites. This may be why Jesus talks about the Son of Man being lifted up in similar fashion. If we look up at Jesus on the cross, we’ll face heaven. In that horrific moment on the cross, we see God more clearly. Of course, this would be fodder for a wonderful sermon. The preacher might put a rubber snake on a pole and lift it up, so people can get the chance to feel their necks strain and their eyes move upward. Or have them notice the feeling of looking up at the screen in the sanctuary onto which you’ve projected the image of a bronze snake, or Jesus on the cross.

Why would God use the snake, the very thing that killed Israelites, to be the thing that healed them? Not only was the bronze serpent a replica of their tormenter in the wilderness, the serpent was the tormenter in the Garden of Eden. Why use that image? How could the very thing that torments us also be the thing that saves us?

Let’s bring that question back to Jesus’ prediction of being lifted up on a cross. Our death is the thing we dread most. It signifies our limits. It separates us from immortal gods. Death on the cross was supposed to be the very worst kind of death, reserved for the worst kind of sinner. This death symbolizes the very worst of the human condition.

The humiliation Jesus experiences on the cross is also the thing that exalts him. It is also the thing that exalts us. The connection of the two stories, the dread serpent and the forced acknowledgement of our brokenness at the cross is both devastating and beautiful. We hate the cross and we are saved by it.

We are dead because of our sinfulness. We are separated from the light and life of God because of our iniquities. Jesus takes on our humanity and brokenness at the cross. The very thing that destroys us now saves us. In that act we see God more clearly. Jesus is exalted and so are we.

Brenda Bos

Fifth Sunday in Lent March 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalm 51:1–12 [or Psalm 119:9–16]

Hebrews 5:5–10

John 12:20–33

Engaging the Texts

My kindergartener is learning about the number line at school. Certain numbers come before, others after in a logical succession. Time works the same way with one event following after another. Jeremiah gives us a taste of this in the first reading: God brings the people out of Egypt, God gives a covenant, the people sin and break the covenant, the people teach one another to “Know the Lord,” and in time, God will forgive the people’s sins and give them a new covenant.

Each event follows logically after the other. Except that it’s poor logic to give a new covenant to a people who have a history of breaking the old one. At least it’s poor logic in human terms. But God doesn’t operate within the human parameters of time and logic. So God doesn’t just offer the people of Israel a “second chance” at covenant keeping. God promises a new covenant that will be written on their very hearts (Jer 31:33) and promises to “remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:34).

My older child is in 5th grade and is also working with the number line in school. This child would likely label God’s promise to the people of Israel as an *infinite* promise—a covenant that begins at a particular point in time and has no end. It’s a beautiful promise. But God’s covenant is actually bigger than even that. Because God doesn’t operate within human categories or orderly timelines. The reading from Hebrews offers this sort of alternate picture: Jesus is begotten, God declares “Today I have begotten you,” Jesus is eternal, Jesus takes on flesh, Jesus submits to God, Jesus offers eternal salvation to all who believe in him, God appoints Jesus a high priest. If we had a timeline we could move any one of those pieces around (and, in fact, some of the New Testament writers, including the author of the book of Hebrews do) and it would still make as much sense in that order as it does in any other order.

This is the confounding blessing of an eternal God. God (and Christ) did not begin in one time and become everlasting. God and Christ as God have existed throughout all time—in eternity, a period that has no beginning or ending. And so, God promises eternal life (Heb 5:9; John 12:25), which is not the same as life everlasting. Eternal life, rather, is life with God that knows no beginning and no end. Eternal salvation is the experience of having God’s covenant written

into the very sinews of your heart (Jer 31:33) so that you are inseparable from it.

This is the promise we have from God in Christ Jesus—that outside even the bounds of time and logic, outside our own ability to comprehend and so control, God loves us, God forgives us, and God gives us *life*.

Pastoral Reflections

The prayer, “Create in me a clean heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10) has long been a part of Lutheran worship. Frequently put to music as an offertory song, the most recent *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* provides four different arrangements. Preaching on this text offers the opportunity to reflect upon the biblical roots of the liturgy and the timelessness of God’s words in Scripture.

Part of this timelessness, however, flows from the living nature of the texts and their ability to speak to people differently across time and circumstance. The psalms are particularly suited for such flexible interpretation. In today’s lectionary, the author of the letter to the Hebrews appropriates Ps 110:4, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,” to describe Jesus’ priesthood. Rooted in the Jewish community, the author of Hebrews in attributing the acclamation to Jesus would have also been aware that the psalm’s acclamation is most commonly attributed to David. David was a righteous king of Jerusalem and the literal translation of the Hebrew “*Melchizedek*” is “righteous king.” This does not mean that it is wrong, from a Christian perspective, to attribute the acclamation to Jesus. It simply means that there may be more than one righteous king to whom the psalmist’s words can be applied.

Another opportunity to see the diversity of interpretation of the psalms occurs with the history of interpretation of Psalm 51 itself. Linguistically, there are two Hebrew verbs in verse 10—“to renew” and “to establish,” or “to put.” The hymn texts follow the more common NKJV interpretation of these verbs in which the emphasis is upon the prayer to “*renew* a right spirit within me.” Yet, the NRSV translation attempts to make sense of these dual verbs by rendering the prayer “*put* a new and right spirit within me.”

Returning to the concept of eternity in our relationship with the divine, the question can be raised as to which translation better describes the Christian experience of God’s grace? Is our prayer for God to establish something new within us? Is our prayer for God to renew the upright spirit that God has already established within us? Can or should our prayer be some combination of both? Pastorally, it is helpful to consider what each person we serve brings into community that can be celebrated and renewed as a gift of the divine—before we seek to establish in them something new of our own human engineering.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Palm Sunday March 25, 2018

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Philippians 2:5–11

Mark 11:1–11

Engaging the Texts

Donkeys have an interesting history throughout the ages. Although there are some indications that they may have been understood then as they are now as stubborn and difficult animals, they are most commonly noted as beasts of burden, measures of wealth, and riding animals throughout the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, most modern nativity scenes contain a donkey (and often depict Mary riding upon it) even though such an animal is never directly mentioned in either Gospel account. Nor should it be surprising that if Jesus were to ride into Jerusalem (rather than walk) that he would do so upon a donkey.

However, within the messianic expectation that Mark's text conveys, the tone changes. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem has been read as a fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy that Israel's awaited king will come "humble and riding on a donkey" (Zech 9:9). While it would be expected that a "normal" person would ride on a donkey, monarchs more typically ride into town on a warhorse, accompanied by great armies.

Thus, while on any other given day it may not draw much attention that Jesus was riding a donkey, on *this* day, it does. Jesus rides into town after having taught his disciples that the time was coming for the Son of Man to be betrayed (Mark 9:31), the hoped for fulfillment of the messianic expectation. And while some of his disciples may have preferred that Jesus brandish a sword (Mark 14:47), the "one who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mark 11:9) comes with humility and patience.

Paul's letter to the Philippians likewise uplifts Christ's humility as a virtue, noting how Jesus emptied and humbled himself, taking the form of a human being (Phil 2:7–8). But it is perhaps Isaiah who describes this quality most poignantly, declaring, "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning [the Lord] wakens—wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught" (Isa 50:4). We might thus wonder, is Isaiah a teacher or a student? It seems that he is and must be both.

Noted educator, Paulo Freire describes the need for the dismantling of such bifurcations in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, writing: "Education must begin with the solution

of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students." The moment when one can both *listen* and *be heard* is the moment when true education, indeed, true revolution begins.

So, Jesus enters Jerusalem humble and unassuming. Both ready to teach *and* to genuinely learn from the humanity within which he has allowed his divinity to be contained. It is this openness that sets the scene for our Lord's passion. It is this openness to the voice of God in one another that sets the scene for our own journey into Jerusalem as we seek to both speak the words of the sacred story and hear God's story reflected back to us in new and unexpected ways. This is the gift of communion—indeed, of community.

Pastoral Reflections

What happened after Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cries of "Hosanna"? Many people may assume that he went straight to the upper room and shared his last supper with his disciples. However, the pericope ends by telling us that Jesus simply looked around the temple and then "as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve" (Mark 11:11). Following this, Mark contains nearly three full chapters of Jesus' teaching and performing works both in the temple and on the Mount of Olives over a period of days. Several of these accounts are included earlier in the lectionary cycle for Lent.

It's not entirely clear on what day of the week Jesus entered into Jerusalem, though the chronology in Mark allows that it was about a week before the Passover. In any case, the messianic overtones of Jesus' entry combined with the chief priests and scribes' plot to kill Jesus following his appearance in the temple the next day (Mark 11:18) make clear that this is the beginning of the narrative of Jesus' passion. The liturgical observance of Palm Sunday itself dates back to the Middle Ages, with the roots of palm processions possibly stretching back as far as the fourth or eighth centuries.

Nevertheless, the modern invention of combining the liturgical observance of "Palm Sunday" with "Passion Sunday" can have the effect of obscuring the narrative in between these two events. Separating these observances with intentional preaching on Christ's triumphant entry can help to re-contextualize the larger passion narrative.

Taking a step backward to honor the joy and expectation felt as the people welcomed Jesus with palms and to observe the growing fear that developed among the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians gives depth for the range of human emotion brought on by Jesus' presence in Jerusalem. Who among us has not felt expectant joy? Only to have our hopes not turn out the way we had planned for them to? Who has not felt the fear of self-preservation? Worry about forces of change?

This was the political and emotional climate of Jerusalem during the week leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Phillip Brooks' famous Christmas hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," observes that "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in [Bethlehem]" at Jesus' birth. How might this same convergence have been true for the people in Jerusalem thirty-some years later when Jesus rode into town on a donkey? How might it still be true in our churches today?

Amy Lindeman Allen

Passion Sunday March 25, 2018

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Mark 14:1–15:47

Engaging the Texts

The humility expressed in Isaiah and Philippians (see above) is heard in a different key when coupled with the account of Jesus' passion in Mark 14–15. Now Paul's description of Christ's obedience "to the point of death—even death on a cross" rings out above the larger picture of his emptying himself into human form. The human identification with humble service thus takes a back seat to the exaltation of Christ as our vindicator amid human failings (Isa 50:8).

On the cross, Jesus is both at his most human and his most divine. His death affirms that he is flesh and blood and yet his willingness to accept it testifies to something more. So, too, Jesus' distress and agitation at Gethsemane (Mark 14:33) are contrasted against his quiet assurance when he stands before Caiaphas (Mark 14:61). And yet, Jesus' humanity is again lifted up when he dies with the words, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" still fresh on his lips (Mark 15:34).

It can be tempting to skip ahead to a theological response. To question why it was that Jesus had to die or what purpose his death served. But Mark does not do this. Instead, Mark leaves us with Jesus on the cross—emptied, at least for this moment, of his life, of his confidence, perhaps even of his hope. This is the human experience of loss and it cannot be vaulted over. We must live in it, mourn with it, and learn to live through it.

However, neither is loss an experience that we must experience alone. This is the good news that Mark proclaims for us. This is the vindication for which Isaiah seeks. At Simon's house, when no one else seems to understand the trials that Jesus must endure, an anonymous woman comes and anoints

him (Mark 14:3). With her actions, silently, she assures him—"You are not alone."

Again, when at the sight of Judas with a crowd bearing swords and clubs all those with Jesus fled, a certain young man is stopped, if just for a moment. When he finally flees, he leaves behind his linen cloth (Mark 14:52). His disciples' shameful retreat thus leaves a remnant, perhaps a sign that Jesus is not truly alone.

When Jesus dies, the sting of this abandonment on his lips, Mark climactically describes the tearing of the temple curtain (Mark 15:38). This is a symbolic gesture of grief, unknown to those who stand at the foot of the cross. Yet, it affirms the presence of God, who occupies the temple's inner sanctum, among them. As a parent at the death of their child, God has not forsaken Jesus. God grieves with and for him. And, finally, when the stone is rolled in place and Jesus' body is alone in the tomb, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus stood by, watching where the body was laid (Mark 15:47).

It is human to feel alone in our sorrows, abandoned and forsaken. It is divine to remain acutely present, standing for and alongside those who struggle. This is the good news of the passion of Jesus Christ—that he emptied himself and that, therefore, "God also highly exalted him...so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:7, 9–11).

Pastoral Reflections

Over the course of Holy Week opportunities will present themselves to preach on portions of this larger narrative, each with their own word of gospel in the midst of and coming out of the struggle which Christ undergoes. But to follow Jesus from the house of Simon in Bethany to the tomb of Joseph outside of Jerusalem presents a unique homiletical opportunity to proclaim God's abiding good news across a range of human experiences from extravagance to loss.

The strength of God's presence with us in any one moment of our lives is felt more deeply when we are able to recognize that abiding presence accompanying us throughout all our moments. When Jesus defends the woman who anoints him, chiding his disciples that they will "always have the poor with them" (Mark 14:7), it is not to diminish the power and importance of care for those marginalized and at risk. Rather, Jesus is reminding his disciples (and us) of the abiding need for kindness and care. This is the kind of presence and concern with which God continually attends to us. God's abiding presence stands in stark contrast to our human accusers who "will wear out like a garment" (Isa 50:9).

The good news of the passion narrative, presented as a narrative, is God's abiding presence with and among us and, indeed, with and among our suffering and loss. This is lived

out most clearly in the narrative of the life and death of Christ Jesus, who was, in the words of Philippians, “in the form of God” but “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (Phil 2:5). As we enter into Holy Week, how might we also take comfort in God’s presence in our midst without attempting to exploit this gracious gift by our own efforts to control and direct it? How might we humble ourselves at the foot of the cross?

Amy Lindeman Allen

Maundy Thursday March 29, 2018

Exodus 12:1–4, [5–10], 11–14

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

*I will lift the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the Lord.
—Psalm 116:13*

Washings

Of all the Gospel writers it’s peculiar that John alone doesn’t bother to narrate in detail Jesus’ words at his last supper with his friends preceding his passion. Even odder is that Paul who otherwise doesn’t evince much interest in the very words of Jesus, takes the trouble to hand on to the Christians in Corinth Jesus’ *ippisima verba* that he claims “I received from the Lord...” (v. 23). Instead of words about the supper, John describes another scene with attention to detail, similar to the other evangelists and Paul when describing the meal itself. With almost sacramental reverence John carefully portrays Jesus’ peculiar actions and the words he uses to explain what English-speakers would come to call the “*maundy*,” a corruption of the Latin word meaning “commandment.” This refers to Jesus’ “new commandment that you love one another” (v. 34), the command he gave his disciples as they sat together around table for a last time, explaining what he meant by his parabolic action of taking a bowl of water and proceeding to wash their feet much to their consternation and Peter’s particular objection.

It was during the reading of Mark’s passion story last Sunday, however, that we may have missed a small detail from Matthew’s more extended telling of the tale that we had heard a year ago and is hard to erase from our memories. It too involves a washing, and I wonder if you can recall it. I’m referring to Pontius Pilate’s “washing his hands” of Jesus, saying “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourself” (Matt

27:24). It’s a tellingly vivid detail that Mark either doesn’t know of or decides not to share with his readers but which fits well the equivocating governor as portrayed in all four Gospels. Pilate’s is a ritual action of quite another kind—an effort to wash away responsibility and accountability; a washing away of government’s obligation to defend the innocent and execute justice; a washing away of that sense of identification of one human being with another across ethnic, class, and religious barriers that leads to unspeakable practices such as torture, the “collateral damage” that occurs to non-combatants in violent warfare, and the targeting of particular populations for racial “profiling” and the use of excessive force in policing.

But, of course, the water with which the Roman governor tried to wash away his complicity in shedding the innocent blood of Jesus didn’t do the job. It “wouldn’t wash,” as we say, the blood of the young man from Galilee in which Pilate colluded. And so, Pontius Pilate, the very one who wished to declare his lack of responsibility, his disavowal of accountability in the fate of Jesus, is the one who has gone down in history as the person responsible for Jesus’ execution. He is the very one who, week-in and week-out, is singled out by name in the church’s liturgy as the one responsible for Jesus’ execution on the cross, a Roman penalty after all. “Crucified under Pontius Pilate” we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, the baptismal creed we confess together whenever a ritual washing into the life of the church occurs.

Pilate’s profession of innocence simply won’t wash; neither will ours. That is part of the legacy of Maundy Thursday. Whether it’s our government’s resorting to torture as a tool in our so-called war on terror or whether it’s the quality of care extended to returning veterans from that very war; whether it’s our response to our human part in causing global climate change or economic issues that continue to lead to widening the gap between rich and poor here in the U.S. as well as globally; whether it’s an issue of how I treat my spouse or kids, parents or neighbors, or for that matter, fellow church members or co-workers, the legacy of the *maundy* is that we cannot wash our hands of responsibility but only wash the feet of one another in love. “I have given you an example,” Jesus says as clearly as he is able, “that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15). This, along with his last meal with his friends in which he says, “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24–25), is the two-fold sacramental inheritance of this Holy Thursday—the Supper which propels us out into down-to-earth loving service of our neighbor in need.

The chanting of Psalm 22 during the stripping of the altar that occurs at the ending of today’s liturgy has become a near-essential conclusion to this service, with congregants silently leaving the newly bared sanctuary. “Where Charity and Love Prevail” (*ELW* #359) and “Love Consecrates the Humblest

Act" (ELW #360), hymns sung to the same tune, are good choices for singing softly during the time of foot-washing. Invoking memories of Jesus' agonizing time of prayer in the Garden is also appropriate for this evening aided by the singing of hymns such as "Go to Dark Gethsemane" (ELW #347), the Taizé chant "Stay with Me" (ELW #348) and "Lord, Who the Night You Were Betrayed" (ELW #463).

John Rollefson

Good Friday March 30, 2018

Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16–25 or Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9

John 18:1—19:42

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
—Psalm 22:1a

The Cruc

"Crux," the Latin word for "cross," has taken on in English the primary meaning of "a difficult problem" or "puzzling thing." The cross of Jesus is certainly that, particularly when seen through Jesus' final and only words from the cross as found in Mark and Matthew: "At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:34, cf. Matt 27:46). Brother Martin of Wittenberg, commenting on this text observed, "Even if it were an animal, the onlooker would be deeply moved, but when it is an innocent man and when he is the son of God! If one should properly consider this, one's heart would burst that God's Son, creator of all things, should let out a cry of death. This is above all sense and understanding. We cannot get to the bottom of it our whole life long."⁵

Hard as we try, we cannot fathom this scandalous word of Jesus the Word spoken through the opening strophe of the twenty-second psalm. As Luther himself confessed, it is something "we cannot get to the bottom of our whole life long," this "difficult problem" that is so much more than merely a "puzzling thing." It lies at the heart of the matter of the meaning of Good Friday, the "crux" of faith over which we ponder and pray on this day we so paradoxically dare to call "good."⁶

Without trying to psychologize Jesus' death-experience, we still can't help but imagine that Jesus is here giving voice to his own personal experience on the cross that opened before him a yawning, bottomless chasm of God—abandonment into which he felt himself plunging as he breathed his last. This is the realization of the human nightmare *par excellence* we confess whenever we join our voices in confessing the Apostles' Creed, "descended into hell." Here Jesus enters into that most negative of human possibilities, symbolizing the full depth of his incarnation's meaning: the absolute separation and alienation from God that only the word "hell" can comprehend. As Albert Camus once said, "For God to be a man, God would have to despair."

Even for the despair evident in Jesus' heart-rending cry of dereliction, some point out that Jesus' died with the name of God on his lips, reaching out in prayer in his extremity to the one who had always been there for him, the *abba* with whom he had always felt such intimacy. I suppose it could be consoling to know that in his time of supreme agony, even according to Mark and Matthew, it was the words of an old hymn of his people that Jesus uttered into the mid-day darkness.

But the irony is that even as Jesus gasped out those last words in Aramaic he was being misunderstood, misheard, miscomprehended for a final time. For those standing beneath the cross thought they heard him calling for Elijah to come to his aid, the prophet of old popularly believed to come to the assistance of those in trouble. But Jesus was not calling out for Elijah but for God—for his *abba*. And for the first time in his life, his *abba* was not there for him. God, Jesus felt, had left the scene of the crime. No, as Luther said, this is a *crux* we can't get to the bottom of our whole life long. Why? All our human questions of theodicy tumble after one another on this day.

While we can't get to the bottom of this matter, we can get to its center, its heart, its own *crux*. Strange as it may seem, it's taken a Jewish writer of the holocaust, Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winner who himself was an adolescent survivor of the Nazi death camps, to help us to penetrate to the *crux* of the matter in his autobiographical novel titled *Night*. On this day of all days when our Jewish neighbors have had most to fear violence done them by Christians through the ages, it is fitting for us to hear from a Jewish author who tells the story of the hanging of three prisoners in a Nazi death camp, one of them a youth the lightness of whose body horribly prolonged his death throes. From among the prisoners who were onlookers to this grisly spectacle, a voice called out asking, "Where is merciful God, where is He?" Then a bit later, the same voice asking, "For God's sake where is God?" To which the narrator of the story says, "from within me I heard a voice answer: 'Where is He? This is where—hanging on this

5. Roland Bainton, ed., *Martin Luther's Easter Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 66.

6. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Crucified and Risen*, trans. by Jo Bennett. (Grand Rapids: Baker, Academic, 2015), 39–82.

gallows. . . ”⁷ This is the *crux* of Good Friday, not only the seeming godforsakenness of Jesus on the cross but the death of God godself glimpsed in mystifying trinitarian perspective.

Liturgies for Good Friday vary widely, from tenebraes to three-hour, seven-last-words preaching extravaganzas to simple adorations of the cross accompanied by the reading of John’s text to elaborate musical settings of the passion. Common to all should be the liturgical effort to focus on the *crux* of the matter—the mystery of Jesus’ death. No hint of Easter should be allowed to intrude, allowing this day its own integrity, awe-fulness and mystogogy.

John Rollefson

Vigil of Easter March 31, 2018

Romans 6:3–11

John 20:1–18

Hell’s Bells

The Vigil of Easter is a mosaic of liturgical pieces that constitutes the linchpin of the *triduum* and marks the critical turning point from the remembrance of Jesus’ passion and death on Good Friday to the full-throated celebration of God’s raising of Jesus celebrated on Easter Day. Further it occurs on “silent Saturday,” the day traditionally related to what we confess in the Apostles’ Creed in the words “he descended to the dead” or “into hell” as we used to put it. Holy Saturday is the day the church remembers Jesus’ “harrowing of hell” to use a vivid, old-fashioned phrase or what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls more prosaically his “going to the dead”⁸ a phrase that seals Jesus’ utter solidarity with the dead of all times and places. This resonates with such mysterious scripture texts as Matt 27:51–53, Phil 2:8–9, and especially 1 Pet 3:19 and 4:6 and serves to highlight God’s complete vindication of Jesus by raising him “from the dead,” the “first fruits of those who have died” (or “fallen asleep” in the original Greek) as Paul writes to the Corinthian church (1 Cor 15:20).

Beginning with the lighting of a fire outside the church after dark (in the church cemetery or memorial garden where possible), the faithful proceed together into the darkened sanctuary, guided by the light of the new paschal candle to the intoning of the Easter Proclamation.

7. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. by Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 64–65. Juergen Moltmann famously made use of this scene in his *The Crucified God*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 273–274.

8. *Mysterium Paschale* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press: 1990), 149 ff.

Once the procession arrives in the darkened sanctuary, the space echoes with as many as nine appointed readings of lengthy stories from Hebrew scripture, our family book of faith, between which short hymns or Taizé chants can be interspersed. Next the congregation surrounds the font for the washing of candidates for baptism who have been prepared during Lent or if no one is available to be washed, the Affirmation of Baptism and/or reception of new members. A pregnant and suspenseful interval of silent meditation ensues, broken suddenly as candles are lit, lights turned on brightly and veils are torn from the altar as the congregation erupts into singing a joyful Easter hymn. I often choose, “We Know that Christ is Raised and Dies No More” (*ELW*#449), a hymn with strong baptismal resonances also used for funerals and often used as the entrance hymn for the following morning’s Easter Day liturgy. This leads to a simple service of holy communion, preceded by the hearing of the appointed readings from Romans 6 and John 20 and a sermon which is necessarily extremely brief and exclamatory in character. I’ve often used a piece of poetry befitting the occasion (e.g., John Updike’s “Seven Stanzas at Easter,” Jane Kenyon’s “Otherwise,” Boris Pasternak’s “Holy Week”). At one Vigil I briefly interviewed the little family from Iran who had just been baptized and at another asked a Jewish-Christian mother to read a letter to her daughter in which she reflected on why she had chosen to bring her new-born to be baptized on this same night on which she herself had been baptized several years earlier.⁹

Easter Vigil is an occasion to revel in the astonishing good news that Jesus is risen and that God’s inexplicable leaving the scene of the crime on Friday has been transfigured by God’s utter vindication of Jesus by raising him from the stone, cold tomb. All this allows the church to celebrate even the originating sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden which continues to stain us all as the “*felix culpa*” sung of in the Easter Proclamation—the “happy fault” that made our salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection both necessary and possible and the best good news possible!

It’s a night to be celebrated by ringing “hell’s bells” ‘til our ears tingle, as had become the practice in one of the congregations I served as pastor. Folks over the years had contributed everything from clanging cow bells to tinkling, ceramic tea bells that were placed in the pews to be rung with great gusto in the wondrous transitional moment of the service with the first “alleluia” heard since the beginning of Lent and every time thereafter “alleluia” was said or sung. The bells remained in the pews for the following morning when the much larger Easter Day congregation would join in the fun of ringing in every “alleluia” by “ringing the hell” out of the bells, with the children, of course, leading the way.

9. John Rollefson, “A Letter to Lydia,” *The Lutheran*, (April 2004), 71.

I'm well aware that the Vigil of Easter isn't everybody's cup of tea. For many clergy it seems too much trouble for so few people. For many it's just too long and held at an inconvenient hour, when the next day's service(s) with their often overflowing crowds seem more deserving of our attention and energy. But my experience is that the Easter Vigil turns out for many to be the most treasured liturgical experience of the entire church calendar, especially when expectations of the number of attendees is scaled back and the participation of the worshipers is maximized—and genuine fun is expected at worship. I remember a time, for example, when hand puppets were the featured actors in the telling of the Old Testament stories and music included the likes of the old sea shanty we learned as kids about Jonah and the whale.

And finally, don't forget the celebratory party that absolutely must follow including sparkling wine and cider. Participants (as well as leaders) will find themselves even more primed to ring in the celebration of the next morning with genuine and contagious joy.

John Rollefson