Preaching Helps

Epiphany of Our Lord, January 6 —
Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7, 2019

The Rhythm of the Seasons

This is about as long as it gets—Epiphany, that is. Because Easter isn't until April 21, the season of Epiphany is longer than usual. This year, the Epiphany of Our Lord falls on Sunday, January 6, so we won't miss the light of that bright star that led the magi to Bethlehem. Many congregations will observe this as the Festival of the Three Kings. The season of Epiphany stretches from January 6 through March 6 when the light of the star is replaced by the sign of the cross marked with ashes on our foreheads.

The rhythm of the Church Year marks a counterpoint to the calendars on our walls, on our phones and in our notebook planners. Most of us work and go to school marking time with those calendars. But the New Year of the Church happened back in December on the First Sunday of Advent as those other calendars were marking the end of the year. When I was a parish pastor in New York City the rhythm of our street was marked by the Jewish new year, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. (In New York City even the public schools observed those holy days and students got the days off, whether or not they were Jewish!) During the festival of Sukkoth, the alleys behind some apartment buildings on our street and space beside the synagogues made room for *sukkahs* decked with vegetables, popcorn strings, gourds and other growing things. They were fragile booths of burlap and wood reminding our Jewish neighbors that their ancestors lived in tents in their wilderness journeys. We Gentiles were reminded, too. Our Lutheran congregation shared space with Beth Am, a Reform congregation. They built their *sukkah* at the side of our shared sanctuary so we couldn't miss the festival in the fall of the year. Union Theological Seminary where I later taught, hosted a *sukkah* in the seminary quadrangle. We worshipped in that fragile structure built by students from Union and Jewish Theological Seminary across the street.

Does it matter—these different calendars? They are different and quite particular ways of *marking time.* That term itself has at least two meanings. A marching band stops moving forward but their feet are still going up and down; we say they are "marking time." But there's another meaning: an intentional attentiveness to the time so that not an hour or a day goes by unnoticed. Someone in captivity scratches a line on the wall to mark another sunrise. A family or someone sitting alone lights a candle to mark each week of Advent. The rhythm of Advent is counterpoint to the frantic countdown to Christmas in the newspaper ads.

Biblical texts also mark our time even as our time marks the texts. This year in Lent we will hear the same texts we heard in 2016. But these texts will not sound the same as they did three years ago. The preacher is different and so are the people listening. Someone is going through chemotherapy for cancer that was undetected three years ago. Someone has been divorced, and another has gotten married. The United States is a different country than we were three years ago when the presidential campaign was beginning. We hadn't seen thousands of migrants walking from Honduras to our border. We hadn't seen children separated from their parents or running from tear gas. How will we hear Jesus saying that he longs to gather us like a mother hen gathers her chicks?

> The sermon does more than *apply* an ancient text to a contemporary setting as though the conversation goes only one way. Our experiences in this time of history also mark the text and we understand the text in a way that is different from any interpretation in the past. [1]

We may look at our sermon files from three years ago and discover that what we said then makes no sense this year. Our time marks the text and we hear what we've never heard before. We see something we hadn't noticed. This is the wonder and challenge of God's living word.

You'll find some familiar friends as well as new writers in this edition of Preaching Helps. Two preachers worked as a team in writing their commentaries, a reminder that preaching doesn't have to be a solitary task. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. An ordained Lutheran pastor, she received her MDiv from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and PhD from Vanderbilt University. **Meta Herrick Carlson** entered seminary skeptical about parish ministry, but then discovered a call to nurture healthy relationships and resist systems where trauma, denial, or broken trust hold power. It turns out the church is a good place to practice these things. Meta now serves as Minnetonka Campus Pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church Twin Cities and thinks the learning from this multi-site model is a gift to the wider church. She's under contract with Fortress Press for two books of ordinary blessings and is a co-creator of the podcast Alter Guild. At home, her three loud and sticky kids run the show. **Erik Christensen** is Pastor to the Community and Director of Worship at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

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[1] Barbara Lundblad, *Marking Time: Preaching Biblical Stories in Present Time* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2007), 13.

(LSTC). Before coming to LSTC, Erik was pastor with St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Logan Square in Chicago. After ten years of intentional redevelopment, the congregation sold its century-old building and relocated to a nearby storefront where they enjoyed new growth and vitality. Erik is a frequent contributor to *Sundays and Seasons* and has written for *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (2012) and *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (2015). He lives in Chicago with his husband Kerry. **Christa M. Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a BA in English and a master's degree in teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa started her career as a high school teacher in Columbia, South Carolina. She was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a PhD from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. **Jane McBride** serves as principal minister of First Congregational Church of Minnesota, United Church of Christ and **Jen Nagel** is lead pastor of University Lutheran Church of Hope. Not only do they serve neighboring congregations near of the University of Minnesota, but they are partners in love, parenting (raising two bright and spunky girls), plenty of adventures, and holding hope. "Do you write just one sermon each week?" This question has been posed plenty of times. They respond: "We like to talk together about the text, share ideas and illustrations, but with different preaching styles, we stick to writing our own!" **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. **Javen Swanson** is associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Saint 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. **Michael Wilker** is the lead pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Before coming to Reformation, he served as president of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. A graduate of St. Olaf College and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, he served bilingual congregations in New York and California. He grew up on a hog farm in southern Minnesota (and was the state 4-H reserve swine showman!). Inspired by Micah 6:8, Mike is passionate to do justice in the world, practice loving-kindness and humbly walk with God each day. As a marathon runner, he's in the journey toward justice and peace for the long-run.

I'm grateful to all these preacher-writers and to you for joining the conversation. God bless your preaching in Epiphany and Lent.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

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

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 wisemen 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.[2] 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). This 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.

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[2] Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 164–166.

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."[3] The abundance 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 by 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

Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43:1–7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14–17
Luke 3:15–17, 21–22

Engaging the Texts

This week's texts are interwoven with natural imagery—water, fire, spirit/wind, and washing. It's tempting to elide these and preach about the Holy Spirit in Baptism. It happens, though, that this is one of the most debated aspects of the sacrament.

Most Christians baptize in the name of the Trinity; however, some baptize only in the name of Jesus Christ. Based in part on today's texts, others practice distinctly separate water and spirit baptisms.

To further complicate matters, the baptism *of* Jesus is not and cannot be equated with baptism *in the name of* Jesus, trinitarian or otherwise. As such, Acts 8 and Luke 3 describe two entirely different rites, to say nothing of their differences in relation to contemporary Christian practices.

Textually, scholars cannot be sure whether John's baptism reflects Jewish proselyte baptisms, purification rituals in

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[3] Ibid., 204–205.

Leviticus or the Essene community, Hellenistic initiation rites, prophetic symbolism, a combination of these, or something else entirely. What we can know is what the Lukan author tells us: John was "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3).

Here too, while it may be tempting to elide repentance and forgiveness, the biblical texts suggest some distinctions. To repent means to think again or think differently. It is to turn one's self toward a new way of living and relating to God. With such a turn, confession of sins might be involved but it is not the only aspect. This difference in action and consciousness seems to be what separates the wheat from the chaff in John's baptismal sermon (Luke 3:15–17). It is also, perhaps, the cord that holds the baptism *of* Jesus and baptism *in the name of* Jesus together.

Although Luke and Acts describe two different practices, both practices reflect a reoriented relationship with God. This is echoed in 1 Peter's description of baptism as an "appeal to God for a good conscience" (3:21). When the emphasis is placed less on forgiveness of sins and more on repentance as a changed way of relating to God and others, the baptism of Jesus himself begins to make more sense within the Lukan story.

In Luke's account, it is after Jesus' baptism while he is praying that the heavens open, God speaks to him, and the Spirit descends. As a child, Jesus related to God through the Scriptures and teachers (Luke 2:40–52), but after his baptism, Jesus begins to relate to God in a new way through the beginning of his public ministry. This change in action occurs *after* the experience of baptism.

In Luke, John's baptism does not require one to adopt a wheat state of mind in order to receive the ritual, the ritual *enables* this change in those who experience it.

Pastoral Reflections

Selling over 1.4 million copies in the first week of its release, Michelle Obama's autobiography, tracing formational experiences from childhood to the board room to the White House, is aptly titled *Becoming*. Perhaps this would be a good title for Luke's untitled account of the life of Jesus as well. From infancy to childhood to the cross and beyond, Luke's story is a story of becoming.

Throughout Luke's prologue Jesus increases "in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52, cf. 2:40). Although Luke is clear that Jesus is the Son of God from his very conception, this Son grows and develops throughout both his childhood and his ministry.

Becoming is also the story of God's people from the beginning of creation. Throughout time the sons and daughters of God suffer trial upon trial. In our first reading, Second Isaiah addresses the despair of the people of Israel under the oppression of Babylonian captivity, reminding them that they are created, called, and accompanied by God (Isa 43:1, 5). The prophet assures "everyone who is called by my name" that they are "created for glory" (Isa 43:7). Life is not about mere survival, it is about giving glory to God.

Jesus is destined for God's glory (Luke 2:32; 21:27; 24:26). At the same time, Jesus is *already* God's glory incarnate. The angels proclaim: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" (Luke 2:14). Luke anticipates a future return of Christ in glory and yet, Luke's Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God is already at hand (Luke 4:21).

Thus, Luke's story is not simply a story of *Jesus'* becoming. In another, larger sense, Luke is a story about the becoming of the Kingdom of God and with it, the becoming of those who serve God's reign. Luke is a story about the becoming of the people of God. Through oppression and temptation, from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, Luke's gospel both tells the story of and incites the experience of the becoming of children of God.

Luke's Jesus extends this call to those who follow him (Luke 6:13), calling "sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Those who follow Jesus are called to reorient their lives and priorities around service not to their own household but to the overarching household of God.

Whatever baptism meant in the first century, this is what it has come to mean today. To repent, to reorient one's self and one's life around becoming a child of God and the becoming of the household, the Kingdom, begun with Jesus.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Second Sunday After Epiphany
January 20, 2019

Isaiah 62:1–5
Psalm 36:5–10
1 Corinthians 12:1–11
John 2:1–11

Engaging the Texts

John 2:1–11 recounts the first of Jesus' signs in John's gospel account; yet, as central as this moment is to our understanding of Jesus, Jesus is not the central character of the story. His very presence at the wedding banquet is narrated as an afterthought (John 2:2). Instead, at the center of this defining moment stands an unnamed mother—the mother of Jesus.

John's gospel account knows no angelic announcements, imperiled births, or childhood dedications. As a result, the wedding in Cana is not only our introduction to Jesus' signs and power, it is the first time we are introduced to his mother. Here John more closely parallels Luke than Matthew and Mark, depicting Jesus' mother as an active character and one who treasures, rather than questions, the ministry of her son.

Nevertheless, throughout John's account, Jesus' mother remains nameless. She appears first at the wedding of Cana, goes with Jesus and his disciples from the wedding to Capernaum (John 2:12), and then drops out of the narrative until she returns with the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross (John 19:25–27). Even the questioning crowds in Nazareth name Joseph, but name Jesus' mother solely by her relationship to Jesus (John 6:42, contrast with Matt 13:55 and Mark 6:3).

Since John names other women, albeit not many, throughout his account, patriarchy alone cannot explain this silence. Surely by the time that John's gospel was written the name Mary associated with the mother of Jesus would have been well established, as demonstrated by agreement in the other accounts. I wonder, therefore, whether no name is given not as a result of lack or bias, but rather in an effort to highlight her role.

The two individuals to whom Jesus might be said to have been closest in John's gospel—his mother and the beloved disciple—are never named. Instead, they kneel nameless at the foot of the cross, faithful to him. Their individuality is thus seen always in service to Jesus, the one whom they loved.

When Mary is introduced, therefore, at the wedding in Cana, her genealogy is unnecessary. Even her name goes unspoken. She is identified instead in relationship to the one who, while on the sidelines of this scene, is central to John's gospel account—Jesus, the Word made flesh. Isaiah's beautiful matrimonial language from the first reading aside, the woman at the center of this wedding story is not a bride, it is a mother. A mother who celebrates and honors her son, showing devotion to him until the very end.

Pastoral Reflections

One of the gifts of relationship is shared language—inside jokes, idioms, finishing sentences. On a staff I worked with, one such shared expression was the phrase, "Whatever that says about me…" It began with a devotion, the name and author of which I no longer recall, detailing a series of authorial idiosyncrasies until finally concluding, "…and whatever that says about me—is probably true."

Whether commenting on favorite jelly bean flavors, approaches to parenting, or favorite books, together we celebrated our individuality (and idiosyncrasies), content with the knowledge that whatever these things said about us, they were probably true. This gift of self-acceptance and acceptance of the other, however, was more deeply rooted in an assurance that each one of these truths about us were (and are) also known, accepted by, and indeed, *gifts from* God God's self.

This is the gospel of 1 Corinthians 12. We are all different; all blessed with our own talents, quirks, and idiosyncrasies. Yet together, we are one body in Christ. Each of our gifts (even those not always named as gifts) come from the same Spirit, which calls us to use each of these gifts, every aspect of ourselves—especially the idiosyncratic ones!—to proclaim that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor 12:3).

This, I think, is what Mary is doing in John's gospel. She cannot turn water into wine. She is not the host of the banquet, able to plan for an adequate wine supply. She is not even the chief steward of the banquet, who may have been able to ration the quantities of wine available to the guests. Mary is a *mother*.

As a Jewish mother in the first-century Mediterranean world, Mary knows how to manage a household. She knows how to stretch scarce resources to provide for her family. She commands not only obedience, but also love and respect from her children. She knows her son and what he is capable of accomplishing. Although she is rarely mentioned in John (and never by name) Mary and her children seem to be traveling together with Jesus and his disciples (John 2:12; see also John 19:25–27). Mary is, it would seem, both a mother *and* a disciple herself. Whatever that says about her is probably true!

Indeed, Mary as Jesus' mother and one of his followers, helps us to see the truth about Jesus. The signs in John's gospel are intended to reveal the deity of Jesus. But more than just showing us *that* Jesus is God, this gospel shows us *how* Jesus is God and *who* that God is in relation to humanity and this world. Put simply: Jesus turns water into wine, and whatever that says about God is probably true.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 27, 2019

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12–31a
Luke 4:14–21

Engaging the Texts

The texts for this Sunday provide scenes of God's people gathered for worship, listening to scripture, and receiving instruction on the meaning of these sacred words. In Nehemiah, the entire community assembles to hear the Torah ("the book of the law of Moses" v. 1) read to them from early morning to midday, with interpretation of the texts provided (v.8). In Luke, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and then delivers his inaugural sermon. Even Psalm 19 offers a reflection on the goodness of the law (vv. 7–10), and suggests that the heavens themselves offer testimony, proclaiming God's gracious presence throughout creation (vv. 1–6).

That is not all they have in common, however, as these texts struggle in their own ways with the role of worship and religious tradition in addressing the needs and concerns of the present moment. In Nehemiah, Israel does not simply gather for worship: "all the people wept when they heard the words of the law" (v. 9). The process of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls had been difficult. There had been both external threats and internal disputes. Greed and narrow self-interest had taken priority over care for one another and commitment to restoring the community. When they finally hear the words of the law, and have its meaning interpreted for them, they are convicted of their sin and weep at the knowledge of their offenses.

A similar dynamic is at work in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, where cultural patterns of honor and shame, power and oppression, are being replicated within the church. Paul was not the first to employ the image of the body as a metaphor for the relationships of power between various peoples and their respective stations in life. Other ancient writings used the image of the body precisely in order to reinforce the status quo by suggesting that some people occupied less essential functions in the body than others. Paul reinterprets the prevailing wisdom of his day, arguing that in the human body and in the communities peopled by these bodies, each member is essential.

That ethic of dignity and inclusion finds its roots in the prophets of Israel and is recovered from history by Jesus as he assumes the role of teacher in the synagogue of his childhood, reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. What is being reinterpreted in this case is not the content of the scriptural text, but the person of Jesus himself. He is not simply "Joseph's son" (v. 22); he is the long-awaited messiah.

Pastoral Reflections

It's not so often that texts assigned for preaching offer an opportunity to reflect on the nature and function of preaching itself. This, however, is one of those occasions. Ezra preaches to the people of God as they dedicate the reconstructed Jerusalem wall and celebrate the return of the exiles. Jesus preaches to the people of Nazareth as they assembled for worship as oppressed people living under Roman occupation. In both cases, ancient wisdom was given new meaning in the current context through the act of interpretation.

Unless the congregation to which you preach is filled with retired pastors, it's entirely possible that listeners have very little idea how you prepare a sermon. Consider what it might be like to share with them the experience of dwelling in the word, uncovering its meaning for your own life, being confronted by the voice of the law, experiencing one epiphany after another as ancient scriptures find new meaning in the present moment. Like Ezra, or Paul, you have been called to reinterpret the tradition you received for these people, in this day and time. Like Jesus, you have been sent to proclaim that God has moved past our history to enter into our present, to fulfill God's promise of restoration and liberation for all people.

Let the reverence for scripture found in these lessons infuse your preaching on this Sunday. Rather than repeating false and harmful, anti-Jewish binaries that set Hebrew scripture against the New Testament by equating the former with a cold legalism and the latter with a warm, relational deity, linger in the words and images from Nehemiah and Psalm 19 that show God's law to be a source of grace and truth. The psalmist describes God's law as more desirable than gold, and sweeter than honey. The priests and scribes console the people in Nehemiah with words of encouragement and the assurance that "the joy of the Lord is your strength" (v. 10).

This pattern of confrontation with the law, followed by consolation administered through the assurance of God's grace and mercy should sound familiar to Protestant preachers acquainted with the law and gospel dialectic. Are there stories from the life of your congregation or wider community that illustrate the ways in which being confronted with the reality of disobedience to the law has created the necessary conditions for needed renewal or reforms? What are the truths that beg to be told in your context that would sound like good news to the poor and release to the captives? How will you interpret these ancient texts in light of the present moment so that God's people might understand this new year to be the year of the Lord's favor?

Erik Christensen

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 3, 2019

Jeremiah 1:4–10
Psalm 71:1–6
1 Corinthians 13:1–13
Luke 4:21–30

Engaging the Texts

These texts confirm, each in their own way, the perils and pitfalls of prophetic ministry. Jeremiah is appointed "over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (v.10). Paul cautions members of the church in Corinth against prophetic speech divorced from the work of love. Jesus experiences first-hand the consequences of delivering an unwelcome message, as the people he grew up with attempt to toss him off a cliff. Prophetic preaching is not for the faint of heart!

God's speech in Jeremiah's call narrative confirms that truly prophetic speech issues from God, as God recalls one action after another in Jeremiah's life, saying, "I formed you," "knew you," "consecrated you," and "appointed you" (v. 5). Each of these actions preemptively addresses Jeremiah's doubts and hesitations, as God already knows those weaknesses in experience or temperament that the prophet thinks ought to disqualify him. Having neutralized those objections, God continues to direct Jeremiah's ministry by declaring, "I send you," "I command you," and "I have put my words in your mouth." (vv. 7, 9) For a prophet of God, confronting the failed and faithless powers of the world is not an elective action, it is a divine mandate.

Nor, however, is prophetic speech simply the act of naming one another's shortcomings, as happens all too often in today's "callout" culture. Paul's letter to the Corinthians denounces all forms of religious speech uttered without love as being ultimately unproductive. Those who practice this kind of speech will end up with nothing because, while human conflict is often self-centered and aims to justify one's own actions and ends, God acts out of the deep love of the creator for the creation. God's love retains all of the qualities named in vv. 4–8, setting the standard for our own care of one another as we speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15).

Sadly, what humanity generally finds most scandalous about prophetic speech is the inclusivity of God's love. When Jesus preaches his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, no one objects to his announcement of the year of the Lord's favor. His choice of texts from the scroll of Isaiah, proclaiming good news for the poor and oppressed, is met with approval as those who had known him from childhood were "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." (v. 22). It is only when Jesus reminds them that God's prophets had consistently worked signs and wonders among the Gentiles, the unclean, and the objectionable, that they turn on him and threaten his life. This then is the warning to those who would take up the mantle of the prophet.

Pastoral Reflections

While some preachers may groan at the sight of 1 Corinthians 13 showing up in the lessons for this day because of its frequent usage at weddings, I wonder if this passage might provide the interpretive key for the surrounding texts. While Jeremiah focuses on the enormity of the prophet's mission, and Luke on the strength of the world's opposition, Paul's comments to the church in Corinth center God's confrontation with the world in God's unfailing, unending love.

What might a sermon that reads Jeremiah through the lens of God's love sound like? The beginning verses of Jeremiah's call story are filled with intimate, maternal imagery: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you" (v. 5). To consecrate something is to make it sacred. God's words to Jeremiah point to the holiness of life, holiness bestowed on the created by the creator, love like that of a parent to a child. God's appointment of Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations confirms that God ennobles our lives with vocations of real consequence for the world. If you sense that the assembly to which you will be preaching stands on the cusp of claiming its prophetic identity, how could your sermon offer loving reassurance that those whom God calls, God also delivers (v. 8). A sermon in this vein might then also draw on the words of Psalm 71, which form a kind of response to the staggering magnitude of Jeremiah's call. The psalmist cries out for God to deliver, to rescue, and to save, appealing to the relationship which began in their mother's womb, evoking the language introduced in Jeremiah.

Or, what might a sermon that reads the Luke text through the lens of God's love described in 1 Corinthians 13 sound like? As the people of Nazareth marvel at the wisdom of his speech, and others wonder how this could be the carpenter Joseph's son, Jesus seems to intentionally provoke the crowd, dropping his approval rating with each subsequent statement. "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!'" Jesus says. It's a bit confusing, since he's not indicated any injury or illness of his own. The saying seems to be in line with the sort of comment that frequently comes up in discussions of foreign aid, as when people say, "We have enough troubles here in our own country. We should clean up our own messes before we get mixed up in other people's business." By naming the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, Jesus reminds the people that God's concern has never shown much respect for national or ethnic boundaries. God's love will not collude with our demonization of the other, will not rejoice in wrongdoing. Instead, as Jesus' ministry demonstrates, God's love will bear with and endure the worst of what humanity has to offer.

Erik Christensen

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 10, 2019

Isaiah 6:1–8, (9–13)
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1–11
Luke 5:1–11

Engaging the Texts

These texts provide a feast for our senses. In **Isaiah** we see the hem of God's robe filling the entire temple, the burning coal resting on the prophet's lip, and those graceful and powerful seraphs. We hear their wings hitting the air, the antiphonal *holy, holy*, and the cry of the prophet: "Here am I, send me." In Year B Isaiah 6 is assigned for Trinity Sunday and includes verses 1–8. Now, for this Fifth Sunday after Epiphany in Year C, we have the option of going on, stretching to include verses 9–13. Consider this option for it adds honesty and complexity to a well-loved and oft-used text. When we stretch to include these additional verses, we realize the weight of the prophet's task. The people have not been faithful; they have not honored God. Now the prophet must push them even further from God: he should magnify their refusal to see, to listen, to understand. They must hit rock bottom, the Lord seems to say. The image of the seed in the stump is a puzzle. A web search reveals how some hardwoods can regenerate from their stumps. To learn more, search "stump sprouts." We see that in a desolate wasteland—vast, empty, twice burned over—new green growth may still emerge. Perhaps some kinds of life can only spring from death. The **psalmist** imagines intimate communication with God despite all that gets in the way: "On the day I called, you answered me." The verses from **1 Corinthians** show up twice in the Revised Common Lectionary's three-year cycle: today and for Easter in Year B. On Easter morning, we think of it as a secondary or supporting text. First Corinthians 15, though, invites us into a wealth of relationship. A relay race unfolds before our eyes. One witness passes the baton to the next, from one generation to another, all the way from Paul to us. In **Luke** we see the boat rocking as Jesus steps in and sits down; the exhaustion and disbelief on the faces of the men; the nets plunging into the deep water; the signal for more help and more hands; the boat sinking, heavy with fish; Peter falling at Jesus' knees.

Pastoral Reflections

Awash in an abundance of sensory experiences, there is also an abundance of sermon possibilities. The themes of **calling** and **passing on faith** can certainly preach. Isaiah has heard the call to stand in the chasm between God and God's people. The disciples will be catching human beings. We ordinary folks receive the word, hold it, and pass it on to the next person. All the while the questions are real: Can I actually do this? Do I want to do this? Simon Peter knows this well—witnessing the mighty power of Jesus, he feels so very inadequate. Jesus' steady Gospel refrain is "Do not be afraid." Paul, in his awkward, self-effacing way, names the grace at the heart of all our calls. We do this not by our own power but by the **grace** of God working in us, through us. This Sunday falls near annual meetings for some congregations. One church officer passes the baton to the next, trusting that they've done what they can and the next person will, too. The same could be said for Sunday school teachers, committee members and pastors, and also bus drivers, teachers, construction workers, nurses, convenience store clerks, and all the rest. They hand-off not simply details and notes and projects, but the holy experiences of hearing God's voice and heeding it, the challenges, the joys, the mysteries. Another angle: Those extra verses in Isaiah caught our attention. What has always seemed like a classic call story (here I am, send me) has layers of complexity. The land is in **turmoil and God seems far off**. That's the story for us, too, isn't it? Morning by morning, the bad news mounts: wildfires, white nationalism, police violence, hurricanes, famines, people without shelter, healthcare, or hope. In her blog post titled *living through the unveiling*, Adrienne Maree Brown says: "**Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered** and we must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil." (http://adriennemareebrown.net/2017/02/03/living-through-the-unveiling) Beneath the veil are truths that could lead to despair. But the seed in the stump and the miraculous catch show us how God works at our dead ends, when our energy is gone, when our courage has died. As the psalmist says, we can ultimately trust that God is with us. The lines of communication are open. But it is often only through a mighty struggle that we really learn to hear God, to see God, to understand what God is trying to say to us and do through us.

Jen Nagel and Jane McBride

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5–10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12–20
Luke 6:17–26

Engaging the Texts

Threading through today's texts are blessings and curses. With a highlighter or similar notation, work through each reading. Who is blessed? Why? What does this look like? Taste like? Feel like? Sound like? Smell like? Notice how some blessings come by actions such as trusting or delighting, while others are showered upon people who hunger or weep. Similarly, who is cursed? Why? Which of the woes are within one's control? Which are due to circumstances? Dare to dig deeper—which circumstances are secondary to earlier choices? Notice how the ancestors and generations get in on the action. Notice the way soil quality and moisture levels are central (Jeremiah and Psalm) and how geography is at work (Luke). How shall we be part of these blessed ones? **Jeremiah** invites us into a contemplative life right where we are. Whether in a dry desert or a lush garden, we are called to bear fruit. It's about the heart, not outward circumstances. The **Psalm** holds themes similar to Jeremiah. Notice the emphasis on "meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night." What a powerful act of devotion and so contemplative in nature. Protestants have often taken a shallow, even adversarial view of the Law, shorting its beauty and power. In reality, the Law in Judaism provides a path, a way of life. In these texts, the Law is the summary of that path, and an example of a way of being in the world. When our vision is obscured by the anti-Semitism of our traditions, the depth of devotion found in Psalm 1 is diminished. In turn, we can unintentionally and unknowingly contribute to further anti-Semitism when we choose not to dwell in texts like this one. To understand the blessings of what the Jewish tradition says about the Law, we must set aside our prejudices. How might a Jewish colleague preach or reflect on "meditating on the Law, day and night"? How does this inform our engagement with the text? **1 Corinthians** doesn't easily fit the blessed and cursed pattern of the other texts. Within the larger section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians about resurrection and return, here Paul over and again describes those blessed ones who, like Christ, will be raised at the second coming. Paul's desire to convince is evident. A connection could be made between first fruits and well-watered fruit. In **Luke** before the blessings and woes, the scene is set with vivid details: location (a level place), the great multitude (and their origins), what the people sought (to hear Jesus, to be healed, to be cured, to touch), and what Jesus does (power comes out, he heals them). It's good journalism with the classic who/what/when/why/where/how. All that, and then Jesus looks up and begins the blessings and the woes. It seems clear that the creators of the Revised Common Lectionary sought the contrasts of blessings and woes when assigning this Sunday's combination of passages. Jesus reminds the listener that the outward appearance of blessing is not necessarily the truth, or the whole truth. The ones who are poor and hungry or persecuted (and thereby blessed) could assume themselves to be the ones Jeremiah describes as withering in the desert. In God's ways, however, there is blessing there, water, fruit. Whether a person perceives themselves to be blessed or cursed, in the parched place or along the lush bank, the situation is less important than seeking God's ways in every situation.

Pastoral Reflections

As happens in our preparation, the textual engagement has led us right into pastoral reflections. We've already explored the theme of **Blessings and Woes** quite a bit. So often we seek (rightly) to help our people dwell in the blessings, seeking vivid stories to illustrate them. Many also yearn to hear words of woe spoken in our time. Consider carefully the reality that these woes don't only convict others, the ones we deem sinners, but also convict us. They are multifaceted, for all is not right in our world and in our hearts. These woes can be preached with a newspaper in hand in the pulpit or at least in one's preparation. Scanning headlines, try making a list of woes. How can these cover local, national, and international situations? How can these feel at once personal to individuals and our communities, while also universal to the human situation? Consider the woes of environmental degradation, the broken immigration system, the harm of racial inequity, the woe of failing to care for the poor. Is there a refrain that returns in preaching these woes? How will the Good News be proclaimed?

A second theme in these readings is the **Contemplative Life.** While at first glance the blessings and woes can seem like dialectics, when seen through a contemplative lens, it's not quite so clear, and this is good news! We may think we're living in a well-watered garden and flourishing, when we're actually in a desert. It's vital to recognize when this is the case and to seek the source. This life allows us to find blessing wherever we are, trusting that God provides blessing for those in need. It also invites us to nourish our roots wherever we are. The injustice of the world exists because the world is not right. When we are comfortable with the world, that may be a sign that we need to look more closely, it's a state of false security, or a false program for happiness, as Richard Rohr would say. (https://cac.org/emotional-sobriety-2015-11-19) The human heart can deceive us. This capacity to deceive ourselves needs to die in order to find the new life of resurrection.

Jane McBride and Jen Nagel

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 24, 2019

Genesis 45:3–11, 15
Psalm 37:1–11, 39–40
1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–50
Luke 6:27–38

> *Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.*
> *Do not fret—it leads only to evil.*
> —Psalm 37:8

Loving Enemies?!

An old *New Yorker* cartoon pictures an assistant demon standing next to Satan peering out over a hell teeming with residents. He smiles in self-congratulation and declares to his boss, "You know we do pretty well when you consider that people are basically good." Today's texts take quite another tack, not trying to convince us that we are basically good and therefore can win God's approval. Quite the contrary, they assume the worst about us—that we will have enemies, for example, or that even brothers can be both envious and devious in acting out their resentments toward one another. But the good news is that God is sufficiently creative so that even our enmity and evil actions can become the raw material of good when God would have it so.

Today's reading from the Joseph saga in Genesis (along with its near conclusion in chapter 50) is for me the heart of the gospel as found in Hebrew scripture. Today's lection begins with Joseph's self–disclosure to his brothers who have come to Egypt seeking food in a time of famine. He reveals that he is the very brother they had so resented as their father's favorite that they had sold him into slavery and falsely misled their father, Jacob, into believing he had been killed by wild animals, producing his blood–spattered coat as evidence. Today's scene is narrated with high emotion as Joseph, now Pharaoh's right–hand man, does his best to disabuse his dissembling brothers of the mistrust they feel toward him, fearing that he might wreak vengeance on them for their jealous actions of old. "*And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here,*" Joseph frankly explains to them, "*for God sent me before you to preserve life… God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God….*" (vv. 5, 7–8). It's almost as if Joseph intends to take away from his brothers not only the shame and guilt of their sin against him but even their freedom to act vengefully, attributing the action to God's more comprehensive salvific intentions.

But as we see in Genesis' ultimate chapter, at the *denouement* of the Joseph saga, Joseph's brothers, out of fear of their brother's possible revenge, try to pull a fast one over on him one last time. They resolve to lie to Joseph that their father, prior to his death, had prevailed upon them to seek their brother's full and final forgiveness—which, in effect, Joseph had already given in today's reading, but which they did not trust. Here Joseph once more articulates a kind of theodicy that doesn't pretend to explain the origin of evil but goes a long way toward explaining how God uses our evil for good. Here Joseph tells his brothers, "'*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm* ("evil" in earlier translations) *to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them*" (vv. 19–21). If you've never tackled Thomas Mann's multi–volumed *Joseph and His Brothers*, a series of novels based on the Joseph saga, now's the time to get started!

In today's Gospel reading, continuing directly on from last week's earlier section from Luke's "Sermon on the Plain," Jesus twice confronts us with the injunction to "*love your enemies*" (vv. 27, 35), perhaps the epitome of the most difficult challenge to the deviousness and perversity of our human hearts, as we heard Jeremiah tell us last week. I remember vividly a bitingly cold winter Sunday morning some years ago when worshipers at our campus congregation found it necessary to run the gauntlet of a small band of folks outside our church bearing signs proclaiming "God Hates Fags" and similar anti–LGBT slogans. It was a Fred Phelps delegation sent to protest our congregation's recent participation in the ordination of a much–loved former intern pastor who happened to be lesbian. Once gathered in worship, what did our Gospel for the day proclaim to us but Jesus' command to "love your enemies," the difficulty of which was made crystal clear that particular day, even and especially "enemies" that claimed allegiance to the same Jesus as we. It was the Word we needed to hear that day. Maybe more within our human reach is the so–called "Golden Rule," much–admired by moralists of every age, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you*" (v. 11). The problem is not so much knowing the right as doing it—finding the power and compassion as enabled by God to forgive if not forget, like Joseph, leaving the judging to God while trusting that God is sufficiently creative to produce both good and justice out of it all. Or as Ben, a character in Alice Hoffman's magnificent, recent novel titled *Faithful* sums up near the story's conclusion in good secular fashion, "I'm glad it all happened . . . even the bad parts."

John Rollefson

Transfiguration of Our Lord/ Last Sunday before Lent
March 3, 2019

Exodus 34:29–35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 2:12—4:2
Luke 9:28–36, [37–43a]

> *The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!*
> *He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake…*
> *Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain;*
> *For the Lord our God is holy.*
> —Psalm 99:1, 9

Listen to Him!

All three synoptic Gospel accounts of Jesus' transfiguration report that Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the mountaintop "*talking to him*." But Luke alone bothers to tell us that they "*were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"* (v. 31). Significant is the fact that the Greek word for "departure" is "exodus," which can't help but connect the violent death that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem with his people's destiny in being led out of Egyptian slavery by Moses who appears in our Hebrew scripture text for the day to remind us of yet another "mountain–top experience." Luke's mentioning of Jesus' impending "exodus" clinches what has long been my supposition that Jesus' taking his inner circle of disciples up the mountain to pray had to do with the growing imminence of his "departure" in Jerusalem much like we will later encounter when Jesus takes these same three disciples to Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal. There he prays in "anguish" that, if it were possible, his *abba* might remove the cup of suffering he sensed lay ahead. A painting of this very scene in Gethsemane was part of the altar piece of the little church in San Francisco before which I used to pray and preside. Words in Danish on that oil painting voiced Jesus' prayer to his father, "*not my will but yours be done"* (22:42). I can't help but think that Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah—those "shades" of his people's past representing the law and the prophets—was needed to help steady and ready him for what lay ahead in Jerusalem.

For all the whiz-bang of the transfiguration's visual light show which, as we can see, borrowed a good bit from the Exodus account of Moses' shining visage, far more compelling is the auditory dimension of the story. After "*a cloud came and overshadowed them"* terrifying the disciples, a voice from the cloud sounded forth with words more than faintly reminiscent of the voice that was heard as Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan at the time of his baptism: "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"* (vv. 34–35). Here we find not so much words of God's personal affirmation and delight as words confirming to the disciples (and, of course, to Jesus himself) that he is God's chosen (the word itself is the origin of our word "eclectic"). What I always find particularly compelling is that we are told that Jesus is the one to whom his disciples are called to *"listen"* or "give heed" as my lexicon suggests.

For me this is a touchstone of Christian faith we too often take for granted, the need to "*listen to him*," to pay the closest possible attention to Jesus' words and actions. Take interfaith relations, for example, where I fear we sometimes spend too much of our time in our dialogues looking for superficial similarities while neglecting to put forward the best and most distinctive aspects of our various faith traditions. It's not so much the church's claims about who Jesus is (important as these are) as it is the very self-revelatory words and actions of Jesus himself heard against the backdrop of his own scriptures as he reinterpreted and embodied their truth that is at the heart of Christian faith. This, for me, was one of the most frustrating things about our recent long slog through church fights over homosexuality—that because Jesus never said anything explicit about same sex issues (our issues, not his) it was as though Jesus had no relevance to the matters before us or that his very way of being in the world and challenging religious exclusivity were not germane to the conversation. Listening to Jesus is still our calling as Christians, as he himself so often urged, as in one of his most commonly attested refrains, "*Whoever has ears to hear let them hear!"* (e.g., Mark 4:9, 23). George Herbert's "Come My Way, My Truth, My Life," (*ELW* #816), set to music by Ralph Vaughan Williams, nicely fits the texts as does the lively Tanzanian hymn "Listen, God is Calling" (*ELW* #513) as well as "Open Your Ears, O Faithful People" (*ELW*#519) set to a lilting Hasidic tune. Though it may be tempting, please avoid singing the hymn with the silliest title ever, "Shine, Jesus, Shine."

The Sunday of the Transfiguration serves as a kind of hinge between the season of Epiphany when we bask in the afterglow of Christmas until swinging the door open to the season of Lent as we journey to Jerusalem with Jesus and the destiny that awaits him there. A simple way of marking this transition and readying ourselves for what Lent betokens is to ritualize the "farewell to alleluia," which can be done as simply as singing or having your choir sing a version of the old Latin hymn translated in *ELW* as “Alleluia, Song of Gladness” (#318) as a sending song or choral benediction.

John Rollefson

Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Engaging the Texts

Ash Wednesday is one of those significant days on which we encounter the same texts year after year. This time I couldn’t help but notice all the ways that hearts show up in these texts. In Joel we have the Lord’s voice calling us to return to God with all our heart. God desires our whole self; no half-hearted repentances will do. Psalm 51 expresses longing for a clean heart, a plea that is rooted in both a clarity about sin—“my sin is ever before me”—and a trust in God’s forgiveness. God’s abundant mercy makes this prayer more than poetry. Deliverance *is* possible. The psalm concludes with the description of a “broken and contrite heart.” In this case a broken heart might be at once shattered by an awareness of our transgressions and broken open to the possibilities of living with the restored joy of God’s salvation.

The Gospel reminds us that God’s transforming mercy shapes how we live, particularly how we use our resources. Where we invest our treasures—money, time, energy, love, attention—says something about how we have been shaped by the power of the cross: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” When we live with a spirit of sacrifice, we will not necessarily be honored by the world, as Second Corinthians observes. We will often find ourselves scorned and misunderstood. But even in the face of the world’s very different value system, we trust in God’s grace. We may appear to have nothing, but in fact we possess everything.

Pastoral Reflections

The poet W.H. Auden had a secret life.[4] Since his death in 1973 stories have emerged of his private generosity, unknown to those who knew him best. He once gave a friend a valuable manuscript that could be sold to pay for an operation the friend could not afford. After World War II Auden arranged to pay for the educational costs of two war orphans, a practice he continued throughout his life. He once learned that a woman from his church was having night terrors, and so he took a blanket and slept in the hallway outside her apartment until she felt safe again. Auden did not want these stories to be known. For whatever reason, he went out of his way to keep them hidden.

My oldest parishioner—a man in his mid-90’s—once asked me why we make the sign of the cross. I think it struck him as too Catholic a gesture for his Lutheran sensibilities. I stumbled through an unsatisfactory answer, but his question has stayed with me. Why ***do*** we enact the religious gestures that we do? Is it to be seen? Because that’s what tradition has taught us? And on this day, why do we show up to have a cross of oil and ashes smudged across our foreheads? Is it performance, piety, or something else altogether?

The Gospel cautions us against a purely performative expression of our faith: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” Don’t give generously to earn praise from others. Don’t pray on the street corners to draw a crowd or fast with melodramatic sighing about how hungry you are. In other words, don’t make it about you.

Lent can sometimes turn into a kind of absurd obsession with what we are “giving up.” It’s fine for people to relinquish their daily latte or favorite dessert for a season, but it becomes all too easy to miss the point. Daily disciplines can be powerful, but only when they point us beyond ourselves. At the threshold of Lent, I sometimes hear echoes of John the Baptist: “Prepare the way of the Lord!” In this season how do we stay focused on the way of the Lord, especially when we realize that it leads directly to the cross? I like to imagine a world in which all of us are running around in secret trying to do as much good as possible without being noticed.

On Ash Wednesday we receive the sign of the cross to remind us of our need for God. It is a stark reminder of our sin. It is an even starker reminder of our mortality, echoed in the words that are both familiar and jarring: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” It is also a reminder of our hope. The cross is the place of our salvation. Whatever we do, in public or in secret, we do because our God has faced down death for us. Faced down death and won.

We also receive the cross as a reminder of our baptism. The baptismal cross may not have been as dramatic as an ashen one—just a light shimmer of oil on our skin. But we trust what that cross represents—God’s faithful promises to us, promises that nothing can shake loose in this life or the next.

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[4] Edward Mendelson, “The Secret Auden,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 20, 2014 issue. Electronic version: https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/03/20/secret-auden/

Both kinds of crosses—of ashes or of oil—wash away with little effort. But the love of God never washes away. God's abundant mercy is eternal. God's steadfast love is everlasting. It follows us as closely as our next breath—from our first breath to our last.

Christa Compton

First Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1–11
Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16
Romans 10:8b–13
Luke 4:1–13

Pastoral Reflections on the Texts

On the first Sunday in Lent we always head into the wilderness for the story of Jesus' temptation. This time around I found myself fascinated—dare I say a little impressed—with how the devil does his work here. The devil is a master manipulator.

We find Jesus in the wilderness, having eaten nothing at all for forty days. He is famished, and that's when the devil shows up to test him with—what else? Food. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." The devil knows that the best temptations speak to our vulnerabilities. By catching Jesus in a moment of profound hunger, the devil seeks to persuade Jesus to fill his own needs. Come on, what would it hurt? One little magic trick. One little loaf of bread. But Jesus does not give in. Jesus resists the temptation to eat what comes at too high a price.

So the devil dials up his game: "Look at all the kingdoms of the world. Worship me, and I will give you power over all of them." Again, Jesus resists the temptation, this time a temptation to hold unbridled earthly power.

Then the devil plays one final card, taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. Surely God's angels will save you." The devil even quotes Psalm 91 in that attempt—a reminder that just because someone quotes scripture does not mean they have your best interests at heart.

Three attempts to test Jesus, to entice him with food, power, and safety. Three attempts, three failures. Keep in mind that we only see these snapshots of temptation. Luke tells us the torment had been going on for the entire forty days.

Each time Jesus responds to the devil's attempts at manipulation, he does so by quoting scripture: "One does not live by bread alone…Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him…Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus had the word on his lips and in his heart, as our reading from Romans describes. All three quotations are from Deuteronomy. They hearken to a time when the people of Israel were also tested in the wilderness. Unlike Jesus, we humans do not always pass the tests put before us.

We see that Jesus is rooted in the Word of God, which is important. But I think there's something more that helps him hold off the allure of the devil's offers. Ironically, it's the devil himself who names it. Twice the devil says "If you are the Son of God…" If. That small little word packs a punch.

We know that Jesus *is* the Son of God. Luke has made that perfectly clear in the three chapters leading up to this moment. The angel told Mary she would give birth to the Son of God. Mary rushes off to tell her dear cousin Elizabeth, who calls Mary "the mother of my Lord." When Jesus was a child, his parents brought him to the temple, where an old man named Simeon took Jesus in his arms and sang a song about how he could now die happy because he had seen the salvation of the Lord. Anna was there too, and she couldn't stop telling people about this holy child. Even Luke's version of Jesus' family tree traces his ancestry all the way back to Adam, son of God. Yes, *that* Adam—from the original temptation story. We can't forget the scene just before this one when Jesus is baptized and the voice of God speaks from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

We know who Jesus is, and so does Jesus. Being grounded in his identity as the Son of God is ultimately what keeps him from giving in to those enticing offers. A less secure messiah would have taken the bait and would have done everything in his power to prove to the devil what he could do. Which would have accomplished exactly nothing. Jesus knows his time is coming, and when it does, it will look not like a party and a throne, but like a cross and a grave.

God has also said to us: *You are my beloved child.* That's our hope when confronted with temptation. I'm not saying we will be as strong as Jesus. That's not possible. But the real temptations—the ones that say *just one more snack, just one more drink, just one more episode, just one more Internet search, just one more purchase, just one more game*—those all depend on our sense that we are not enough. Those things that tempt us echo the voice of Jesus' tormenter: *Don't you want to feel fed rather than empty? Don't you want more power? Don't worry—you can trust what I'm saying.* Those voices are unrelentingly eager to fill the empty spaces within us.

We, too, are beloved children of God. We, too, have been bathed in baptismal waters. We don't need one more of anything to make us whole. We are already whole because God has made us that way. We are, by God's grace, already enough.

We've entered the wilderness, but we do not go there alone. We have a Savior who walks before us, beside us, behind us, and within us as we make this pilgrimage. And nothing else can give us more than that.

Christa Compton

Second Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17—4:1
Luke 13:31–35

Abram second-guesses God's plan to make a great nation through him since he is still childless. The psalmist begs for faith and courage in the face of enemies and oppression. Paul weaves words of pastoral comfort and threat for the church in Philippi because being conformed to Christ's body is easier said than done. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refuses to be careful and tepid in the holy tension of Herod's political power and God's mission to love and save the world.

We have a long history of resisting God's covenants because they are so intimate and dangerous. They change us without our permission or control. They operate in *kairos* time where we are less confident, patient, and self-sufficient.

I don't know the Pharisees' motivation for warning Jesus, but it doesn't seem to matter. They are caught in the timeless compromise of God's Kingdom and Earth's Empire. Perhaps they have grown comfortable in this status quo that allows them to worship a little, to practice their culture a little, to feel free so long as they don't rock the boat.

But like generations of leaders before and after them, this compromise is hardly freedom. They are slaves who tell themselves it could be worse. They are frozen by their fear of change because they do not imagine change can move them from status quo to justice, from slavery to freedom, from death to life. The muscles they once used to dream have atrophied. So, they remain trapped and docile.

Perhaps Jesus' tone is so salty because he can see the chains they won't break, he can hear the excuses they make, he can taste freedom right in front of them and yet they are still starving. He is irritated because God has been a faithful provider who has kept promises since Abram tried counting stars in the sky, but it's not enough. God's people have short memories and are quick to go it alone.

Jesus is not fazed by their warnings because this is precisely where he needs to be! God has come close to the fear, anxiety, paranoia, and shame that trap humanity in unholy compromise. God has come close to feel the suffering and pain we have numbed until it feels strangely comfortable. God has come close so that God can put it all to death.

You can tell that wily fox Herod that I'm busy. I'm busy loving and healing people. And besides, I couldn't fit him in even if I wanted to because I'm booked solid freeing creation today, tomorrow and on the third day. If he wants to get on my calendar and kill me, he'll need to use kairos *time because I am God's promises alive and free.*

Jesus acknowledges how much easier it would be to run around Jerusalem herding God's people like chicks, smothered into obedience and salvation. Yet God desires that our relationship with the Kingdom of Heaven look radically different from the threats and oversight we already know in Herod.

So, there is lament instead. Jerusalem was a place where prophets and reformers had long been put to death for revealing God's dreams on earth. Resisters and martyrs would be killed for generations after Jesus, too. Jesus names the distance between our will and God's will, the way we save and the way God saves. It is like a vast chasm, and so Jesus laments this city only vaguely recognizable: *Isn't this the home of God's chosen people? Are these the ones who have been delivered from slavery, captivity, and exile? And yet they hide, pander, and bend like other nations.*

I am grateful for this show of grief. Jesus is already feeling the weight of our bondage to sin and aches for the magnitude he will carry on the cross. It will crush him like it has crushed us. If he did not already know, Jesus now sees that we cannot and will not save ourselves. We need a king who can put to death the things that are killing us, who can give us new life beyond fear and shame.

So, he will not run away from this threat like the rest of us. God is finished sharing us with the things that constrain and diminish our bodies, minds, and spirits. Jesus will not hand us over to those who promise safety and life so long as we take up less space and make less noise until we disappear into the status quo. No! Jesus vows to heal and love and serve on the way to the city where he will hold space for life abundant and make noise for the sake of God's justice and peace.

Take heart, people of God. We believe in the One who can make nations of one, who hears your prayers for faith and courage, who builds up the body of Christ through generations of hope, who does not shy away from bearing everything we need—even though our memory is short.

Blessed is the one who comes into our cage,
breaking the chains of fear and shame!
Blessed is the one who comes into our compromise,
  taking up space and making noise
  for heaven's sake.

Blessed is the one who comes into our death,
bearing and breaking everything we have
hidden away.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
You set your people free, even when we forget.

Meta Carlson

Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1–9
Psalm 63:1–8
1 Corinthians 10:1–13
Luke 13:1–9

Here's an example of Jesus preaching and teaching with the scriptures in one hand and the newspaper in the other! He's probably referring to recent events that have people talking about why bad things happen and what sin has to do with it. We don't have to be experts on first-century sacrifices to know that the gossip about Pilate and Galileans is charged with political and religious tension. We know that Pilate was a brutal governor, his punishments often gory and attended by a public audience. The second reference sounds like a terrible accident at a construction site. Innocent people were killed, but we do not hear malicious intent.

Jesus is less concerned with providing a rationale for the evil they have witnessed and instead focuses on their communal response to the trauma. After all, the suffering has already occurred and cannot be controlled or changed by the crowds. Their decision to scapegoat or practice empathy, however, is still within their jurisdiction.

What good does it do the dead to have their sins measured by you? Is this the reward of the living? Is this what God intends for those of you with breath and heartbeat? Of course not! Listen to yourselves, trapped in the myth of scarcity and focused only on what is not yours to know.

It is human nature for survivors and bystanders to seek patterns or purpose in the randomness of life's horrors. It's a defense mechanism created to distance ourselves from that fate, to explain why we are unscathed and others were not so fortunate. We have not evolved beyond scapegoating and still struggle to stand proximate to the pain of others.

What happens when survivors of sexual abuse tell their stories? So often they are met with questions about their own behavior, words, boundaries, decisions, and actions. These interrogations might not be malicious, but they aren't helpful either. Questioning the survivor implies they are not believable or that they did something to incite this violence. Retelling the details of an assault can mean having to relive the traumatizing experience all over again, all for the curiosity of the person prodding skeptically. We want to know why they left the bar alone that night, what they were wearing, if they had been flirting and why they hadn't told anyone sooner. We want to know because being proximate to pain is scary. Sharing suffering with another is vulnerable. We'd rather play detective and figure out how to avoid the pain all together next time. So, we measure their sins. We go looking for a scapegoat.

What happens when a caravan of migrants begins moving from violence and poverty in central America toward safety and opportunity in the North? We want to know how many. We wonder who might be hiding among the vulnerable. We try throwing money at the problem to help them stay put. We get nervous about what might change if they find their way to our jobs, our services, and our neighborhoods. We look for a bad apple in the mix or blame an entire country for failing its people. It's hard to hear the stories of single mothers walking twenty miles each day with their small children, to wonder who might want them dead back home, to grieve for these refugees who do not yet know that they might be caged apart from their children at our border. It is easier to wish them away than it is to learn about America's role in their country's civil war. So, we measure their sins. We go looking for a scapegoat.

This is the behavior Jesus condemns, our habit of looking for the sins of others instead of our own, our pattern of making other people smaller so we can feel big, our quick distance from the pain and suffering of others as though that space will strengthen our own lives.

Repent, you fools. Repent of this scorekeeping and fear mongering and blaming of the other! Counting sins is not the business of human beings. If you must notice sin, then notice your own first and do not let it keep you from compassion for your neighbor. You will find life when you spend your time and energy taking action on what is actually yours to control and manage instead of everything else.

Then Jesus goes on to tell them a parable about a fig tree that wouldn't bear fruit. Year after year, the same care (or lack thereof) yielded nothing. The landowner became irritated with that failure and wanted to punish the tree, but the gardener asked him to wait one more year. After all, the definition of insanity is trying the same thing, over and over again, but expecting a different result. Perhaps a new approach would help the tree bear fruit. Or perhaps not. But the gardener was willing to try. Neither man could control that the fig tree had been wasting soil this far, but they could control what happened next. It would require patience, proximity, curiosity, and withholding blame.

The parable doesn't tell us how the tree fares the following year, but that's beside the point. The landowner and the gardener repent of their old ways—their disgust, irritation, and chiding—and instead opened themselves up for the sake of new fruit and life abundant. It meant getting their hands dirty. It meant a deeper investment in creation. It meant they were willing to be changed by the seasons it took, but I'm willing to guess it was worth it in the end.

Meta Carlson

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:9–12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16–21
Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

Engaging the Texts

The excerpt from Joshua about a Passover meal compliments the story of the feast at the end of Jesus' parable of the father and two sons. This is the first Passover commemorated by the Israelites in the "land flowing with milk and honey" before the conquest of Jericho. As the ancient Israelites traveled from Shittim to Gilgal, God dried up the bed of the Jordan River so the entire nation could cross. Gilgal refers to the stones the Israelites rolled up from the riverbed to make a memorial of the crossing. Micah recalls the crossing as an example of God's many gracious, saving acts (Micah 6:5).

Psalm 32 is a joyful expression of someone who has had the weight of sin lifted from their body. Coming immediately after the story of the Passover from Joshua, we could forget the meal is the commemoration of a communal liberation from disgrace and begin to focus only an individual's guilt and deliverance. "Mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD" (Ps 32:10b) can be translated "the one who trusts in the LORD shall be surrounded by steadfast love (*hesed)*." Sung on the day we hear Jesus' parable, Ps 32:10–11 can echo the scene of the merciful father who embraces a wayward son and then calls the household to rejoice.

The second reading extends the theme of God's merciful embrace to God's reconciliation of the world through Christ. Surrounded by God's loving-kindness—in Christ—human beings and the world are a new creation. Could what is "old" be the judgment of us and other human beings "according to the flesh (*sarx)*"? (The NRSV reads, "according to a human point of view.") Often *sarx* is linked with the rebellious character inherited from Adam and Eve from the primordial era of creation. Sometimes *sarx* is connected to the outward appearance of circumcision in contrast to a faithful heart (2 Cor 5:12; Phil 3:4). In Christ, we are no longer judged—nor bound to judge others—according to the *sarx,* physical characteristics, or trespasses. Instead, God entrusts Christ's representatives with the message of reconciliation—to entreat others to accept God's embrace and to embrace one another.

In the Gospel reading we hear Jesus tell the story of the father and two sons. But something's missing: the lectionary skips the parable of the shepherd who found the one lost sheep and the parable of the woman who found one lost coin. By reminding the congregation of the setting in which Jesus tells the parable of the father and two sons (Luke 15:1–3), the hearers can imagine a merciful God who embraces tax collectors and sinners and welcomes the entire household to rejoice.

Pastoral Reflections

First, consider the word *prodigal.* Jesus' parable has come to define the word. "Prodigal" comes from Latin and means "lavish." A prodigal person is someone who spends recklessly, wastefully, or imprudently. A second meaning is that a prodigal person gives freely, lavishly, and generously. Many of the people hearing this story in worship will think this story is called *The Parable of the Prodigal Son.* Many ear-catching sermons have retitled this story *The Parable of the Prodigal Father* and proclaimed God's prodigious love. (See also Timothy Keller's book with the same title.)

Whenever the metaphor of God's embrace appears, I remember Miroslav Volf's book *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation.* How does God embrace the world? At what cost? How can we stop excluding people from our communities and nations—and embrace?

The rich and varied textures in Jesus' parable remind many of Rembrandt's painting, *Return of the Prodigal.* Henri Nouwen's best-selling book, subtitled *A Story of Homecoming,* engages the painting and the parable. The painting helps Nouwen delve into the three main characters of Jesus' parable as archetypes of his own spiritual life. Congregations could display Rembrandt's painting in the sanctuary. They could organize small group studies to read through Nouwen's book. Congregations could also find other visual representations of the parable and see what other artists have communicated. (Search *prodigal daughter.*)

Nouwen's book is an example of opening up a parable by imagining oneself as each of the characters in the story. In addition to the three male characters, Rembrandt and Nouwen notice two women in the shadows. Preachers could invite the rest of their congregation members to imagine they are various characters in the story—including those beyond the father and two sons: residents of the foreign country, the younger son's employers, his carousing partners, the so-called prostitutes the older son says the younger son hired, the father's enslaved workers who are called to get the robe and ring and fix the banquet, the enslaved worker who meets the older brother.

Preachers should intentionally invite hearers to imagine themselves as characters beyond their own gender—and also to see themselves in their own gender in the story. Who was the mother of the two sons? Enslaved workers and prostitutes could be people of any gender.

And then the preachers might recall that people of all genders were also at the table eating with Jesus when he told this parable and the parable of the shepherd finding a lost sheep and the woman finding a lost coin. Can a sermon find and embrace all those people as God's wide embrace does? What was lost has been found! Come, let us rejoice and eat!

Mike Wilker

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019

Isaiah 43:16–21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b–14
John 12:1–8

Engaging the Texts

In the context of the second portion of Isaiah, the Persian emperor Cyrus has just—or is just about to—conquer the Babylonians and free the Jewish exiles. Today's reading compares this new liberation to the Exodus when God parted the Sea of Reeds and the ancient Israelites walked across dry land. The Egyptian chariots and warriors were drowned by the rushing waters (See Miriam's Song, Exod 15:21). The second part of the reading flips the water metaphor. Instead of waters parting to make a dry path, God will make a waterway in the wilderness.

Psalm 126 sings of the return from Babylonian exile. Dreams can be both divine revelation and fleeting visions. The psalm remembers the joy of the liberation vision and makes room to petition God to continue to restore the livelihood of people. "*Watercourses*" in the psalm echoes the Isaiah reading. The Negev is an arid, but productive, southern part of ancient Judah. Its cities were especially hard hit by the Babylonian conquest and exile.

The excerpt from Paul's letter to the Philippian community extends his vehement opposition to circumcision for Gentile-Christians. Paul's adversaries may have been Jewish-Christians or Gentile-Christians pushing a certain interpretation of scriptures about circumcision. According to Paul's self-evaluation, his sacred religious, national, tribal, educational, and partisan membership exceeds any and all opponents. Yet all that sacred status is a dung heap compared to knowing Christ Jesus, and the power of his resurrection and his suffering.

The anointing of Jesus by a woman is included in all four gospels (cf. Matt 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–11; Luke 7:36–50). The person who anoints Jesus is unnamed in the synoptic texts. While Matthew and Mark tell a similar story and place it at Bethany, Luke is different and sets the story in Galilee. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus says the anointing is preparation for his burial. In Luke, Jesus interprets the anointing as an act of thankful devotion by a forgiven sinner. Luke then mentions three women healed by Jesus who provided for him and the other disciples from their wealth: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna (Luke 8:1–3).

John says the person who anointed Jesus is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. Many who had come with Mary and witnessed the raising of Lazarus believed in Jesus. John says that when the council heard of this, "from that day on they planned to put Jesus to death" (John 11:53). After Mary anoints Jesus, a great crowd gathers to see him and Lazarus. The next day, this is the crowd that hails Jesus with palm branches as he enters Jerusalem.

Pastoral Reflections

The story of a woman anointing Jesus is heard sporadically in the church. It is not read at all during the Year of Matthew (Year A). The Year of Mark (Year B) includes the anointing in the Passion Sunday reading. In the Year of Luke, (Year C), the church hears John's story of Mary anointing Jesus on this Fifth Sunday in Lent. Later in June, Luke's story is appointed to be read (Lectionary 11 C) if it falls after Holy Trinity Sunday. In 2019, Holy Trinity is June 16, so the anointing of Jesus by the forgiven woman will not be heard in regular worship for three more years.

Whatever the year, preachers should be clear about the differences and similarities between the stories. Mary of Bethany's anointing is boldly intimate and strategically prophetic. Mary and Jesus had a deep relationship with one another before her brother's death. They have listened and talked to one another. When her brother was dead in the tomb, Mary knelt at Jesus' feet and agitated him: "Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died." After Jesus raised her brother from the dead, Mary knew Jesus was a marked man. She knows what will happen. She intentionally crafts and enacts a public action, a ritual overflowing with meaning. She claims agency to be the ritual leader to anoint Jesus prophet, priest, and king. Her ritual prepares Jesus—and the rest of the disciples — for Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Mary of Bethany's story is full of sensuality—oil and fragrance, feet and hair, a woman touching a man in bold intimacy. The lavish sensuality is one way this story is similar to the anointing of Jesus by the forgiven woman. Those gestures are also why women who anoint Jesus are slandered as being too sexually expressive. *Jesus Christ: Superstar* goes further and conflates the woman who anoints Jesus with Mary Magdalene and a prostitute. When Judas questions how Mary Magdalene was able to afford such expensive perfume, he implies she gained the money through prostitution. But the musical goes beyond what is said in the gospels. There is no evidence that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

A sermon that honors Mary of Bethany's anointing of Jesus might explore the ways she embodies her devotion and gratitude so fully and intimately. Preachers could encourage hearers to follow Mary's example to be boldly intimate with Jesus Christ.

Mary's prodigious devotion could be an interesting parallel to the lavishness of the father in Jesus' parable of the father and two sons read the previous week. Could our gratitude to Jesus be as lavish as the father's embrace?

Finally, could the community of disciples lavish Mary's care and respect upon people who are poor in their midst? What would that look like and smell and feel like?

Mike Wilker

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