Preaching Helps

Pentecost 21, October 14 —
Epiphany of Our Lord, January 6, 2019

Lectionary Readings and Midterm Elections

[***Editor's Note:*** If you're looking for preaching helps for October 7, you'll find that Sunday in the previous issue of "Preaching Helps," *Currents for Theology and Mission,* July 2018. In this and future issues we plan to include the Sunday that comes after publication so preachers can plan ahead.]

This issue of "Preaching Helps" marks the end of Ordinary Time. The long, green season of "Sundays after Pentecost" will give way to the blue of Advent in December, then the white paraments of Christmas and Epiphany. Of course, there are also festivals adding their colors to the last days of Ordinary Time: the red of Reformation Sunday on October 28, and the white of All Saints a week later.

Beyond the rhythm and colors of the lectionary, the days of October will be filled with political ads and patriotic colors leading up to mid-term elections on November 6. How will Mark's gospel readings prepare us for the election?

- October 14: A rich man visits Jesus and goes away sorrowful after Jesus asks him to give up his possessions.
- October 21: Jesus rebukes James and John when they ask for positions of power at Jesus' right and left hands.
- October 28: On Reformation Sunday we turn to John's gospel and hear Jesus say, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." If you've preached on John 8 for years, you might decide to stay with Mark on October 28. It's a shame to miss the wonderful story of Bartimaeus, Jesus' last encounter with someone before entering Jerusalem. After receiving his sight, Bartimaeus followed Jesus "on the way." What does it mean for us to be "on the way" with Jesus?
- November 4: As the writer for this Sunday reminds us: "This year, All Saints Sunday falls two days before the midterm elections. What better time than this to take the long view, the resurrection view, the wiping-away-every-tear-from-their-eyes view!"

The last Sunday in November will bring Ordinary Time to an end as Jesus tells Pilate, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." (John 18:37) Even though the lectionary reading stops with that verse, we can hear ourselves and people in the congregation asking Pilate's question: "What is truth?" (John 18: 38).

Two writers in this issue published new books this fall. Justin Lind-Ayres' first book, *Is That Poop on My Arm? Parenting While Christian* (Fortress Press), was published on October 1. If you think this is a silly title, I encourage you to read what's inside, whether or not you have children! Judith Mattison's newest book *I Will Not Break: a memoir*, was also published this fall. The online description includes these words: "Unearthing her repressed past, she learned that forgetting was how she coped as a child. Remembering as an adult broke her apart—and then put her together again." As you can see from the biographies that follow, our writers are up to many exciting adventures besides sharing their insights for preaching in these pages.

While several writers in this issue are from the Twin Cities, we also reach across the country from Los Angeles to New Hampshire. **Caleb Crainer** (he/him/his) serves as pastor at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Los Angeles, California. He is a product of Valparaiso University, The Graduate Theological Union, The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, 4 billion years of evolution, his friends, and his parents. You might find him playing the tuba, attending science lectures, or on the kickball field—but not at the same time. **Justin Lind-Ayres** currently serves as the seminary pastor at Luther Seminary and campus ministry associate at Augsburg University. His first book, *Is That Poop on My Arm? Parenting While Christian* (Fortress Press), was just published on October 1. **Catherine Malotky** is Grant and Project Manager for the Center for Stewardship Leaders at Luther Seminary. She earned an MA in theater from Northwestern and the M.Div. from Luther. Catherine has served congregations in inner city Minneapolis and rural southwestern Minnesota, sharing a call with her spouse, David Engelstad. In addition to her regular column, "Amen," in the magazine *Gather,* she authored the "Genesis" Bible study for *The Book of Faith* series. In February 2019, Fortress Press will publish a book she co-wrote with David, *Carrying Them with Us: Living Through Pregnancy and Infant Loss*. She and David give thanks for their grown daughters and are grateful their grandchildren live close by. **Judith Mattison** is a retired Lutheran pastor living in the Minneapolis area. This fall her newest book is released: *I Will Not Break: a Memoir*. A story of trial and inspiration, it is available through your favorite retail book dealer. **Andrea Roske-Metcalfe** is the associate pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Apple Valley, Minnesota. She's a writer-in-residence with Fidelia's Sisters (the online magazine of Young Clergy Women International), a fellow with the Collegeville Insti-

tute's Multi-Religious Leadership Cohort, and a winner of the Moth GrandSLAM storytelling competition. She lives in Minneapolis with her spouse, Luke, and their two daughters. **Miriam Samuelson-Roberts** is associate pastor at Westwood Lutheran Church in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and co-host of the podcast Alter Guild. She graduated from Yale Divinity School in 2015 and is a member of Proclaim, group for LGBTQIA rostered leaders in the ELCA. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband, Daniel, and daughter, Esther. **Javen Swanson** is associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he has served since 2014. Prior to his ordination, Javen was a community organizer, first with OutFront Minnesota and the Minnesotans United for All Families Campaign, and later with the National LGBTQ Task Force. **Susan Plocher Thomas** is an ELCA pastor who lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire. She has served in campus and congregational ministries in North Minneapolis; Cambridge, Massachusetts; Hanover, New Hampshire, and with ELCA Global Mission in Vienna and Jerusalem.

Blessings on your preaching from the end of Ordinary Time to the new year of the church and beyond to Epiphany.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Editor, Preaching Helps

Pentecost 21/Lectionary 28
October 14, 2018

Amos 5:5–7, 10–15
Psalm 90:12–17
Hebrews 4:12–16
Mark 10:17–31

Engaging the Texts

The lectionary texts for this Sunday share a common theme—*threshold*. That is, these texts enable God's people to cross from one place to another, to take a significant step in the journey of following in God's way.

For the prophet Amos, the action swirls around the gate of the city. Imploring the house of Israel not to "enter" Gilgal or "cross-over" to Beer-sheba—places of exile and destruction described in Genesis—Amos commands the people to turn from evil to seek the Lord and the way of righteousness. Goodness exists at the city gate where the court of law (God's law) demands care for the poor and justice for the oppressed. Amos beckons the people to cross this threshold so life in God's abundant word may be theirs.

As for the psalmist, the transition from night to day becomes the threshold for satisfaction in the steadfast love of God that carries us forth for "all our days." This visual of the sky bursting anew with morning light echoes Amos' threshold-message, moving from our evil to the manifestation of God's goodness among us through divine compassion. The writer of Hebrews, also concerned with sin and evil within us, states, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). We approach the eschatological threshold of our finitude and sinfulness with the eternal grandeur and mercy of God. This is made possible only through the grace of Jesus, the Son of God, "who has passed through the heavens."

These threshold-crossings have now set the stage for the Gospel of Mark wherein a rich man seeks to cross from this life into eternal life. His quest leads to his query of Jesus, "[W]hat must I do?" Jesus' response to the man is to follow in the way of God's commandments that lead to goodness and truth, the same divine law uttered at the gate in Amos. Confident in his ability "to do," the rich man checks those boxes; yet, Jesus demands more: "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor." The text tells us that the rich man is shocked and goes away grieving for this threshold of moving from *having to giving* is unbearable for him. In fact, this threshold is so difficult that Jesus asserts, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (10:25). This is the threshold where we are left standing on this October day.

Pastoral Reflections

For me, Mark 10's placement in the lectionary in October feels a bit like stacking the deck for stewardship season. At a time when worshipping communities are often seeking pledges for the year ahead, Jesus' exchange with the rich man situates us at the threshold from *having to giving*. But more than fodder for the typical stewardship season sermon, these "threshold texts" for today give communities space to ask:

> As a community and part of the body of Christ striving to follow the law of God, the love of Jesus, and the leading of the Spirit, what thresholds are we straddling? And how will we—together—faithfully cross from one place to another taking a significant step in our journey of following in God's way? In other words, where are the places in our communities that call for communal movement so that the poor and the oppressed are given justice (Amos 5), the steadfast love of God bursts forth with compassion and mercy (Psalm 90), the heavenly glory is realized here and now (Hebrews 4), and having becomes the invitation for giving (Mark 10)?

For some congregations, this will necessitate crossing the threshold to have hard conversations together about institu-

tional racism and white privilege in the church so equity may be realized.

For some congregations, this will mean stepping out to engage neighbors of different faith traditions and build interfaith networks for the common good.

For some congregations, it will entail opening the church to refugees or immigrants for a safe space to worship and for them to be fully recognized as beloved of God. A challenging threshold in rural and farming communities, to be sure.

For some congregations, it will require tackling the issue of affordable housing and food insecurity in town which may mean crossing the threshold into community politics with Amos' words on the lips.

And yes, for some congregations it will involve a hard look at material possessions and consumer culture even as we dream about possibilities in following Jesus' command to give it all away for the sake of the gospel.

We must not kid ourselves. This is challenging, camel-through-the-eye-of-the-needle stuff! One may even deem these threshold-crossings impossible. But the texts are a summons to take the arduous step, to journey into new territory empowered by the promise of God. And the promise is this: "For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27). This is what salvation looks like, the impossible possibility of trusting in our God, who in Christ Jesus, crosses all thresholds with nothing less than the eternal love of God.

May your preaching carry you and your community across whatever thresholds you all are straddling into the fullness of life made possible in Christ.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Pentecost 22/Lectionary 29
October 21, 2018

Isaiah 53:4–12
Psalm 91:9–16
Hebrews 5:1–10
Mark 10:35–45

Engaging the Text: "Seeing Salvation"

What does salvation look like? To the witness of scripture? In the words of Jesus?

The question—if not the quest—for salvation is at the forefront of the minds of the Zebedee brothers in Mark 10. James and John audaciously ask Jesus "to do for us whatever we want." As glory-hogs, they imperatively state, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." They aren't jockeying for the best seat at the dinner table; this is about eternal salvation in their minds. And in truth, their question about their place-settings in eternity really is less of an inquiry and more so a demand. A bold move, even for these two of the three closest friends of Jesus.

Simply put, James and John have not been paying attention. These fisher-folk are clinging to a future eschatology when their allegiance to Jesus is supremely honored at the heavenly banquet in glory before God. The words of Jesus and the witness of scripture, however, reveal a fuller view of salvation, a realized eschatology unfolding in the presence of a living God. Jesus' life is the great revelation of God's incarnate salvation, living and breathing in the world. This is a future eschatology made real in the flesh.

Psalm 91 testifies to the revelatory experience of salvation in life. The familiar "On Eagles' Wings" scripture text proclaims that heavenly angels will "guard you in all your ways" so that "you will not dash your foot against a stone." Holy protection and divine deliverance are offered not just in death and sitting in eternal glory with God, but they are first offered in a life lived in faith and trust in God's promises. God declares, "Those who love me, I will deliver…with long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation" (vs. 14–16). God's salvation begins here and now, seen in the real grit of life.

Amazingly, Jesus meets the brothers' demand not with anger or annoyance, but with an inquiry of his own, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" In his question, Jesus shows the sacramental reality of salvation, the real presence of God among us. This fleshy promise of love and deliverance looks like Jesus' life lived in the world that leads, ultimately, to the cross. For, just a few verses earlier in Mark 10, Jesus said to James and John and all the rest, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over…they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise again" (vs. 33–34). If James and John were paying closer attention, perhaps they would have seen their salvation in another way, a fuller way: in the dying *and living* in Jesus Christ.

Pastoral Reflections: "Flipping Salvation"

What does salvation look like for you and your community of faith today?

The future promise of God's glory is realized in the living body of Christ. We are a cruciform people, formed by the cross. Jesus spoke of the way of the cross as the way of discipleship, a way of living into the promise of salvation. This is why each year during the Good Friday liturgy we proclaim at the foot of the cross:

> Behold, the life-giving cross, on which was hung the Savior of the whole world.

Oh come, let us worship him. (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, page 264).

In tandem with this confession of the salvific cross of Christ, the Good Friday liturgy also prescribes Isaiah 53 as the first reading. It is no coincidence that Isaiah 53 is wed to Mark 10 on this Sunday for the suffering servant of Isaiah's song reveals the extent of a realized eschatology in the embodied love of God. For "surely he has borne our infirmities, and carried our diseases" (53:4) as the one "wounded for our transgressions" (53:5) so that the "righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous" (53:11). This is a radical shift from the heavenly glory sought after by James and John; it is an earthy experience of a God who shows up in our pain and death. It is the flipping of salvation!

When Jesus flips salvation for James and John and the others, he shows them (and us!) what it looks like. He teaches, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (10:43–45). Salvation is about being last not first; salvation is putting others before ourselves in love, bearing each other's burdens and infirmities; salvation is our life together in Christ made real in our service to the neighbor.

What does this realized salvation look like for your community of faith as you gather for worship in the hearing of these texts? Only you know your context and can answer that question. But allow me to submit an idea or two for you to consider.

Maybe the flipping of salvation for your community starts with the children. Too often, children are the last in line in our liturgical practices. What if the children in your community took the lead in realizing Christ's presence among you? What if you empowered the children to share the cup Jesus drinks and the baptism by which Jesus is baptized? Maybe you gather with the youngest believers at the font and teach them to mark the cross of Christ on the foreheads of the all the adults. Then say, "Get in line, adults, and allow the kids to mark you with Christ's salvation!" Or, what if you allowed young kids to eat first at the table and drink the cup of God's goodness. Just declare, "Kids eat and drink first today!" (Or, if you need more justification for this practice, say, "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come unto me!'") Flip the order. Then, allow the children to serve communion to the adults. Or, maybe you enlist the help of a child to preach the sermon?

These are just small ideas, to be sure. But they point us to the flipping of the order and the usual ways of doing things. And in doing so, I believe these actions can bear witness to the flipping of salvation in Jesus, the servant-savior.

Justin Lind-Ayres

Reformation Sunday
October 28, 2018

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

Engaging the Day

This Sunday is both historic and theological. It's familiar to think of the Reformation as something of a revolution—a big change. Lutheran Christians have sometimes been a bit puffed up because Luther was an early leader of the movement. For some there is a sense of "We Won" over the Catholics. But if we're honest, more than Luther's followers were being re-formed. Questions were being raised by many leaders, seeking new understandings of the creation and culture. God was at work in many ways.

Those of us who were steeped in church history may forget that some of our listeners aren't on the same page. Some may have celebrated the 500th birthday of the Reformation but others may not have much background in that historic knowledge. It may be important for us to give people a sense of which theological practices were called into question during the Reformation—re-forming *what*? Behaviors? Sunday worship? Church organization? Or our understanding of who we are in God's eyes? Were indulgences something from long ago, or do we have our own modern ways of trying to secure salvation? What was Luther talking about when he referred to "hoardes of devils"? It may be helpful to rehearse the civic history of the time. How did the rebellions of princes and peasants play into the story? How did literacy and the printing press influence the growth of the Reformation? Could we find a way to create a brief narrative of people from that time discussing their current concerns or how they lived their daily lives? Our listeners are not likely interested in a history lecture, but setting the context of the times will broaden their understanding.

It might be useful to have an education hour presentation or use a video to bring people up to date. One could write a newsletter column or even celebrate the 501st birthday! There are talented people who can dramatically present Luther's story during worship or at other events. Our sermons could include a comparison of the practices that differ among denominations, which folks tend to like to learn about. A Roman Catholic friend once said she learned that one difference between Catholics and Protestants was that Protestants believed in righteousness through works! Without having to compare denominations, we can remind people that Luther-

ans believe we are not blessed or forgiven because of our works, but because God created and loves us.

The re-forming of the church may be seen as a Kairos moment, when many things came together—not necessarily neatly—so that the world would hear new things in the Word of God as our lives take on greater meaning as God's children. It's more than red stoles and powerful hymns and different church structures. Reformation is the inner transformation that became visible in the interpretation of the Word.

Pastoral Reflections

Hopefully some listeners will be touched and re-formed as our texts are read. The re-formation of our theology never ends—there's always something new to learn about God.

The foundation of the day is in Psalm 46. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble…the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts" (vs.1, 6). It is a rock-solid claim that underscores all we believe. Still, with God, all things can be new, says Jeremiah. God will make a new covenant. "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:31, 33b). Re-formed. Held in the heart of God in a new way.

The epistle text gives us an opportunity to set our own historical and personal context as we allow ourselves to admit our bondage, our slavery to sin. The range of images is broad—we not only hang on to compulsive behaviors, but we keep ourselves at the center of our thinking and actions. The Me-First doctrine of life. Bondage, slavery.

A parishioner once timidly told me that there was something she didn't understand. A lifelong Lutheran, she confessed that she didn't know what that word "grace" meant. People used it all the time but what did it mean? I felt a little sad that somehow no one had found a way to effectively explain grace to her. Perhaps we can never say it enough—it's not about what you do, or your virtue. We are worthy in God's sight because it's a gift from God. Not because of our great thinking and wisdom. Not because of our dutiful service to others. Not because of our acts of compassion. We are *gifted* with God's love. Grace.

Just as it's important to understand the context of the Reformation, the history of the Gospel of John is also helpful. One important observation is John's use of "Jews." Great damage has been done with the misunderstanding of who "the Jews" are in John's Gospel. "The Jews" did not refer to today's Jewish population or Jews for all time. They were not the "bad guys" who killed Jesus. This passage is not intended to be anti-Semitic. John wrote for Christian Jews who felt powerless among the dominant religious group and power structures. John sought to have Jewish Christians reclaim their roots and rituals of Judaism, including Jesus himself.

Perhaps this week we can address the way context is significant as we re-form our theology. Context helps us understand lessons that call us to be aware of our slavery to sin, as well as pointing to the transforming discovery that God's love rescues us from our inability to be perfect and free. Knowing *Jesus* is freedom and truth. Thanks be to God for those like Luther and John who led the way.

Judith Mattison

Pentecost 23/Lectionary 30
October 28, 2018

Jeremiah 31:7–9
Psalm 126
Hebrews 7:23–28
Mark 10:45–52

Engaging the Texts

Our texts aren't always coordinated so that we can weave them smoothly into a sermon. However, both Jeremiah and our Psalm for the day are hopeful. We are promised that people from all directions and with all sorts of challenges—blind, lame; those who are sad or lost—all of them will be gathered together. The very remnant of Israel will be consoled and led along streams in a dry land. They'll no longer stumble along unfamiliar paths (Jer 31:7–9). And the music of the Psalm proclaims we can expect that even those who sow in tears will reap joy. Those two Hebrew texts create a sort of nest for the story in Mark—a safe home to which all can come, even those overlooked or ignored by society. Bartimaeus is one of those. He calls out to Jesus that he needs help! He cannot see. We, and our audience might benefit from pausing to imagine what it means to be blind.

Others in Mark's Gospel have also sought healing or gifts from Jesus. Jesus asks James and John, "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:36). They request special places of honor and glory. Jesus calls into question whether they are prepared to face the consequences of walking the walk that Jesus faces as he enters Jerusalem. They're confident they are able. Jesus is not so sure, and reminds all the disciples that to be great, one must serve others. This is a constant challenge to those of our culture who assume that it is preferable to be victors and self-reliant.

The first blind man in Mark begged to be touched by Jesus to gain sight. Jesus heals him and tells him to go home and not to the village where people will discover he is healed (8:22–26). In contrast, Bartimaeus simply calls Jesus' name and his title, "Son of David." He trusts that Jesus will give him sight, and his insistence reveals that Bartimaeus sees beyond

most people. He has *in-sight* into the full meaning of who Jesus is. Jesus is streams in dry land and unending consolation and acceptance, even for the blind.

Bartimaeus is eager to answer the call to follow Jesus. The disciples, as portrayed in Mark, are often found to be "dense"—in the midst of amazing events they wonder who this Jesus can possibly be. Bartimaeus, after becoming sighted, hastens to join the parade into Jerusalem, proclaiming the coming of "the kingdom of our ancestor David" (11:10). In today's vernacular he's "all in." He knows who Jesus is.

Pastoral Reflections

With whom do we identify in this brief story? Perhaps the two most likely choices from the text are the crowd and Bartimaeus. We can invite people to think about how they manage their feelings and actions when they meet a blind person. I'm told it is common for sighted people to speak louder to compensate for what appears to be loss. Perhaps we see a blind person selling pencils, or simply making their way along on the sidewalk. Do we look away—an irony in the presence of a blind person? Do we feel sad or embarrassed? Or guilty, if we wonder if we should have offered some help? Do we avoid the difficulty of another? Perhaps we identify with the cultural norms of Jesus' time, when people considered the blind among the least-valued people in their world. Do we hush up those we consider "less-than" as this crowd did the blind man? "Be quiet! Don't bother me." Or do we empower them and recognize them as whole, beloved people of God? Those to whom we preach may respond to simple direct questions in our sermon such as: How willing are we to be aware of our own prejudices? Do we dare ask ourselves if we're like the crowd? But before we ask, we remember it's not easy to raise such questions in a sermon. People may feel accused and may retreat into denial rather than introspection.

In this story, Jesus finds a way to involve the crowd by having them call the blind Bartimaeus to come to Jesus. They become messengers of hope despite themselves. "Take heart…" they tell him (v. 49). He is urged to go to Jesus, to the light.

We may identify with Bartimaeus. Perhaps not because we feel confident that we are devoted followers of Jesus. But we may recognize in Bartimaeus a picture of ourselves. We are the blind. We are the vulnerable. We have needs—not usually hunger or physical disabilities, but self-loathing or self-absorption or the pain of past mistakes. We are the vulnerable. We have lost our way to the nest of promises in Jeremiah and Psalm 126.

See what Bartimaeus does! He acknowledges his weakness: "My teacher, let me see again" (v. 51). He claims his truth—and ours—we are vulnerable. We are weak. We weep and fail and get lost. We are blind to the Way of Jesus. We can't pretend anymore. We need help.

Bartimaeus has the courage to ask. Not for favors. For *life.* For sight. He tells the truth of what it means to be human. When Bartimaeus spoke his truth and admitted his vulnerability, it allowed him to be fully human—one who falls short of perfection. One who needs God. And in that moment, he was in the presence of God. Simultaneously Saint and Sinner. His was a mature insight into faith. Jesus IS life.

Judith Mattison

All Saints Sunday
November 4, 2018

Isaiah 25:6–9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1–6a
John 11:32–44

Engaging the Texts

This year, All Saints Sunday falls two days before the mid-term elections. What better time than this to take the long view, the resurrection view, the wiping-away-every-tear-from-their-eyes view!

Our texts are rich with compassion, comfort, and hope. Some surrounding texts deal more harshly with oppressors. It's worth considering the many ways faithful people express their understanding of what is right, just, life-giving, and healing.

The resurrection motif rules. We recognize afresh our walk in the company of saints—living and dead. As I write this, the nation is confronting issues of mortality, character, and worth as we mark the deaths of singer Aretha Franklin and Senator John McCain in ceremony and recollection. In what do we finally hope? In whom do we finally trust? What vision of the future did these public figures give us and what do we need to lift up now? We don't cling to the fame, glamor, wealth, or power that accrued to them, but to the examples of courage, generosity, integrity, and hope that they offered.

The preacher's task always comes back to what God said to the prophet Habakkuk centuries ago: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (Hab 2:2–3). All of chapter 2 seems particularly apt for our present age.

On All Saints Sunday, making plain the vision—without lying—is your task in spades.

Pastoral Reflections

Isaiah 25:6–9

The prophet envisions God closing the distance between Godself and human subjects on the holy mountain. Even separation by death is swallowed up (a reversal of the Canaanite myth of death swallowing up everything) and God proceeds to destroy the "shroud" cast over all peoples. That action reminds us of Matt 27:51 when, upon Jesus' death, "the veil of the temple was torn in two," opening the way for all to the divine presence. This is a vision of communion and intimacy with God, a time worth waiting for when all sorrow and disgrace are wiped away.

Psalm 24

This liturgy accompanies the entrance of the Lord into the sanctuary, presumably by means of the Ark of the Covenant (*HarperCollins Study Bible* note on vs. 7–10). The earth rejoices; those accompanying the divine presence "have clean hands and pure hearts; they don't lift up their souls to what is false or swear deceitfully." The temptation to lift up our souls to that which is false remains strong. The company of saints helps us to seek the face of God instead.

Revelation 21:1–6a

One of the most moving visions in all of scripture, glimpsed earlier in Isa 25:8 and Rev 7:17, contains the promise that God will wipe away every tear. Once again, the one sitting upon the throne comes close—removing barriers, making a home among the people. Death, mourning, crying, and pain are no more. All things are being made new. As in Hab 2:2, the direction is to "write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." And those trustworthy words encompass *everything*: "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." As you hold up the vision today, don't shy away from this far-reaching view. Rather, seek a way to make it vivid and present to waiting, thirsty souls (music sung by the Queen of Soul might help!).

John 11:32–44

The assigned text omits the poignant encounter between Jesus and Martha after her brother's death, along with Martha's remarkable faith-filled confession. It picks up with Mary, and Jesus' compassionate response to the sorrow he sees. Among the striking aspects of this story, one stands out to me at this time: that Lazarus is really, truly dead.

Lazarus' body was wrapped and placed in his cave tomb within 24 hours of his death. Even if his spirit lingered near his body for three days, as some Jews believed *(HarperCollins Study Bible*, note on v. 11:17), this is now the fourth. The stink of death is upon him, as Martha warns. The end of Lazarus has come and gone.

Some of us feel our hope is at least four days gone. REALLY dead—due to circumstances in our own lives or the effect of disheartening actions we see around us. We weep for our earthly home, in grave danger of becoming uninhabitable for life as we know it. We have trouble discerning what's true and what's false, and even when we can, we feel unable to effect change. Our vision of a new earth and a new heaven is dim. The stink of sin and death is strong.

Yet this is a day to lift up our heads and listen! Because Jesus calls us out from death. In the words and songs and stories of scripture, in the witness of saints who've gone before us and who travel with us now, God continues to unbind us from the deadly hold of despair.

We are being called out and sent out again, to take our places among clear-eyed visionaries familiar with the stench of death. To take our places among the practical, glorious, long-suffering, and hope-filled communion of saints.

Susan Plocher Thomas

Pentecost 25/Lectionary 32
November 11, 2018

1 Kings 17:8–16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24–28
Mark 12:38–44

Engaging the Texts

I can't foretell the results of the mid-term elections to be decided days before parishioners encounter these Pentecost 25 texts, nor would I be able to interpret those results if I knew them. But what can be said with certainty is that, throughout scripture, not forgetting the widow and orphan in their need is the sign of good government. Prophets continually call rulers to remember the economically vulnerable rather than regard them as insignificant. The well-being of widows and orphans in a society is the measure by which a kingdom is to be judged by God.

This ought to be such an obvious point for Christians that saying it would be unnecessary in our churches. Yet we find ourselves in a political era when the vulnerable are not necessarily being remembered by many who call themselves Christian. Their well-being is, at most, an afterthought. At worst, widows and orphans—the poor and the vulnerable—are cast as enemies to decent, hard-working Americans trying to secure their place in this country.

Two widow stories appear in today's assigned texts—Elijah with the widow of Zarapheth (1 Kgs 17:8–16) and Jesus observing the widow who placed two copper coins in the temple offering (Mark 12:38–44). Because the Second Lesson (Heb 9:24–28) is part of a larger theological argument, I would recommend substituting a third widow story, that of Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17).

In addition to the political context for this 2018 Sunday, some congregations are in their stewardship season or have just completed it. There is plenty to mine in these texts related to the practice of giving generously, should that be the direction your sermon takes.

Pastoral Reflections

1 Kings 17:8–16

Generosity in the midst of poverty. God's provision for those who are faithful.

God's representative enters a widow's household and asks for her hospitality. She, from her poverty rather than her bounty, gives it. From this shared need and offering, the mutuality of their poverty before God and one another, God is present and able to work a miracle. The mother has desperately scraped together the last of her supplies for this final meal with her son before they die, and yet, maybe *because* of her despair (for what would it really matter?), she shares this meager meal with a hungry stranger and the resources continue to stretch until the famine ceases. These stories of need and offering and blessing, these biblical stories of widows and orphans and the prophets who don't ignore them, who even dwell right there *with* them, are important for us to hear.

Psalm 146

This psalm contains three classic themes: First, the faithful person's job is to praise and thank the Lord no matter what. Second, don't put all your trust in earthly rulers. And third, be faithful to the just and compassionate God who created all that is.

Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17 (replacing Hebrews 9:24–28)

Hopelessness abounds. Naomi, her husband and sons move from Bethlehem to Moab to escape famine, but Naomi's husband and sons die. She must return to Bethlehem to beg kindness from relatives, and counsels her sons' Moabite wives to return to their own families for support.

Orpah leaves, but Ruth vows that Naomi's people and God will also be hers. So the two widows travel to Bethlehem where they subsist as well as they can until Naomi cleverly arranges for Boaz, a kinsman, to see Ruth as a potential wife. In a desperately creative seduction scene, Boaz recognizes Ruth's virtue and her plea for a future. Finally, Naomi and Ruth are secure in the household of Boaz, and a son, Obed, is born.

This isn't just a story of overcoming trials, but an unusual story of devotion between two women with no status. In her old age, Naomi miraculously nurses Ruth's infant son, who grows up to be the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth, the foreigner, already remarkably held up as a sign of love and loyalty, is grandmother of the great king David—and a foremother in the genealogy of Jesus.

Out of famine, death, and hopelessness comes a great king and the Messiah. Out of the love, creative thinking, and risk-taking of these two poverty-stricken women, Jew and Gentile, comes the grace of God for a nation and salvation for the world.

Mark 12:38–44

When the widow puts her last two coins into the alms box, Jesus sees a poignant contrast to ostentatious giving. Not only is the widow unassuming about her gift, it is proportionally huge. It is, Jesus tells us, all she has to live on, literally "her whole life." She's putting her entire means, her entire self, at God's disposal.

Mark moves from this narrative to Jesus himself *becoming* an offering. Jesus' passion and death begin in earnest here in Mark's Gospel. Jesus is not just making interesting observations about what he sees. Jesus is reading himself right into *being* that widow's offering.

Things never looked more hopeless than that night when Jesus was brought, under guard, from Gethsemane into the walled city of Jerusalem, the hoarding of rights and fears and entitlements far outweighing the inclination to generosity. To act generously in such a situation was a radical act of faith. It was a creative act for the sake of the future. It required everything Jesus had.

Susan Plocher Thomas

Pentecost 26/Lectionary 33
November 18, 2018

Daniel 12:1–3
Psalm 16
Hebrews 10:11–14, [15–18], 19–25
Mark 13:1–8

Engaging the Texts

Our inquiry can be a powerful tool to rupture stagnant/outdated/irrelevant meanings and breathe the Holy Spirit into our interpretations and preaching. When I study

the Bible through a queer lens she generates some living curiosity about these ancient texts. The process I use is simple: ask all the questions you can. Nothing is off-limits. By asking questions, we create a cognitive space for new possibilities. Why not give it a try? I invite you to join me. Resist the temptation to offer answers, instead take time to sit with these questions and others you might want to ask:

Daniel 12: What was Michael protecting people from? What were other times of anguish? What does it mean to be delivered? What is "the book?" What was the author's experience with death? Is everlasting life a good thing? How does wisdom shine?

Psalm 16: What does it look like to take refuge in God? Why is there such disdain for other gods? What would lead people to worship other gods? Does this support a type of polytheism? Who owned this land before it was "yours"? How does the heart teach us? What is the deal with everyone's right hand?

Hebrews 10: How did sacrificing claim to remove sins? Was Christ in control of Christ's own sacrifice? Is Christ's sacrifice a type of human sacrifice prohibited in Jewish law? Are there contemporary people we see sacrificing themselves for others? What does it mean to have laws in our hearts and minds? What happens if God does remember our mistakes? What temple rituals does this language echo? How do we provoke each other to do good?

Mark 13: Which disciple is pointing out the temple Jesus just exited? Why did Jesus ask if they can see the buildings? What were their hopes for the buildings? Is this good news or bad news? Why doesn't Jesus just tell the disciples when things will happen? How can you tell the difference between a genuine prophet and a false one? Who is not alarmed by war? How does Jesus know about birth pangs? Was there ever a time when these things weren't happening?

As you ask your own questions about these texts you might be drawn to a particular theme. For me this was the notion of purity. I wondered: What exactly is the threshold of purity? In Daniel it seems like qualifying for the eternal bonus was an unknowable factor you cannot change. After all, no one has a copy of that book of names in their church library. The psalmist goes to great lengths to establish themselves as the pure adherent over-against "those people" who do things differently, but here purity is a matter of personal devotion. In Hebrews, the purifying has been done by Christ, contrasting the ineffective sacrifices of the official religious institution. In Mark the fear of the future centers around a notion that devastation is inevitable, ritual purity seems irrelevant. Who is controlling what counts as pure and impure today?

As an out-gay pastor, I've been told I don't meet Christian purity standards simply because of who I am. Luckily, I think we're moving beyond that, because "The Purity Game" has never actually worked well for anyone. Purity might not be the goal Christ would have us aim toward. Everything is going to crumble so something new can arise. When most people saw the destruction of the temple as the unmooring of all things holy, all notions of purity evaporated. Jesus preaches something different, something strange, something queer: that something better is coming.

Pastoral Reflections

When our trust in institutions is betrayed, it's challenging to rebuild. There are many people who have been harmed by the church in the past and present. It's easy to blame an institutional entity for exclusionary policies, outdated practices, abuse, or even hurt feelings. But the church is made up of people. When people are let down by their religion, they are really let down by other humans. Human collective action matters, but it's based on our collective values.

Before June 26, 2013, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act, I wasn't sure I would ever have an equal place in this country. I remember I was with a bunch of other new clergy I had just met at a retreat when we saw the news reports. We cried tears of joy and hugged each other. It's no coincidence that 2013 was the first time that over 50 percent of Americans supported legalizing same-gender marriages. Until that shift in opinion, many thought treating others with equal dignity would demolish our most foundational institutions. Some still are afraid of that. It was ordinary people that made the institutional shift possible. The only thing demolished was our self-righteous notions of what counts as pure and sacred; our false gods.

Chances are that you or someone you love has been hurt or excluded by the church and other Christians. The opportunity for hearts to soften, minds to change, and truth to prevail is the promise of a liberating gospel proclaiming God's love during our most hopeless times. Something better is coming. We can trust that there will be more rough times ahead. Do not be alarmed, yet Christ is our faithful companion. Let's continue to provoke each other to love more, to show more compassion, to share our joy with the whole world one connection at a time—by doing so, God rebuilds with us.

Caleb Crainer

Reign of Christ Sunday
November 25, 2018

Daniel 7:9–10, 13–14
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b–8
John 18:33–37

Engaging the Texts

These texts are awesome! They're big, bold, beautiful! (I mean, also plenty of destruction—but it makes for exquisite D.R.A.M.A.!) It can be useful to remember that these texts were meant to be heard audibly. Their elaborate words flow into our imaginations where we conjure fiery thrones, raucous waters, and all the spectacle of judgment. It's a story worth repeating.

I'm going to assume that if you're reading this you're not looking for a one-to-one prophetic correlation ala 1980s fundamentalisms. Not that people haven't been doing that for hundreds of years, but now we can consider more grounded interpretations. I get why that stuff was popular—and still is in many corners of Christianity. It's interesting and exciting! Just misdirected. We've moved on, so we can hear scripture's sacred calls for justice alongside our own.

This type of power-reclaiming literature belonged first and foremost to the marginalized folks who experienced daily discrimination or worse. These texts aren't written for rich folks. The visions that captivated them were of divine retribution against those who have mistreated them for so long. And we love that. We modern champions of justice and truth revel in it when "our-side" is validated.

These texts also call us to thundering action when justice is thwarted. When black bodies are treated as expendable. When immigration documents are used to define human worth. When we visit our environmental sins on our children. When women's voices are devalued. When queer people are shunned to death. These texts would have us roar.

Daniel isn't playing games anymore; the throne belongs to God, the Ancient One. The court of God's judgment is in session. The Son of Man, a nobody on earth, is now given reign. Who is affected? Everyone. How long is this going to last? Forever. Remember that this text isn't about Jesus. It's about an unnamed figure subverting the order of everything. (Something only becomes read as "prophecy" like that after the fact when correlations are infused.) In its historical context, this strange Aramaic text echoes a world of Akkadian myths and legends from Babylon; tropes that would have been familiar in the ears of ancient listeners. (Check out 1 Enoch 14:13–25 and The Enuma Elish 1:151–162 for some ancient similarities.)

Revelation is a powerful book that fundamentalisms have deterred us from utilizing. I really recommend taking an hour and a half and listening to the entirety of the book read aloud. There's a lot of cultural distance between us and the original audiences, but the sheer power reverberates. Jesus' horrific, unjust death will finally get the full holy retribution Jesus deserved. Notice all the fancy titles. These aren't applied to those traditionally at the top of society, but instead to Jesus, the punk, the Messiah! We are cheering! We are singing! Buckle up! You're about to hear what's going down!

I wonder if this passage from John's Gospel needs to be heard in a fresh way, too. Every time I've ever heard this read in church, it's been serious, heavy, and bleak. But the original audience knew who Pilate was. They knew that Pilate had been such a crucifixion-happy bloodthirsty autocrat, that the people petitioned and had him recalled to Rome. Philo and Josephus both write about him as a vicious inflexible leader. So it's weird that the Gospels seem to give him a pass. If you read this section remembering that Pilate is a really bad dude then the whole exchange with Jesus becomes a dangerous comedy. Jesus never answers Pilate's questions, asks him questions in return, then talks over his head about kingdom and truth. Let's listen to Jesus' voice, the voice of someone making fun of a vicious ruler to his face. Jesus has been handed over by the Jewish leaders, and slips in that his followers would be trying to keep him from being handed over TO the Jewish leaders. It's a tragedy that the lectionary omits the punchline in verse 38 when Pilate asks Jesus "What is the truth?" Pilate looks like a fool here. Jesus is innocent, and with every jab the audience gets closer to understanding the evil mechanisms of Jesus' demise.

Pastoral Reflections

"This is the best show I've ever seen." It was my first time at a live drag performance and it was amazing. Everyone was over-the-top—in everything. There were clouds of smoke, dazzling robes, flawless hair, and dance moves that left the audience stunned. I like to think of the places in my life where pageantry still reigns supreme as I walk through the apocalyptic literature in the Bible. Dani Yells and The Revelation (those would be great drag names!)

The original audiences for these texts would have been enthralled by the imagery and spectacle. But like drag, there's more going on. Drag is largely about gender performance and the best drag blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. Apocalyptic literature also speaks to social truths through captivating blurring imagery. Is this real? I love it! We do well to take a cue from Jesus' last public appearance before Pilate. Jesus is also speaking through spectacle, albeit a gruesome one. Two sovereigns, one real, the other fantasy. Which is which? Jesus' drag challenges us with this juxtaposition, too. On one hand,

truth is a feisty performer, but you'll know her when you see her: yas qween!

Caleb Crainer

First Sunday in Advent
December 2, 2018

Jeremiah 33:14–16
Psalm 25:1–10
1 Thessalonians 3:9–13
Luke 21:25–36

How can we thank God enough for you? This verse, written by the apostle Paul to the Thessalonians, is a good reminder a week and a half after Thanksgiving, when the gratitude of that holiday is slowly replaced with what seems, in the United States, to be one of the most harried times of the year.

Contrast the gratitude of our epistle with the fear and foreboding of our gospel reading from Luke. These signs in the sun and moon, the fear and distress, and the coming of the Son of Man in a cloud, are told in each of the synoptic gospels, as is the parable of the fig tree. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all want us to hear that the coming of the Son of Man will not come without struggle and pain.

The apocalyptic tone of this text often causes us preachers to recoil, not wanting to tread into territory of a fear-driven and threatening Christianity. But let's take seriously for a moment the *Sturm und Drang* of Luke 21:26: "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Perhaps, as we look to the birth of Jesus this Advent, we can let that event be a little less meek and mild, and a little more earth-shattering. Perhaps it is healthy for us to feel fear and foreboding, because change never comes without fear, and neither does faith. Perhaps this shaking up of power is exactly what we need.

I also wonder what it means to take this lens of gratitude from Paul's letter to the Ephesians into Luke's gospel text. When he was alive, my grandfather began each day by singing the table prayer "for life and health and daily bread, we give you thanks, O God." He sang this prayer daily even when he moved into assisted living on a quicker timeline than he would have liked. He sang it even when his glaucoma and Parkinson's made seeing and moving progressively more difficult for him. He sang it even when my grandmother, his beloved wife of over 60 years, died.

My grandfather didn't sing this song of gratitude to wish away all of these painful parts of life, and he didn't sing it to gloss over them. He sang this song because it gave him a lens through which to see signs of the coming kingdom. Signs of a world that might someday reach beyond what we know on earth—but also a kingdom that comes to us in the midst of all our human existence here and now, full of grief and struggle and messiness.

If we are afraid to touch the fear and foreboding of Luke's apocalyptic text, we might miss the point, which is that Jesus—the incarnation of God's love on earth—is coming to be with us again, and we can and will see signs of that embodied love. This love will come to be with us not in spite of our pain, and not to take it away, but to live in the midst of this broken world, teaching us about healing and new life. We are called to be awake to those signs, and to remember that even if the very foundation of everything we think we know passes away, God's words of promise and steadfast love will always be with us.

This season, we await the coming of Jesus, whose birth we will celebrate in a few weeks. We also *invite* the coming of Jesus. Another table prayer, this one echoing these texts that invite the coming of Jesus, goes like this:

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest,
And let these gifts to us be blessed.

Many people I know have added the following lines to this prayer:

Blessed be God, who is our bread;
May all the world be clothed and fed.

What does it mean to pray "Come, Lord Jesus"? How does this prayer help us look for signs of Jesus' presence in our midst, and how does it change the lens through which we view the world? Does the blessing of Christ, who is our bread, our life, and our hope, propel us into the world to clothe and feed and be in solidarity with others? What does it mean for Jesus to have come to us, for God to have put on human clothes, and what does it mean that we wait for Jesus to come again? How are we called, here and now, to be co-workers in the kingdom of God?

We remain awake, watching for signs of God's kingdom come. We wait for Jesus, love incarnate who is to be born as a vulnerable baby, who will threaten familiar structures of power and sow seeds of a different kind of kingdom. These texts allow us to weave together gratitude and struggle as we await the coming of Jesus. They call us to be aware of the real pain and real hope that we experience as individuals and communities. Our waiting and awake-ness transform the way we live and move and breathe in our complicated world, giv-

ing us gratitude and hope in the midst of brokenness, pain, and grief, and turning us outward to offer the same to our neighbor.

Miriam Samuelson-Roberts

Second Sunday in Advent
December 9, 2018

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalmody: Luke 1:68–79
Philippians 1:3–11
Luke 3:1–6

Engaging the Texts

In many Renaissance paintings of this gospel text, most notably Leonardo Da Vinci's *St. John the Baptist*, John the Baptist is shown pointing toward Jesus. This is the focus of all our texts this Sunday, especially Malachi's refiner's fire, Zechariah's song about his son, and the portrayal of John the Baptist himself from Luke's gospel. This second Sunday of Advent, we point toward Jesus, and do some intentional preparation in our hearts and in our world as we await the birth of love incarnate.

The Psalmody this Sunday is Zechariah's song from Luke 1, sung after the birth of his son, John the Baptist. In this chapter of Luke's Gospel, Mary (whose song will be our focus on the fourth Sunday of Advent) and Zechariah have somewhat parallel stories. They are both visited by the angel Gabriel, and both have a "but how?" question in response. They both sing a song—a prophecy—about the birth of their children; in Mary's case, it is before Jesus is born, and in Zechariah's case, it is as his son is being named John, against all tradition and expectation. What Mary sings of Jesus, Zechariah echoes as he prophesizes about a remembered covenant, promised mercy, and light to those who sit in darkness.

Two notable motifs in both Zechariah's song and in Luke's portrayal of John the Baptist in our Gospel reading are preparation and forgiveness. Zechariah says that his son "will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to *prepare* his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the *forgiveness* of their sins" (Luke 1:76–77). Then the adult John, who "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the *forgiveness* of sins," preaches and quotes the prophet Isaiah, saying "'*Prepare* the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'" (Luke 3:3–4). As we look toward the birth of Christ, as we sing about our hearts preparing him room, might we engage in repentance and reconciliation and forgiveness as a way to do so?

John points to an entirely new world that will be ushered in by Jesus. To prepare for this new way of being, the whole earth needs to change: paths must be made straight, valleys filled, mountains and hills made low. We are preparing not just for the birth of a baby, but for a whole new kingdom, a different worldview.

The first sentence (vs. 1–2) of Luke's third chapter tells us everything we need to know about the current state of the world, the top-down holders of power who Jesus will challenge throughout his ministry. Pontius Pilate, Annas, and Caiaphas are all named in this introduction, and all three will be key players in Jesus' crucifixion (Luke 23:1–5, John 18:13–14). These characters sit in stark opposition to the themes of Zechariah's prophecy about John and Jesus: forgiveness of sins, the tender mercy of God, the guiding of our feet into the way of peace. Each of Luke's first three chapters begins by situating us in current political events and structures. The threat of abused power looms large in the Gospel of Luke, as does the promise that God will, in the words of John the Baptist, eventually fill every valley and make every mountain and hill low.

Pastoral Reflections

What in our world needs to be prepared, filled, made smooth as we look to the birth of Christ? Knowing that we are rooted and grounded in God's abundant love and forgiveness, what do John the Baptist's words "prepare" and "forgive" mean to us in this time and place? I think of all the ways we think we are preparing for Christmas—going into consumer overdrive, overscheduling ourselves, attempting to gloss over the grief and family conflict that inevitably arise during this season for so many. What John asks of us is much simpler, but also much more challenging. Repenting, forgiving, and preparing a way that welcomes Jesus involves whole-life change, and can't be bought or efficiently scheduled.

Poet and artist Jan Richardson writes the following in her reflection on John the Baptist:[1]

Prepare, prepare.
It may feel like
the word is leveling you
emptying you
as it asks you
to give up
what you have known.

1. Richardson, Jan. *Advent 2:Prepare*. http://adventdoor.com/2012/12/05/advent-2-prepare/

It is impolite
and hardly tame
but when it falls
upon your lips
you will wonder
at the sweetness

like honey
that finds its way
into the hunger
you had not known
was there.

There are things in our lives and in our world that do need to be leveled and emptied. There are patterns and wounds in our personal lives that need to be healed. There are patterns and wounds ingrained in our social systems—racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism to name a few—where we need to hear John's call to repentance and reconciliation.

The hunger that emerges in Richardson's poem when all has been laid flat is beautiful. For what do we hunger? In the hymn "We Come to the Hungry Feast" (ELW 479), Ray Makeever writes about our hunger for a word of peace, our hunger for a world released. Prepare, point, repent, forgive. These are some of the seeds of preparation we can sow this Advent as we point to the coming of Christ, who will "give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, [and] guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79).

Miriam Samuelson-Roberts

Third Sunday in Advent
December 16, 2018

Zephaniah 3:14–20
Psalmody: Isaiah 12:2–6
Philippians 4:4–7
Luke 3:7–18

Engaging the Texts

You are forgiven if you experience this week's texts with a bit of whiplash. While our culture has a laser focus on Christmas and all that we can buy to show our love, the texts for this week ask something else of us.

Zephaniah has spent the first two chapters railing about the coming judgment on the southern kingdom of Judah, vividly detailing the coming disasters, social implosion, and abandonment. The great day of the Lord is not joy but hardship, a day of being cut off from God's mercy and love. And it's not just the chosen people, but their enemies also will suffer and perish. Then Zephaniah returns to the wickedness, likely of Jerusalem, particularly the leaders of the city. Just before today's text, God announces in one breath that the earth will be consumed (v. 8), and in the next that "I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech…" (v. 9).

Then the promises start coming, even for those whose complacency and faithless religion sparked outrage moments earlier. The song of joy which is our text may have been added later, scholars suggest, because its tone is as loving as the earlier material is impatient with rage. This love is not a romantic snapshot backlit with fuzzy edges. It is quite specific about the results of the actions proposed. "Do not fear, O Zion…" (v. 16b). God is not a distant observer, but engaged, close-up, and personal.

It's not a surprise that the people are exhorted to rejoice and exult. Good things are promised. But God is also clearly described as ebullient, as if this flip to a saving point of view is a gift to God as well.

The psalm in Isaiah is of a similar vein to the appointed verses in Zephaniah. Are these promises enough to spark faith in exiles who have long imagined that God is no longer present with them in their suffering, away from home and languishing? Isaiah reports God's invitation to sing the songs and remember the stories of faith, to try to reignite the spark of hope and trust.

Philippians proposes a set of behaviors that can sustain faith. Rejoice always, be known for gentleness and don't worry about anything. The peace of God will guard you in Christ Jesus. In the midst of church conflict or whatever life-should-not-be-like-this friction, this is our ground, the letter to the Philippians offers. We are in this together, and the way we treat one another is a sign of God's presence.

Finally, John the Baptist storms into the story line of the day. We heard about him last week, but we start with a bang today. Luke's John directs his warnings to the whole crowd, not just the religious elite as in Matthew. He amps up their anxiety by refusing to let them off the hook just because they were born into Abraham's privileged family. "What shall we do?" they appeal. Share what you have with those who don't have enough. Don't perpetuate a system that robs the poor to pay the rich, and don't fleece people because your power allows it. Repentance is evident in how you live your life in relationship to your neighbors, known and not. John's blunt focus on God's justice gets him into trouble, as we learn at the end of the text. He dared to speak the truth to power, and that put him into prison. Eventually, revenge cost him his head (Luke 9:9; also Matt 14:1–12, Mark 6:14–29).

Pastoral Reflections

These texts do not make life easy for preachers, unless you are a fire-and-brimstone type. God's wrath, which is so hard to hold in tension with God's love, is abundant in the approach of the prophets, both Zephaniah and John the Baptist. There is no mincing words, no guarding of the hearer's self-esteem, or breaking it to them gently.

Wrath seems out of step during this most commercialized season of the retail year. Irritating or intimidating customers is no way to make your bottom line, especially in these critical weeks before Christmas. In addition, let us not forget that we who seek to fund the mission of our congregations and larger churches are also inordinately dependent on the giving in this season. It's not a good time to get folks riled up.

Yet, in these texts, God demands that we get beyond our complacency and unreflective religious routines, both personal and corporate. If we don't, we really can't appreciate the grace being offered. The specificity of God's saving intervention is a both/and. The call to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" invites us to take our religious practices and our personal behaviors under the microscope. Are we caring for those who don't have enough? Are we padding our own pockets at others' expense (even unwittingly), or feeling relieved that we can have all the energy we need, without counting the cost to those most vulnerable to our voracious appetites for convenience and security?

The sweetness of the baby in the manger is too sanitized according to our texts for today. This baby brings salvation, yes, but brings it because we really, really need it. We are God's own at great cost. How shall we respond? How shall we live?

Catherine Malotky

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 23, 2018

Micah 5:2–5a
Psalmody: Luke 1:46b–55
Hebrews 10:5–10
Luke 1:39–45, (46–55)

Engaging the Texts

We are close now, just hours away from the silent night for which we have been waiting this season—certainly it was pierced by the sounds of birthing in spite of our traditional imposition of silence and calm. We have one more opportunity to shape the faith lens through which we see this event, particularly because our consumerist culture is so shaped by the Santa Claus idea that if you are good you will be rewarded.

In the first reading, Micah starts by working his prophetic condemnation on the people, calling out their economic exploitation of the poor, widows, and customers; and pointing out the offense of worshipping other gods (specifically Baal, whose fertility cult was indigenous). He then pivots, and the promise of salvation follows. Part way through, Micah locates the promise's geographical spring in Bethlehem of Ephrathah.

It is interesting that Ephrathah is the Hebrew word for "fertility." The genealogy of Judah reveals that this is the name of Caleb's wife (1 Chronicles 2:50). It is mysterious that in this highly patriarchal society, her name is the one that endures as a place name. She must have been considered the ancestor of Bethlehem, she who bore sons who fathered sons through generations until they came to Jesse and his son David, who was born in Bethlehem of Ephrathah. It was a fertile line in a fertile place.

Note the tone of the poetry and the metaphors chosen. Might it make sense to imagine that the Davidic line is being birthed by God, she who is laboring to bring forth the promised one who will usher in the peace and security so longed for? Christians have seen a messianic prophesy here, but Micah's first hearers would have been happy to have the Assyrian threat tamed and their cultural growing pains resolved.

As we hear in the other texts appointed for this day, it's all about surprise. God is not wed to the structures we invent to measure each other's relative value and worth.

So, in the Gospel reading we hear words of faith from people at the bottom of the ladder who greeted one another with wombs full of new life: an old woman who understood the shame and disregard of her community because of years of *infertility*, and a young woman whose miraculous *fertility* had already threatened her security. Like women before her, Mary sang of reversals: the low go high and the high go low. Both Mary and Elizabeth had confidence that God had seen them and welcomed them into God's embrace in spite of what their culture said about their value and worth.

Might Jesus' faithful submission, "I have come to do your will" in the Hebrews text, be seen through this lens as well? Could Jesus' willingness to give himself over to the labor of love, his complete obedience to this labor throughout his life and even to death, with his body as the carrier and expression of faith—could this be seen through the eyes of pregnancy? Think of the mother who turns her body over for the sake of the one being formed in her and, in time, born, and then fed (from her body) for months to come? This is a profound kind of fertility, and, according to Hebrews, we have been sanctified by this very sacrifice.

Pastoral Reflections

This is an intriguing idea, to let a female lens shape our reading of these texts, and it does offer something new, does it not? We don't want to mess too much with people's tidied idea of what Jesus' birth was like, but we have become quite numb to the realities that must have been true. Ask any woman who has given birth (perhaps the partner who was with her can validate from observation) and she will tell you that this is no small thing. The body is wracked, the bones give way, the blood flows, and whatever noise happens is perfectly justified by the tremendous exertion. Ironically, however, submitting to the wisdom of the body, in most cases, is exactly the right course, made terribly difficult by our insatiable need to control what simply cannot be controlled.

Is this the kind of submission that parallels the trust and hope we are asked to center on God's goodness, in spite of the labors required of us as we live through the suffering and uncertainty and even threat that accompany any life lived as a human? Might the fertile outcome of this submission be the stunning awareness that God's affection is for every human, and even for creation itself?

Our drive to control our own security and place at God's table too often constructs a cocoon of protection around ourselves, shoring up our boundaries, and then dehumanizing those we perceive as a threat. As our grip gets tighter, our trust in God's benevolence gets narrower. Our deep doubts that God's love is enough for all shuts us out of the glorious inclusion that absolutely includes ourselves.

In Mary's song of resistance and reversal, the humble and lowly are heard and seen by God. The rest of us, who will have our hustle (the power and privilege that shore up our lives) taken away, will again be able to see the world we had shut out. We will see ourselves, with all others, lavished by God's choosing. We will hear our names called and be shown to our place at the table of mercy. And it will be enough.

Catherine Malotky

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018

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

Engaging the Texts

Of all the sermons we write in a year, this will either be the easiest or the hardest. Or it starts out as one and ends up as the other, but I've not found much middle ground on this holiest of nights.

Part of the problem is that the story is so familiar. It's likely that no one listening to this sermon will be hearing this story for the first time. But that's part of the magic, too. You can take this story places you can't take other ones, because of its familiarity.

One of my favorite things to do with stories like this—the ones many of us know by heart—is to read between the lines; to ask the questions we forget to wonder about, because familiarity has pushed wonder to the side.

…all the world should be registered.

Was it really *all* the world? What about children, or servants or slaves? Did they go to their own hometowns or those of their owners or masters? What kind of information did people have to share? Why did Quirinius want to know these things? Who benefited from this information? Who didn't?

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

Where was Mary when the contractions started? Was she comfortable, or was she still riding that bony and lumbering donkey? (Wait, is there even a donkey in the story??) Did Joseph stay with her? Did men even do that? Was there a midwife? How long did her labor last?

She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger.

Who cut the cord? Who wiped the baby up? Did they have clean towels? What about all the blood? *Why is there never any blood in manger scenes?* Why does everyone look so calm and peaceful, and for the love of all that is holy, HOW ON EARTH IS MARY KNEELING?!?

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Okay, I'm sorry, but no. These are peasants. These are not fancy, refined people, who drink tea with their pinkies up. These are car mechanics, with callouses and grease under their fingernails. They are salt-of-the-earth garbage collectors and dishwashers and migrant farmworkers. I promise that the first thing they said to one another after *the entire multitude of the heavenly host* left them was not, "Gosh, friends, let us go now and see!" I promise it was not fit to print in scripture, and I absolutely wish it had been recorded just the same.

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

She was all of what, 12 years old? 14, *maybe?* She's pregnant outside of wedlock, and has just given birth to the son of God, of all people. She's in a barn. Her God-baby is in a feedbox. Her fiancé is there, but not her mom or sisters or aunts. None of the family members who were supposed to help her through this. And her first visitors, after the beleaguered delivery of her first-born child, are rag-tag shepherds and their smelly sheep, saying that an angel has told them this baby is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that Mary needed a nap. Or she needed her best friend, the one she could've turned to and whispered, "Are you hearing what I'm hearing? You know, *do you hear what I hear?*" But sure, maybe this exhausted, bewildered, pre-teen mother of *the Christ child himself* treasured those words, and pondered them in her heart.

I mean, it's possible.

Pastoral Reflections

Maybe these questions feel too cheeky to you. Maybe you think it would feel too cheeky to your congregation. Maybe it even feels a little heretical. But I think an awful lot of us feel the pressure to preach out of an increased level of piety on this holiest of nights, either because of the weight of the night itself, or because there will be so many visitors in the pews who only come for the pomp and circumstance and never the run-of-the-mill Sunday morning, or who have simply never heard you in the pulpit before.

But asking questions they're not expecting to hear might be okay. It might help to draw them into the story. Most of them aren't settling in, ready to take sermon notes, anyway. They're calculating what time they'll get home, and how long after that the turkey can come out of the oven. They're trying their best to prevent the little ones from melting down, plying them with goldfish and candy canes and asking them to please keep their tights on. They're sitting next to the uncle who still calls them by the wrong pronouns or they can't wait to get home to open presents. They're feeling an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, or they're weepy or grieving or questioning what tomorrow will bring.

This story is larger-than-life, but in the end it's about the day when God became human. Anything we can do to connect that day to what it means to be human today has got to be worth the effort.

Acknowledge the familiarity, and invite some wonder back into the story.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe

Christmas Day
December 25, 2018

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

Engaging the Texts

The prologue to the Gospel of John is simultaneously one of the most abstract pieces of scripture as well as one of the grittiest, at least in my reading. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. That line gives me shivers, but I'm also standing off to the side, looking askance at the preacher, thinking, "Okay but seriously, what does that even *mean*??"

Then, just a few lines later, we hear that *the Word became flesh and lived among us*, and I understand that in a visceral way that absolutely does not require a seminary degree. Little kids can understand it–God got a body, plain and simple. God put on skin.

Abstract and gritty. Esoteric and fleshy. Whatever you want to call it, it's a good combination, and it gives us a lot to work with!

And that's before we even get to the light and the darkness. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world*.

You can talk about both light and darkness in abstract ways and gritty ways. Esoteric ways and fleshy ways. Any preacher worth their salt will take care not to push forward the line of thinking that equates light with goodness and darkness with evil. There is simply no need to do so.

Light can mean anything from the blazing hot sun or a flickering light bulb or a battery-operated tea light to search lights at a nightclub or spotlights on a stage or the sticky finger of a child singing "This Little Light of Mine."

Darkness can come early in the winter and late in the summer. It can be a cool basement in the middle of the night or a movie theater in the middle of the afternoon or your eyes behind a sleep mask on an airplane.

However you figure it, Barbara Brown Taylor points out in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, that we need darkness at least as much as we need light. "New life starts in the dark," she writes. "Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

Pastoral Reflections

Nearly twenty years ago now, during a semester abroad, I found myself on a short vacation in the northern islands

of the Philippines. In a cave, to be exact, three hours in and God-knows-how-far underground. With three other international students who had become good friends, and two unofficial guides we had met on the side of the road.

My friends and I had headlamps—really bright ones that we had purchased at camping stores. We had hiking boots and backpacks and quick-dry clothing. We were pretty ridiculous. Our guides wore flip-flops, and shorts and T-shirts. They each carried an oil lamp.

This wasn't the kind of cave with worn paths and ropes to guide you. We had to climb steep rock faces and squeeze through tight spaces and scramble over boulders and at one point we had to swim a fair distance with our bags over our heads. But we were game. This is what the guides had described; this is what we had signed up for.

But then came the part they *hadn't* told us about; the part we *hadn't* signed up for.

Up ahead was a ledge, the guides explained. It was really long and only a few inches wide, and the drop-off was steep. Steep like a German tourist had fallen off a few months back, and that was it. He was gone. Our guides said they had one condition for going across the ledge and we were all ears, but then they told us what it was: we had to turn off our headlamps.

There was basically mutiny for a few minutes, before we remembered that we were at their mercy. They had grown up in these caves; they knew them backward and forward. We knew nothing. So, one-by-one, we turned off our headlamps. As the last headlamp went off, our guides blew out their oil lamps.

It was the darkest darkness I've ever seen. It was deep and warm and wonderful.

And then, the match. One of the guides lit a match to light the oil lamps again, and then it all made sense—that was the first time that I had been able to see the whole cave. My stupid headlamp was so bright that I may as well have had blinders on while I was wearing it. I could see everything straight in front of me, plain as day, and absolutely nothing outside of it. I had spent three hours in a cave with no peripheral vision whatsoever. That one match—that one, tiny light—changed the game. It allowed us to see all the details we had missed before. It changed our perspective, both of ourselves and of the people and spaces around us.

The darkness was able to overcome those headlamps, but not that match. The match wasn't nearly as flashy as the headlamps, but it illuminated the darkness in a way that completely changed the game.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. The Word *becomes* flesh and *lives* among us.

The light shines in the darkness.

And it changes the game.

Andrea Roske-Metcalfe

First Sunday of Christmas
December 30, 2018

1 Samuel 2:18–20, 26
Psalm 148
Colossians 3:12–17
Luke 2:41–52

Engaging the Texts

It is easy to see why the lectionary pairs these readings from 1 Samuel and the Gospel of Luke; the author of Luke's Gospel must have had this passage from 1 Samuel in mind when composing this story from Jesus' childhood. The parallels are readily apparent: families traveling to the religious center for the annual festival; young spiritual prodigies finding their place in the house of the Lord, and both boys becoming renowned for their extraordinary wisdom. In fact, this is not the first time the Gospel of Luke has drawn a connection between Jesus and Samuel: it is widely recognized that Mary's song (the Magnificat, Luke 1:46–55) is patterned on the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10).

What is Luke's purpose in alluding to the story of Samuel? Justo L. González explains that "there are parallelisms between Hannah and Mary, and particularly between Samuel and Jesus, and Luke is presenting Samuel as one of many 'types' pointing to Jesus."[2] One parallel is that of barrenness. Over and over again, throughout the scriptures, women who could not conceive eventually do—with God's help—and the child born plays a significant role in God's work of salvation. Even though Mary was young and not "barren," she questioned how she could ever be pregnant. (Luke 1:34) By connecting Mary's child with Samuel, Luke places Jesus squarely in the line of those miraculously born who become an essential part of salvation history.[3]

Other parallels have to do with "kingdom" and the place where God dwells on earth: "Samuel would bring in the kingdom of David, which pointed to the kingdom of God that Jesus would bring in. Furthermore, Samuel's connection both with the temple and with Jesus hint at the typology that sees Jesus as the new and final temple of God…. The temple, and the tabernacle before it, were types of the incarnation that was to come."[4] Linking Jesus to Samuel in this story, Luke hints that Samuel is a lens through which we might see and understand what God is up to in Jesus.

This very notion of incarnation—that Jesus' body has become the dwelling place of God—is asserted early on in

2. Justo L. Gonzalez, *Luke,* Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 25.
3. Ibid., 25–26.
4. Ibid., 43–44.

Colossians (1:19). In the next chapter we read that, even more remarkably, *we* become part of Jesus' body (and thus partake in divinity ourselves) through baptism (2:9–12). The passage assigned for today, Colossians 3:12–17, then offers a beautiful meditation on baptized life in this "one body." If God dwells in the body of Christ, then how could our life in the body be marked by anything other than gratitude, love, and universal praise (Psalm 148)?

Pastoral Reflections

I am struck by the contrast between the anger and anxiety of Jesus' parents and Jesus' own single-minded focus on learning in the temple. Of course, Joseph and Mary were right to be worried and upset. What parent would respond any differently? Yet, Mary and Joseph's (understandable) fixation on human concerns—on their responsibility for the safety and well-being of the child entrusted to their care—prevents them from really seeing and appreciating the amazing scene playing out in the temple.

This part of the story calls to mind times in my own life when my preoccupation with duty, propriety, convention, or regulations impeded grace and thwarted a more profound experience of blessing. I remember one day in seminary when daily chapel included an opportunity for worshipers to anoint one another with fragrant oil. During the service we passed around shells with the oil, into which we dipped our thumbs to take the modest amount needed to smudge the sign of the cross on each other's foreheads. It was a tender—and very civilized—gesture. After the service, just as the next class period was about to begin, my fiancé (and classmate) retrieved one of the shells full of oil and, before I even knew what was happening, anointed my head the way anointing is described in the Bible—the oil poured over my head, saturating my hair, dripping down my face, staining my shirt, reeking of whatever spices had provided the fragrance. I was stunned—and enraged. "What are you *doing?* I'll have to go to class like this!" I will never forget how his face morphed from euphoria to dejection. To this day, he remembers being overcome suddenly by a deep desire to offer me a special blessing, to which I responded with resentfulness and disgust. The fact is, I *did* go to class looking and smelling ridiculous, and I *was* resentful and disgusted. It took me a few showers before I could appreciate the gesture for what it was: an act of love and an offer of grace.

A sermon on this day might consider the ways we become captive to dutiful habits and patterns that foreclose the possibility of unexpected encounters with the divine, or the ways our rigid adherence to protocols snuffs out grace. What rules need to be broken for the sake of love? How can we make space for heavenly encounters even as we fulfill our earthly responsibilities?

Javen Swanson

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2019

Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12
Matthew 2:1–12

Engaging the Texts

As was true last week, we can see clearly why the lectionary combines the first reading and the Gospel lesson: foreigners who come bringing gifts of gold and frankincense figure prominently in both passages. By highlighting this detail, the writer of Matthew's gospel likely intended that readers would recall Isaiah 60 and interpret the wise men narrative through the lens of this earlier story.

Most scholars agree that Isaiah 56–66 was composed after the Babylonian exile, as returning Jews are struggling to rebuild their community in Jerusalem. The restoration anticipated in Isaiah 40–55 has come to fruition as Persia has overtaken the Babylonian Empire, and the Persian king Cyrus has permitted exiled Israelites to reestablish their home in Israel. But the process of restoration is messy and complicated. Walter Brueggemann sees in Isaiah 56–66 ("Third Isaiah") evidence of ideological disputes among the returning exiles, particularly regarding the inclusiveness of the redeveloping Jewish community in Jerusalem.[5] The opening verses of Third Isaiah (56:1–2) implore the Jewish people to "maintain justice and do what is right." The prophet elaborates this imperative in the verses that follow: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree'" (56:3). Foreigners and eunuchs, of course, are groups of people who are to be excluded from the worshiping assembly according to Torah regulations (Deut 23:1–8), which makes the prophet's call for inclusion all the more remarkable. We should keep in mind the prophet's inclination toward inclusion as we approach our reading of today's first lesson.

Isa 60:1–6 envisions the glory of the Lord appearing over Israel as the nations come streaming toward their light, bringing great wealth and praising God. The "wealth of the nations" represents taxes that foreigners will now pay to Israel. Brueggemann points out that this constitutes a great reversal: "For as long as anyone can remember, Israel has paid tribute to others—the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians—all money going out. Now the process is reversed."[6] The abun-

5. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66,* Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 164–166.
6. Ibid., 204–205.

dance of the nations' wealth consists of the very best they have to offer. The prophet even alludes to the queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon (1 Kgs 10:1–13), when this foreign monarch "came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones…. Never again did spices come in such quantity as that which the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon." The prophet anticipates in Isa 60:1–6 just such a day again in Jerusalem, as the nations marvel at Israel and come bearing the abundance of their wealth—including, of course, gold and frankincense.

When the author of Matthew's gospel writes about "wise men from the East" coming to Jerusalem bearing gifts of gold and frankincense, readers should remember these earlier stories from Isaiah 60 and 1 Kings 10. The prophet Isaiah had imagined the nations submitting to Israel and celebrating its preeminence; now Matthew seems to be suggesting that, in Jesus, this day has come.

Pastoral Reflections

The passage from Matthew seems to proclaim a fulfillment of the new day envisioned by Isaiah: Those who have endured exile and have been accustomed to domination will experience a great reversal. No longer will they be crushed under the weight of oppression or left to endure feelings of alienation and rejection. Liberation has come in Jesus, and the whole world will come streaming in to bear witness and give praise to God. A sermon on this text might proclaim good news to those in our midst who currently experience exile or oppression, and might explore what liberation would look like to them.

A preacher might also choose to contemplate the significance of "outsiders" who recognize what God is up to in Jesus while "insiders" are determined to thwart God's intentions. In Matt 2:1–12 it is "wise men"—perhaps akin to astrologers reading the signs in the stars—who find themselves drawn to the manger. These foreigners are not the ones expected to discover and bring gifts to the newborn "king of the Jews." Those who *should* have been there—the "chief priests and scribes"—seem totally uninterested in what is happening in Bethlehem. (Indeed, these may be included in "all Jerusalem" (v. 3) who are described as frightened along with Herod, for their ruling power would have likewise been threatened in Jesus.) In our own day, who are those we would least expect to find at the manger—or worse, those we have written off as beyond God's saving and redeeming activity—who are nevertheless showing us the way to the Christ child? What would it mean for us "insiders" to follow their lead rather than being frightened with "all Jerusalem" by changes on the horizon?

In Matthew's gospel the wise men find their way to Bethlehem by a star's guidance. God uses the language and signs understood by such outsiders to draw them closer. In an era when the institutional church is in decline and fewer people claim adherence to any religious faith, how do our traditional strategies for proclaiming the gospel need to be reevaluated? What language or symbols will connect with those outside the church today—those who also long to see and hear of God's mercy?

Javen Swanson