

Preaching Helps

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 6

— Christmas Day, December 25, 2019

A Preacher Stands Up to Preach...

...and the lectionary texts that have been read won't sound the same as in any other place. The exact words of the scripture readings may vary according to the chosen translation, but what people hear will be different even if every congregation uses the New Revised Standard Version. After the presidential election in November 2016 some preachers reported that members of their congregations were upset because the readings were too political. "Why did you choose these Bible passages?" they wanted to know. If the preacher answered, "These readings are from the lectionary," that didn't seem to make much difference.

Many pastors have told me this is a very hard time to preach. The United States is so divided that almost any sermon will cause some people to cry, "I'm sick and tired of hearing about politics in church!" Other people may push the pastor saying, "Please talk about what's happening at the southern border. I can't believe we're separating children from their parents!" Years ago I heard a homiletics professor counsel preachers to "give every person a place to stand." But is that possible?

What if we consider the First Reading from Habbakkuk for the first Sunday of October:

"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..."

The pastor stands up to preach...

...to people in a wealthy suburb where the average home sells for \$450,000

...to people in the city, including many immigrants from Mexico and Central America, several of them undocumented

...to Iowa farmers hoping for a good harvest, worried about being able to sell their soybeans and corn, uncertain about the impact of tariffs

...to college students, a number of professors and others related to the nearby university; most members identify themselves as political progressives

...to people in an Arizona retirement community, many formerly from Minnesota and Wisconsin

...to people in the congregation you serve

What is the vision God calls Habbakkuk to write? Whatever the vision is, it's meant to be public rather than private, the writing so large that a runner can read it. Billboard size! What vision do members of your congregation long to see and hear? What vision do they fear? How is your vision different from most of the people to whom you preach? Of course "the congregation" isn't a block of uniformity! Is there any vision almost all the people share? Will your attentiveness to personal fears and hopes help people hear larger political concerns? As pastor you know there are personal longings as well as public and political ones. Someone spent Friday watching the vision of the waiting room monitor track their loved one's progress from prep to surgery to recovery room. Farmers are watching the vision of weather forecasts on the evening news, hoping to get into the field this week. You know these stories better than the person writing this column.

Preaching is hard in these times of division and fear. I don't have any easy answers. I agree with something Fred Craddock said years ago: "The best sermons will never be found in books because they were preached at a certain time for specific people." Those sermons might not make sense anywhere else. Here are a few preaching resources I've found helpful for times such as these: *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* by J. Philip Wogaman; *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* by Frank Thomas; *Preaching in the Era of Trump* by O. Wesley Allen (obviously left-leaning but includes helpful guidance for any setting); *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* by Charles L. Campbell (he calls preachers to both "expose" and "envision" rather than just one or the other), and I'll add my book, *Transforming the Stone: Preaching through Resistance to Change* (a few years old but attentive to people who feel left behind and left out).

I'm grateful to writers for this issue who help us hear the texts in fresh ways. In this issue we welcome a new writer Elaine Hewes, a Maine pastor and writer. I'll add a plug for two published authors in these pages: Patrick Cabello Hansel's book of poems, *The Devouring Land* was published this year and John Rollefson's trilogy *Postils for Preaching* is now available for lectionary years A, B and C. **Christa M. Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a B.A. in English and a Masters in Teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa 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 Ph.D. from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2013 and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. **Patrick Cabello Hansel** has served

for over thirty years in multicultural communities in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. With his wife, Luisa, he pastors San Pablo/St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. Together they began the Semilla Center for Healing and the Arts. Patrick is a poet and fiction writer. His book of poems *The Devouring Land* was published this year by Main Street Rag Publishing. **Elaine Hewes** is a retired Lutheran pastor who now does Sunday supply in a number of Episcopal and Lutheran congregations along the coast of Maine, where she has lived for forty-two years, and where she and her husband, Michael, raised their three children. A former homiletics teacher at Bangor Theological Seminary and a lover of the arts, Elaine is passionate about finding ways of breaking open (kaleidoscoping) the biblical text using the language of music, poetry, and the “ordinary things” of our beautiful, fragile, suffering world. **Wilbert “Wilk” Miller** and his wife, Dagmar, recently retired to Essex, Connecticut, after serving Holy Trinity, New York City; First Lutheran, San Diego; Augustana, Washington, D.C. and Calvary in center city Philadelphia. **Stan Olson** is finding great joy in his vocations as husband, father, grandfather, pastor, and gardener. He explored several aspects of the pastoral vocation—serving congregations in Duluth and New Ulm, Minnesota; teaching New Testament at Luther Seminary; serving as bishop of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod of the ELCA; and leading ELCA work with ministry, education, youth, and young adults. He was president of Wartburg Theological Seminary when he retired in 2015 and later served as interim president of Trinity Lutheran Seminary. **Jan Schnell Rippentrop** is a homiletics professor with the Association of Chicago Theological Schools DMin in Preaching Program, and an adjunct worship professor with Wartburg Theological Seminary. In her academic writing she is particularly interested in how eschatology liberates people to hope in, and work toward, the justice that God creates. She is the co-founder and pastor of JustChurch in Iowa City, a community enacting that to know Jesus is to do justice. In her teaching, preaching, and research, she is committed to interdisciplinarity, theories that have street cred, and methodologies that recognize the inherent value and wisdom that each participant brings. A conference speaker and preacher, she delights in God’s spirited movement in the fabric of our daily lives and on the streets of our public spaces. **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 books *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary* are now available for Years A, B and C. (The editor highly recommends them as preaching companions alongside “Preaching Helps.”) John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran

Church. **Michael Wilker** is senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, he served as parish pastor in California before becoming national director of Lutheran Volunteer Corps. Back in the parish now, he finds it exhilarating and challenging to be a pastor and preacher close to the Capitol and the White House.

God bless you and your preaching as we move from Ordinary Time to the season of Advent, from the gospel of Luke to the gospel of Matthew. Trust that God has a word for you and for the people who will be listening.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, “Preaching Helps”

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost October 6, 2019

Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–4

Psalm 37:1–9

2 Timothy 1:1–14

Luke 17:5–10

Reflections on the Texts

Habakkuk, a minor prophet who lived about 2,600 years ago, was sick and tired of being sick and tired. He stood before God uttering, not what God might want to hear, but what weighed heaviest on his heart: “How many times do I have to yell, ‘Help! Murder! Police!’ before you come to my rescue? Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day?”¹

Eugene Peterson writes: “Most prophets, most of the time, speak God’s Word *to us*...But Habakkuk speaks our word *to God*. He gives voice to our bewilderment, articulates our puzzled attempts to make sense of things, faces God with our disappointments with God.”

God’s response to Habakkuk’s questions was inconceivable: “Something’s about to take place and you’re going to find it hard to believe. I’m about to raise up Babylonians to punish you, Babylonians, fierce and ferocious” (Habakkuk 1:5b–6, *The Message*). How dare God use a despicable adversary, Babylon, to destroy God’s country? Habakkuk was fuming; we would be fuming, too. We prefer God on our side and, if God raises a finger, it better be pointing straight at our enemy.

Even after Habakkuk voiced his fiercest grievances to God, his prayer still had a long way to go: he had to shut up

1. Scripture taken from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPressPublishing Group.

and listen for God's answer. Longing for God's gift of waiting patiently, T. S. Eliot begs, "Teach us to sit still."² Sitting still in prayer and waiting for God's response seems prayer's most challenging test. It was through sitting still and waiting that Habakkuk's people finally were assured of their future return to Jerusalem. This return, however, took longer than they wished or expected and the time frame occurred on God's clock, not on Habakkuk's nor on theirs.

Are we able to wait as Habakkuk was required to do? Saint Paul was willing to wait as he held fast to Habakkuk's declaration, "the righteous live by their faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). Martin Luther was willing as he embraced Habakkuk's words as his foundational phrase. (Lutherans among us might consider changing our name to *Habakkukians!*) This righteous wait, trusting that God will answer our prayers better than we can ever imagine, is the essence of faith.

This call to patient waiting in the face of catastrophe, confusion, and grief is woven through today's readings. "Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices," sang the psalmist (Ps 37:7). Lois and Eunice's faithful waiting deeply moved Saint Paul (2 Tim 1:5). Paul invites us to similar waiting: "Join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God" (2 Tim 1:8).

This enduring trust that God will provide in times of agony, anxiety, and exasperation is highlighted by Luke as well: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Luke 17:6).

Such mustard seed faith can achieve the unthinkable. Nine members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, were murdered on June 17, 2015, soon after they had welcomed white supremacist Dylann Roof (a Lutheran) to join their Bible study. Many surviving family and church members gathered at the bond hearing for this 21-year-old killer and offered their forgiveness. One was Nadine Collier, whose mother, Ethel Lance, had been the longtime church custodian. When it was her turn to speak, she said, "I just want everybody to know, for you [Dylann Roof] to know, I forgive you!"³

As we get up to preach, we will be at our finest when we struggle to stand in the footsteps of the courageous ones like Habakkuk, Eunice and Lois, and Nadine Collier. We will do our best to do as God charged Habakkuk: "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" (Habakkuk 2:2,3).

One such saint who wrote the vision plain was Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, assassinated in 1980, while celebrating Mass. In "A Future Not Our Own," he writes:

*It helps, now and then, to step back
and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision...
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything...
We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.*

As we craft our sermons for this Sunday, we do well to seek ways to invite those to whom we minister to trust the psalmist's words: "Those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land" (Ps 37:9). In this generation as in the past, we face much that seems inexplicably shocking. May we speak candidly and courageously, inviting the blessed ones to see God's vision as plainly as possible so that they, too, will be inspired to wait patiently on the LORD.

Wilk Miller

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 13, 2019

2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8–15

Luke 17:11–19

Reflections on the Texts

The military commander Naaman and the prophet Elisha, the young girl and a couple of mighty kings—what a story!

Wash in the Jordan seven times and you shall be clean? There are those who use numerology to illuminate why seven was the perfect number. Yet what if seven is a mystery beyond our comprehension? What if there is nothing more to seven than Elisha commanding Naaman to wash that many times in the Jordan? No fancy empirical explanation necessary.

Then there is the messy matter of the muddy puddle known as the Jordan River. Why not wash in a magnificent river, why not in a royal bath? Again, no explanation is offered. What about Naaman, a military bigwig tormented by

2. "Ash Wednesday," *T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1934), 84.

3. Jennifer Berry Hawes, *Grace Will Lead Them Home*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019), 74.

leprosy, the one with “ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten festal garments...and horses and chariots” (2 Kings 5:6, 9)? Who could ever conceive of him humiliating himself by jumping into the dinky Jordan?

Oh, and Elisha. He was not the sort who inspired confidence. Earlier in 2 Kings, a group of small boys jeered at him, “Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!” (2 Kings 2:23). And, fascinatingly, the idea of Elisha doing the healing came not from the king of Aram but from, of all people, “a young girl captive from the land of Israel” who served Naaman’s wife (2 Kings 5:3).

This isn’t how things were supposed to be accomplished in the world of the well-heeled and powerful. For those who delighted in dropping names (“Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel”) and were accustomed to the finest accommodations, receiving directives to clean up in a two-bit river via a servant girl and bald-headed prophet was preposterous. Is it any wonder Naaman protested? For whatever reason, the protocol of ceremonial trumpets, elaborately dressed honor guards, and royal refinements was absent; instead, Naaman was simply told, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times.”

Aren’t we all a bit like Naaman? Don’t we prefer mighty rivers like the Abana and Pharpar of Damascus? Aren’t these rivers better than anything Israel has to offer—or our struggling churches for that matter?

The servant girl pointed to God’s wondrous healing power occurring through a backwater prophet and a measly river. She was like those in our own day who are able to behold enchanting mystery in modest things (bread, wine, and water) and humble words (“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” and “Take and eat”). That is enough (“*Satis est*”) for healing to occur declares the Augsburg Confession.

The need for continual training in comprehending how God comes to us also becomes apparent in the story of the ten lepers. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem when ten lepers cried out, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.” They knew who could heal them. Maybe they knew too well; perhaps nine of ten took Jesus’ healing power for granted.

Many know the story of the lepers. All were losers, all were healed, and only one celebrated the miraculous recovery. The grateful one was a double loser: not only did he suffer from a dreadful skin disease, worse yet, he was a dreaded Samaritan. Remarkably, this outsider was the only one who thought to say, “Thank you.”

We can point our Sunday listeners to similar grateful people in our day like Mexican immigrants who get jobs cleaning rooms at Motel 6 and picking fruit in scorching fields and yet, somehow, are able to thank God for their work.

Whether we care to admit it or not, we who gather at

church on Sunday morning are losers as well. We stand before God with our failures, foul-ups, and fiascoes and are told that in eating trifling crumbs of bread and sipping smidgeons of wine, we can be made well again. Will we give thanks for Christ’s body and blood or go on our merry way, acting as if nothing much has transpired? The Sunday meal offers a repeated opportunity for gratitude and is often called the Eucharist for that reason. It is here that God invites us to touch and taste the gifts of heaven that strengthen us to go out into our groaning world to make a positive difference.

Annie Dillard teaches us to infuse our liturgies with mystery and thanksgiving. She writes of the marvel of purchasing communion wine for her little country church: “How can I buy the communion wine...Shouldn’t I be wearing robes and, especially, a mask? Shouldn’t I make the communion wine? Are there holy grapes, is there holy ground, is anything here holy? There are no holy grapes, there is no holy ground, nor is there anyone but us.” After she buys the wine, where she can also purchase eggs, sandpaper, broccoli, wood screws, and milk, she’s out on the road again, “toting a backload of God.”⁴

Mary Oliver fills our eyes with similar *tenth leper gratitude*:

*When death comes...I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.*

*I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*⁵

May our simple sermons invite the beloved to be married to amazement through miniscule baptismal fonts, paltry wafers, and ramshackle sinners like ourselves. By grace, may we bear a backload of God out into the world, giving thanks to the Almighty One every step of the way.

Wilk Miller

4. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 63–64.

5. Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes,” from *New & Selected Poems: Vol 1*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost October 20, 2019

Genesis 32:22–31

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Luke 18:1–8

Engaging the Texts

If you're looking for perfect people making wise choices in ideal circumstances, try reading something other than the Bible. Jacob has been both the deceiver and the deceived. We find him leaving the land of his father-in-law, Laban; these two men have a long history of playing tricks on one another. They appear to reconcile at the end of Chapter 31, but Jacob turns from one messy family history to another. When we catch up with Jacob in today's reading, he is headed to meet up with his brother, Esau, whose birthright he had stolen years earlier. Jacob has no reason to expect that this meeting will go well, so he pleads for God's protection and sends lavish gifts to Esau in a desperate attempt to appease his brother. Ultimately Jacob finds himself in a wrestling match that lasts all night—a struggle that he understands to be with God. Jacob walks away with a new limp and a new name—right into an encounter with Esau that goes much better than Jacob deserves. If there was an easier path to reconciliation, Jacob does not seem to have found it.

The widow in today's gospel has her own challenges. We don't know what case she is pleading or who her opponent might be, but we do know that it is not a fair fight—the lone widow with no social or political standing versus the callous, indifferent judge who has position and power. But the widow is persistent. She refuses to relent.

I can't help but hear the 2 Timothy reading as a homiletical pep talk for preachers in our present moment. The challenges here are familiar these days, especially those people with "itching ears" who prefer to learn from teachers (or cable news or social media or online sources) that tell them what they *want* to hear rather than what they *need* to hear. Be persistent, the writer of 2 Timothy reminds us. Proclaim the message, whether or not it is favorably received.

We all face our own versions of the challenges named by today's texts—wrestling with God at midnight, confronting those who turn away from truth, or knocking on the doors of people who just want us to go away. What God promises us—in the words of today's psalm and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is that evil will not prevail. Our lives are in God's hands. Of that we can be sure.

Pastoral Reflections

We have many excuses for avoiding the work of justice: We don't have time. We feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the world's needs. We want to learn more about an issue before we get involved. We're worried about the potential backlash. We're not sure what one person can really accomplish.

We long for conditions to be ideal before we pursue justice. When work is less busy, when our children are older, when we've elected people who agree with us, when we've done our homework, *then* we will use our hands, hearts, and voices to work for what is right.

Enter the widow in today's gospel. She's faced with the ultimate roadblock—a judge who has no regard for God or for people, which makes him accountable to no one. Furthermore, the judge has all the institutional power, while the widow has none. But she does not make excuses. The widow keeps showing up to plead her case. The judge keeps denying the widow justice, and then she shows up again. We don't know how long this back-and-forth lasts, but eventually the judge concedes. The widow has worn him out and worn him down.

Jesus says that this parable is about prayer and persistence—about not losing heart. In prayer we are invited to "bother" God, whether we are crying out in lament to help us mend a broken relationship or demanding that God do something about the evils of the world. Such prayers are not dainty. They are visceral. They can leave us limping. But they can also send us out to embody those prayers, turning our cries into letters and phone calls and e-mails and difficult conversations with people who might surprise us by changing their minds.

The biblical narrative is constantly serving up characters who remind us that conditions do not have to be ideal for God's mercy to prevail. Like Jacob, we don't have to be perfect people before we seek reconciliation. Like the widow, we don't have to wait for the perfect allies before we demand justice. We just keep doing what God has equipped us to do. In the words of 2 Timothy, "Be persistent, whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."

Let's be clear. We do not seek justice in order to be reconciled to God. We seek justice so that the relationships in our lives and in our communities might reflect more clearly the reconciliation that Jesus has already secured on the cross.

So, what, really, do we have to fear? Nothing. What is left of our excuses? Nothing. The Lord will keep our lives, from this time on and forevermore.

Christa Compton

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost October 27, 2019

Jeremiah 14:7–10, 19–22

Psalm 84:1–7

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Luke 18:9–14

Engaging the Texts

A theme of humility has been a thread throughout our readings this fall. Today's gospel echoes the very words that Jesus used back in Luke 14 when he gave instructions about choosing a seat at a dinner party: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." A gospel kind of humility is more than refusing to accept a compliment. A Jesus kind of humility turns the structures and systems of the world upside down.

One spiritual practice that helps us cultivate humility is confession. In Jeremiah 14 we hear the desperate pleas of a people facing a drought and fearing that it is a punishment for their iniquities. "We acknowledge our wickedness," they cry to the Lord. "For we have sinned against you." In times of prosperity our idols and temptations can seem like harmless diversions. But when we face deep suffering, we know that our real hope is in God alone. We come to understand how little our idols can help us and how much we truly need God.

The gospel sets up a clear contrast between two central characters. First we hear the Pharisee, who is so full of himself that he has created a performance piece extolling his own virtues: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers...I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." [Cue eye-roll emoji.] Then we have the tax collector who makes his confession simple and clear: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The difference is made more poignant because it defies the assumptions people would have made about these characters based on their professions. The religious leader is arrogant and self-righteous, while the money guy with the government job has a clear sense of his own transgressions.

At the heart of these readings is the tension between trusting in ourselves and trusting in God. On whom will we rely? It is clear that we cannot count on our own virtue. While the author of 2 Timothy may suffer from a case of mixed metaphors (are you a libation, a fighter, or a runner?), he knows that the Lord is the One who grants righteousness, offers strength, and rescues us from evil. With those promises God offers us a home, a dwelling place where we can sing for joy (Psalm 84).

Pastoral Reflections

I know I shouldn't do it. I scroll through my social media feeds, and I know that I should not compare my life to what I see there. I know perfectly well that I'm looking at a curated version of other people's lives, and yet I sometimes can't help myself. *That vacation is so much cooler than mine. Wow, they've been married for 20 years, and here I am still single. She is doing such important work; my life seems boring next to hers.*

The real danger occurs when these comparisons lead to a self-righteous place. *Well, at least my life is not as messed up as hers. He really seems to be struggling. Thank goodness I'm not like them.* That's when we fall into the same trap as the Pharisee in today's gospel.

We are both the Pharisee and the tax collector. We love to imagine, like the Pharisee, that we occupy a moral high ground, that if we do all the "right" things—especially if we do them "better" than other people—everything will be OK. If we can get a little extra attention and affirmation in the process, all the better. We also know, like the tax collector, that we are sinners, though most of us hold that truth in secrecy and shame rather than declaring it in the public square.

One of the worst outcomes of seeing other people's sin as worse than our own is that it keeps us from facing our need for repentance. We are horrified by Nazis marching through the streets of Charlottesville, but we're unwilling to face our own racism and complicity in racist systems of power. We are horrified by the abuse that the #metoo movement has made public, but we don't always intervene when we see someone being harassed or belittled.

There's something quite freeing about seeing sin as sin. When we create a taxonomy of sin that says "my wrongdoing is better than your wrongdoing" or "my holiness is more holy than yours," we miss the point. We have countless creative ways of turning away from God, but God is the One who forgives us and restores us to wholeness.

It comes down to this. We need God. We can't bribe, beg, or bully our way to abundant life. We can't grift our way to grace. We can only receive it as a gift—a gift from a God who promises us a dwelling place, a home, and all the strength that we need to keep the faith.

Christa Compton

Reformation Sunday October 27, 2019

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalm 46

Romans 3:19–28

John 8:31–36

Reflections on the Texts

Reformation Sunday reminds us that a festival or commemoration included in the lectionary may, in itself, offer a useful tool for hearing the interplay of texts and contexts. A festival or commemoration often amplifies or accentuates particular dynamics of the texts—specific portrayals of God *working*. I suggest that the festival of the Reformation appropriately amplifies the stories of God’s *freeing* work—past, present, and future; personal and communal.

The John 8 text was chosen long ago for this day because it proclaims freedom given by the grace of God. That’s the dynamic to consider. “Jesus said..., ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.’” The dialog between Jesus and his followers explicates what it means to be made freed, helping us see it as the working of God to give a permanent place in the household of God. The followers thought of freedom as a status, a static condition. Jesus instead amplified attention to the working of God as a continuing relationship of freedom.

A sermon on this text will aim to nurture freedom for individuals, congregations, and communities by helping to renew relationships with God. You may need to talk about the nature and content of freedom, but your goal is to be an agent of God for the creation of freedom.

All four of the assigned texts can open us to accept the great daily freeing work of God. According to John 8, Jesus grounded trust and freedom in the promise of an ongoing relationship with God as part of God’s household. Similarly, Psalm 46 uses multiple images of God’s *continual presence*, which gives security: “God is our refuge and strength” (v.1). “God is in the midst of the city” (v. 5); “the Lord of hosts is with us” (v. 7); “the Lord of hosts is with us” (v.11). The parallel emphasis on the *working* of God prevents us from treating security as a status: God is “a very present help” (v. 1); God is “making glad the city of God” (v. 4); “God will help...when the morning dawns” (v. 5). The works of God named here are ongoing works to set people free from fear, oppression, ignorance, and more.

Jeremiah used the language of covenant to speak in another way about God-given freedom. The new covenant is not a mutual agreement between two parties, breakable by the conduct of either. Jeremiah grounds the dependability of the covenant in the dependability of God. The prophet emphasized knowledge of God, knowledge that God is characterized by forgiveness. This is not merely conceptual understanding. It is awareness as the foundation of relationship. It is the proclamation of forgiveness given and received. It’s knowledge that allows one to live confidently and energetically. Condemnation is not God’s essential way with us. Forgiveness is. Not even sin breaks this covenant—because God is working. There is freedom in this constancy.

The familiar Romans text for Reformation Sunday says, “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.... All (are)...justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Redemption, of course, is a freeing work. So is justifying—taking us from wrong relationship to right. God is a freedom worker.

As a young monk, Martin Luther wrestled with this text and others like it. He struggled with the concept of the righteousness of God. Luther saw God as so perfect in contrast with his own failures and limitations that he once wrote that he hated God. But, Luther’s understanding of these texts was transformed by a fresh hearing that accentuated the working of God. It’s not that God’s righteousness sets the standard for people’s conduct. Rather, righteousness is a quality of God in action. God places people into right relationships with Godself—and God sustains us in that relationship. We’re welcomed into the freedom of trust.

We miss the full message here if we take these four texts as focusing only on God working in and for individuals. The texts were written for the whole people of God, in community. One good way to amplify the message of God giving freedom is to let the texts proclaim freedom also for groups, congregations, denominations, communities and nations. The texts’ images of household, presence of God, covenant, and right relationship all lend themselves to reflection on the social aspects of God’s freeing work.

Freedom comes from continuing in the Word, the rich, deep, fresh Word of God that addresses us, setting us free.

Stan Olson

All Saints Sunday November 3, 2019

Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18

Psalm 149

Ephesians 1:11–23

Luke 6:20–31

Reflections on the Texts

As I said in the notes for Reformation Sunday, a festival or commemoration included in the lectionary may, in itself, offer a useful tool for hearing the interplay of texts and contexts. A festival or commemoration often amplifies or accentuates particular dynamics of the texts—specific portrayals of God *working*. I suggest that the festival of All Saints appropriately amplifies the texts' proclamation of God setting us to holy work.

The amplification on this day can enable the work of God in creating human works that glorify God. The sermon will aim to be good news by facilitating confidence that human lives can, indeed, embody the graciousness of God and thus lead to praise of God.

In the Ephesians text we see a focus on this continuing result of God's ongoing work: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, ... so that we might live *for the praise of his glory*. In him, you also, when you heard the word of truth...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, *to the praise of his glory*," (v. 14) and "(God) has made (Jesus) the head over all things for the church which is his body, *the fullness of him who fills all in all*" (v. 23). Our redeemed lives praise God's glory. In our lives, our lives together as the Church, we embody the fullness of God. God is praised when we and others see the total impact of God's working and also when we and others give thanks for specific ways in which people embody God's holy working.

The other suggested texts for the day can also amplify the message that it is the working of God we see when we look at the lives of people. Luke does not include the blessings and woes text to urge distinctions between groups to be labeled saints and sinners but rather to proclaim that God's work can be embodied in human lives and in the course of history. Luke's combination here of promise, warning, and admonition reveals the nature of God, the nature of God's working.

In studying the assigned Daniel text, be sure to consider the paragraph the lectionary omits, vs. 4–14. Those verses, especially v. 14, are necessary for understanding the text's promise concerning God's reign. We're reminded there that it is the one "like a human being" who will be given dominion, glory and kingship, by God. That's the reign being considered

here. Daniel had been troubled by a vision of four great beasts but was assured that the "holy ones of the Most High shall receive the *kingdom* and possess the kingdom forever" (v.18). The promise was not merely of some individual blessing and safety for Daniel. Rather, he was assured that he and all God's people will participate in the central victory of God. Daniel's vision (and the recording and canonization of it) were not to produce fear but rather to invite confidence that God is at work in human lives. By the power of God, we are embodying the work of God.

For the proclaimer of grace seeking to avoid a focus on human goodness alone, Psalm 149 may be the most challenging of these four texts. It portrays the faithful as rewarded and the wicked as punished by God. I suggest that here, too, the foundational message is for believers and that the purpose is the deepening of confidence. We are urged not to be misled by the apparent power of the wicked because God is still at work. "Praise the Lord." That's where the psalm and each of our days can begin and end.

The holiness theme of All Saints Sunday and its texts could work against the proclamation of grace that's so central the prior week, on Reformation Sunday, but it ought not. This is not "Shape-up-so-you-can-be-a-saint Sunday." It's "Rejoice-God-is-working-in-people Sunday." Help your hearers get the nuance. A saint is a person through whom God continually renews life and hope. A saint is a person through whom God occasions godly gratitude.

It's impossible not to ponder good and evil in our lives and in the world around us. It's very difficult to avoid assigning people to categories—saints and sinners. I think the preacher may need to be careful to point out the risk in such partisan analysis. We are invited to put our confidence in the working of God—not in particular acts of righteousness nor in the successes of particular holy ones who seem to have succeeded in holiness. Think back to the Ephesians text—think of the potential of every life to occasion praise of God.

The hymn "Rise, O Church, like Christ Arisen," (ELW 548) might be the hymn of the day with its praising alleluias and its call to service. Note especially stanza three, "Rise, remember well the future God has called us to receive; present by God's loving nurture, Spirited then let us live. Alleluia, alleluia; Spirit, grace by whom we live."

Stan Olson

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost November 3, 2019

Isaiah 1:10–18

Psalm 32:1–7

2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12

Luke 19:1–10

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,

And in whose spirit there is no deceit.

—Psalm 32:2

A Wee, Little Man

In today's story about Jesus the two gospel priorities of welcoming the lost and the proper use of wealth intersect as Luke introduces us to a resident of Jericho, one of the oldest cities in ancient Israel. "A man was there," Luke reports, "named Zacchaeus," a name that, funny enough, means "innocent" or "clean." It is an ironic name, we soon discover, for Luke goes on to say, "*he was a chief tax collector and was rich*" (v. 2). Tax collectors were considered the dregs of Jewish society, so Zacchaeus being a "chief tax collector" was, in effect the worst of the worst in his own people's eyes. The last introductory detail we learn about Zacchaeus is probably the one that some of us will remember from Sunday school days: he was "short in stature," which meant that in order to see Jesus he needed to climb up a sycamore tree (vs. 3–4). It's a memorable detail few of us will forget, especially children, who have the same problem seeing in crowds. Zacchaeus was a "wee little man, a wee little man was he," we learned to sing redundantly in the old Sunday school ditty.

As the story proceeds, Jesus looks up, sees Zacchaeus perched up in the tree, and says to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." Jesus apparently knew the little man's name, but why he invited himself to his home, Luke does not bother to tell us—only that Zacchaeus hurried down from the tree "and was happy to welcome him" (vs. 5–6). But what so tickled Zacchaeus was that Jesus not only called him by name but invited himself over to his house. This, as we have by now become inured to in Luke's Gospel, caused great consternation among some present who began to grumble, complaining of Jesus, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner," (v. 7)—"yet again," they might have added grumpily.

But Luke is more interested in Zacchaeus than the complaining crowd—and particularly in describing just what the impact of Jesus' encounter with the little man was. "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord," Luke begins, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (v. 8). Here's unsolicited repentance and restitution with a vengeance! It is clearly and simply a gratuitous response to Jesus' unmerited acceptance of him which makes me think that Zacchaeus' story is our story. It's a tale of how God intercepts us, how God invites us down out of wherever we have been hiding or peeking, and dignifies us by invading our own space and inviting us to play host. This is true even for those who do not think we are quite up to it because of our past actions and associations. It is our story insofar as we too know that it is God's surprising invitation and acceptance of us as we are—we might call it "grace"—that creates our joyous and almost incredulous response which includes our resolve to make amends—to make changes in our behavior that will effect justice and serve the poor with overflowing generosity.

Notice too how, other than inviting Zacchaeus to climb down from his tree in order to play host to him, Jesus does not have to tell him what to do. He knows what to do and does it spontaneously without the demands of any law. And Jesus crowns the encounter with this affirmation of the good news: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (vs. 9–10). Whatever else "salvation" might be it is contained right here in the story of Zacchaeus, in this "lost," little, rich man with the hilariously ironic name being "found" by Jesus and then finding the grace to clean up his act and restore his good name! Happy, indeed, are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, as the psalmist sings.

Reformation Sunday, like All Saints Sunday (as this year), sometimes falls on this Sunday. I have long championed using the Zacchaeus story (as, so too, the foregoing parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector) as highly appropriate texts that illustrate the doctrine of God's justifying grace to sinners become saints thus not requiring the reading of the Reformation Day or All Saints texts. The old Reformation war-horse "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" (ELW #590) is a good choice for hymn as is Luther's own "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice," whose verses can be split up and used throughout the service. But do try to find some kids to help lead the congregation in "Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man."

John Rollefson

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost November 10, 2019

Job 19: 23–27a

Psalm 17:1–9

2 Thessalonians 2:1–5; 13–17

Luke 20:27–38

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry. . . .

*From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right. . . .*

*Guard me as the apple of your eye;
hide me in the shadow of your wings. . . .*

—Psalm 17:1a, 2, 8

Seven in Heaven?

On this third to the last Sunday of the church year our attention turns to end-time matters that will continue to preoccupy our readings at least through the First Sunday in Advent. Like an out-of-season bolt from the blue, today resurrection and life after death are the issues, introduced by that much-loved affirmation from Job, “For I know that my redeemer lives” (v.25) immortalized in Handel’s aria from *Messiah* and made singable by the eighteenth-century Easter hymn (*ELW* #619). More to the point in relation to our Gospel reading is the rare Old Testament claim of personal life after death in the words, “and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God” (v. 26).

The Sadducees normally play second fiddle to Jesus’ opponents, the Pharisees, in the Gospel accounts. But here this Jewish religious party, known for its passion for the temple cult as well as its priestly leadership’s collusion with the Romans, is singled out for its disavowal of belief in the resurrection. Luke portrays the Sadducees as seeking out Jesus—much like the Pharisees (who did believe in resurrection) are pictured in other passages—with a question intended to ridicule the very idea of resurrection by a comically exaggerated hypothetical. Beginning by addressing Jesus respectfully as “Teacher” or “Rabbi,”—an expert in *torah*—the Sadducees lay out a preposterous case regarding the Mosaic law’s prescription regarding the need for a deceased man’s brother to marry his childless wife in order to “raise up children for his brother” (v. 27). What if, their hypothetical question goes, seven brothers in a row marry the same unlucky woman, all, including finally the woman herself, dying childless? One could, presumably, use such an unlikely set of occurrences to ask many questions—regarding the wisdom of Levirate marriage itself, the plight of the unfortunate multiply-widowed woman, and so forth. But the Sadducees have only one ques-

tion for Jesus: “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?” (v. 33). Marriage in Israel at the time was a matter of patriarchal ownership of a sort, and so the question was—with no little hint of sexual innuendo—whose will she be in this “resurrection” you believe in, Jesus? Underlying their interrogation was a kind of Sadducean *torah*-worship that bordered on *torah*-fundamentalism which included disinterest in the later biblical writings and rejection of the innovating “hedge” around the *torah* promoted by the Pharisees.

In fact, the Sadducees were not interested in any answer Jesus would offer but were merely trying to poke fun at the very idea of resurrection which they felt had no basis in *torah*. Levirate marriage, since it could be found in Moses’ writings, so the thinking went, is God’s eternally revealed truth and must take precedence over any secondary novelty like the idea of resurrection. QED! I cannot help but think it is more than a bit like how same-sex marriage was opposed by people who argued that because one-woman/one-man marriage is supposedly taught in the Bible (ignoring biblical stories of polygamy) that it must be the ultimate, timeless truth to which all subsequent ideas—including loving and committed same-sex relationships never mentioned in the Bible—must be denied. There can be no new thing under the sun that is not specifically authorized by the Bible is the mind-set.

But Jesus, as always, cuts to the heart of the matter, neither paying attention to the implicit insult and ridicule inherent in the question nor to the literalistic woodenness of his opponents’ assumptions. Instead he changes the very terms of the debate, suggesting that what he calls “children of the resurrection” will no longer be encumbered by their old status as husbands or wives, for those “in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage” (v. 35). Here Jesus is suggesting that resurrected life is not the “same old, same old” made eternal but is a whole new dimension of life, life perhaps impossible to imagine for us mortals who love to make idols of our own conventions and worship our traditional rules and expectations. As Jesus says elsewhere (to the scribes and Pharisees): “So for the sake of your traditions you make void the Word of God (Matt 15:6). Or again, “Neither is new wine put into old wineskins” (Matt 9:17).

Finally, in a clever application of his gift for irony, Jesus tweaks the Sadducees by referring to the Exodus story of the call to Moses from out of the burning bush where *YHWH* describes godself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the very same God who is, Jesus says, “God not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive” (vv. 37–38).

It is not that *YHWH* was the God of the patriarchs and matriarchs but that the great I AM WHO I AM God *is* their God, meaning they find their life even now in *YHWH*. And to those “hyper-believers” who behave as though the “day of the Lord is already here” (v. 2)—jumping out of their skins,

so to speak—we find Paul in our second reading bringing us back to earth, to keep us hopeful and watchful without being hyped-up by the allure of phony adventisms!

John Rollefson

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost November 17, 2019

Malachi 4:1–2a

Psalm 98

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

Luke 21:5–19

Reflections on the Texts

“... the day that comes shall burn them up.”

“...there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues...”

“...they will arrest you and persecute you... they will put some of you to death.”

Those are cheery words as we embark upon the great liturgical season of Christmas shopping, aren't they? A veritable feast of carnage to look forward to.

William Stringfellow, the lawyer and theologian, told about being late for his plane. He couldn't find his keys or his ticket; he was rushing around, trying to finish packing and get to a waiting taxi, when a knock at the door announced two evangelists. “Do you know the world could end any day?” they asked him. “Yes!” he replied. “And I hope it's today!”

We seem to have a fascination with the end of the world. How many movies proclaim a future that is terrifying, cataclysmic, and violent? How many of us have members who ask us (or more likely, *tell* us) about the end times, often quoting *Left Behind* and other such books, chapter and verse?

I have travelled to other countries, and I haven't seen that same fascination with the end times that we see here. It seems strange that it is the richest nation on earth, the most powerful militarily, that is the one most eager to imagine the *teleos* of the world to be creation destroying rather than creation redeeming. Why is that? How do we preach in this context?

These texts give those who see God's final revelation as mass destruction plenty to point to. We could avoid them completely, I suppose—Thessalonians has some nice church order stuff. Or we can see them as God's final critique on a world of oppression and violence, a critique that leads to God's final act of destroying death.

Both Malachi and Jesus see that God's promised end is healing, justice, a renewal of the earth. We may have to dig to get to that promised end; but in God's time, it is waiting for us, watching for us, moving in us. Even in the midst of the

machinery of death that sin has constructed, machinery that, unfortunately, has stood the test of human time. But it will not stand in God's time. The time of the end will reveal God's true power.

Thomas Merton, monk and poet, wrote a Christmas meditation called the “Time of the End Is the Time of No Room.” It is in his book *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New Directions Press, 1966).⁶ He connects the story of the Christ Child rejected from the inn with the end time:

We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quality, speed, number, price, power, and acceleration.

Stringfellow wrote that in 1966! But it could sum up our current anxiety. Despite all our technology that “will bring the world closer together,” we are more divided than ever. We could see that division as God's separating the “good” from the “bad,” as many apocalyptic films and books do. Or we could see it as God's womb breaking open to a new life that encompasses all in the divide.

Here's an idea: What if the end time has already happened? What if Christ has already come back, and we've missed him again, just like we missed him almost 2000 years ago? Here's Merton again:

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it—because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it—his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated.

So where is Christ hiding in our anxiety? Look at our border. Look at indigenous communities fighting for the earth in Brazil and Guatemala. Look at transgender women of color being murdered. There we will find the Christ, the suffering One. There we also will find the Sun of Righteousness, rising with healing in its wings. This is where the Spirit is birthing fierce faith. It may be that the faith of the poor and the marginalized is exactly what the church needs, as it struggles to be faithful.

These are hard texts to preach and I struggle as a preacher

6. For Merton quotes, see: <https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2015/12/18/mysticism-the-time-is-the-time-of-no-room-by-thomas-merton/>

with two extremes. One is minimizing the pain that ending injustice entails. The other is succumbing to my anger at how immigrants, the disabled, and poor are treated, so that I end up violent in my spirit, if not in my actions.

A couple of closing thoughts:

English versions translate *Tzedakah* in Malachi 4:2 as “Sun of Righteousness.” In every Spanish translation, conservative or liberal, it is translated “Sun of Justice.” How would our preaching change if we saw justice as the promised healing?

I know many of us fight the losing battle about singing Christmas hymns during Advent. But maybe on this Sunday—we could sing this verse of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”:

Hail the heav’n-born Prince of Peace,
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His Wings.
Now He lays His Glory by,
Born that we no more may die
Born to raise each child of earth,
Born to give them second birth.
Hark! the herald angels sing,
“Glory to the New-born king!”

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Reign of Christ Sunday November 24, 2019

Jeremiah 23:1–6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11–20

Luke 23:33–43

Reflections on the Texts

It’s rare that we have the opportunity to preach from the lectionary on both the cosmic Christ and the very human Jesus, but this Sunday is the day. Colossians shows us the Christ as the “image of the invisible God,” “the first born of all creation,” and the one who “is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Unpacking any one of those could be a sermon in itself.

Then Luke gives us the most human and humane human being: Jesus who is mocked while being tortured to death, yet still finds the power to forgive his torturers and to welcome a fellow criminal into Paradise. Oh, that we in our sufferings could find such courage and such compassion!

Curiously, neither writer allows us to become solely focused on one aspect of Jesus’ reality. Paul does not allow us

to merely extol Christ’s powers and his centrality in the universe. He brings suffering and death into the great revealing of the cosmos. Christ is not only the firstborn of all creation, he is the firstborn from the dead.

And Luke does not simply present the death of an innocent human being suffering under the oppression of an occupying army and a collaborating religious establishment. He shows Jesus in full communion with the Father, beyond all human struggle, and yet intimately engaged with all human struggle. The promise to those suffering with him is Paradise. Paradise: an image that would resonate with Jew and Gentile alike. When spoken by a man being murdered, an image that would shock Jew and Gentile alike.

Jesus is referred to with regal titles four times, twice as Messiah, twice as king. All of them are used to mock him. “If you are the Messiah, . . .” the religious leaders scoff. “If you are the King of the Jews, . . .” the soldiers mock. Pilate’s mockery is the sign nailed over Jesus’ head: “This is the king of the Jews.” The crucified man who derides Jesus says, “Are you not the Messiah?” None of them address Jesus by his name, only by a title. King. Messiah. Titles of near absolute power: a savior who can do anything. Their words betray their longing for just such a savior. In the mocking, their words show how those kinds of saviors are treated when they don’t produce: they become losers who can do nothing.

We might think we’re beyond all that. Perhaps we’ve preached more than a few times how the people of Jesus’ day were expecting a certain type of savior who would deliver them with just a word; but how God in Christ was a suffering servant who chose the way of the cross. But admit it, don’t our hearts often cry out for that kind of miracle worker when we see the injustice and cruelty of our day?

This unnamed thief was later given the name Dysmas in church tradition. St. Dysmas is not interested in titles; rather, he calls him by name: Jesus. The name given by Gabriel to Mary, for her to give to her child. The name that means Savior.

And Dysmas does not ask Jesus to save him, or forgive him, for that matter. He asks Jesus to *remember* him. Unlike Jesus’ detractors, he is not fond of the snide use of “if.” There is no conditional in Dysmas’ petition; there is only a trust, a longing in a promised future. Dysmas does not ask Jesus to be the Lone Ranger Savior who pulls off an incredible feat, bringing them both off the oppressive cross to prove once and for all that he is the real deal. Dysmas, even in the terror of being tortured to death, sees that Jesus doesn’t need to prove anything. Jesus just needs to be, and Dysmas asks to be with him.

“Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” The people in our congregation love to sing that Taize hymn—maybe because it conveys our longing for relationship, our vulnerability and our hope in just a few words.

Paul says that Christ is the firstborn *of* all creation, and the firstborn *from* the dead. I'm not sure that even the Greek I once had would suffice to unpack those prepositions. But in English they ring these notes for me: Christ is the One through whom all creation was made. Yet Christ is not separate from the creation, but truly of it. As the Human One, this Jesus of Nazareth, is the first one born from the old age of death into the new age, the new world that Dysmas asked to be a part of. The firstborn, leading the way.

In the end, Paul and Luke wrestle with the same questions humans ask: what is the nature of the universe, and of life? What does the future hold? Why is there suffering? How do we live in the face of it? Their writings come at the questions from radically different points of view. Paul, the cosmic logician, turns phrases that spark the mind. Luke, the most human-centered of the Gospel writers, tells a story that anyone would weep over, whether religious or not. But the underlying message is the same: Jesus the Christ is someone we can trust. No matter what. He is Jeremiah's good shepherd, the Righteous Branch, the fullness of God, who has made peace through the blood of his cross. The One who remembers us.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

First Sunday of Advent December 1, 2019

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

Reflections on the Texts

Wake up! Shhhh. Listen... Can you hear it? The Advent word that moves in the dark, dances at the grave, stirs in the halls of power; the word that both blossoms and burns, sings and stings, rises and rouses; the word that wears either ballet shoes or mud boots depending upon the circumstance, and is known to hang out with graffiti artists, to weep with the whales, to wail like Mahalia, and to use the adjectives both “tender” and “fierce” when speaking of love.

Wake up! Shhhh. Listen... Can you hear it?

Isaiah whispered the Advent word to the people of Jerusalem and Judah in the eighth century BCE saying, “Assyria threatens at your doorstep, declaring its power over your present and future; *nevertheless*, even now from Jerusalem comes the dawning of justice and peace for all the earth.”

Paul declared the Advent word to the early Christian community in Rome saying, “The lifeless lures of empire

declare their power over your present and future; *nevertheless*, even now the light of Christ dawns on the horizon and invites your participation in the transformation of the world.”

Matthew taught the Advent word to his Jewish Christian community in the latter decades of the first century, lifting up Jesus' invitation to his disciples of every age saying, “The dead-end slogans of ‘might makes right’ and ‘every man to himself’ and ‘the guy with the most toys wins’ declare their power over your present and future; *nevertheless* even now the Lord of God's kingdom-come is coming to burn away anything that does not live in service to love.”

Wake up! Shhh. Listen... Can you hear it? The Advent word that takes what “has been” and opens it to what “can be” by the power of love. Listen... Here it is again...

Once, when a young woman was dying of cancer, a friend gave her a round stone with a hole in the center. The young woman who was dying couldn't figure out what it was; *nevertheless*, with the little bit of strength she had to muster, she held the stone up to her eye. “Oh,” she whispered after a long moment... “Now I see... It's the way through.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

During the Holocaust a group of Jewish prisoners in a concentration camp decided to put God on trial on charges of negligence and abandonment. Over the course of a number of days the witnesses spoke powerfully against God as the rabbi, taking the part of the judge, listened. At the end of the trial, the rabbi said, “In light of all the evidence given during the past few days, I hereby indict God on all the charges and declare him dead; *nevertheless*, night is falling and it is time for prayers. Come, let us pray...”

Once, out on the plains of North Dakota, the church fathers of an old Lutheran congregation decreed they would be upholding the rules set forth in the church by-laws prohibiting the coffins of those who committed suicide from going through the gates of the church cemetery, demanding instead that the coffins of such “sinners” be lifted over the fence; *nevertheless*, when one of the elderly farmers in their fellowship took his own life in the barn in which he had worked all his days, the young pastor, new to the congregation, stood at the entrance to the cemetery on the day of the funeral and said to the pall bearers and all those gathered, “Today, we will be going *through* the gate.”

Wake up! Shhh. Listen... Can you hear it? The Advent Word that is pregnant with possibility, donning mud boots or ballet shoes depending upon the circumstance, to take what “has been” and to open it to what “can be” by the power of love... the word *nevertheless*... Moving over the chaos and darkness since the beginning, fiercely declaring to the dead ends of injustice and violence and hatred and fear, “You think you have power over the present or future; *nevertheless*, by the power of love there is always another part to the story.”

Whispering tenderly to those caught in the throes of injustice and violence and hatred and fear, “You think there is no hope for your present or future; *nevertheless*, by the power of love there is always another part to the story.”

Nevertheless... Wake up! Shhh. Listen. By the power of Love there is always another part to the story. It comes hidden in ways you would never expect to overturn what “has been” for the sake of what “can be.” Look... As it moved over the chaos and void to bring creation into being, as it sang from the hearts of the prophets, as it was received and conceived in the womb of Mary, as it lived Love’s passionate presence in the world, as it was silenced by the dead-ends of fear and death, as it rose from death to sing like Mahalia again, so, too, it is coming again to usher in another part of the story; the part so pregnant with Love that all of creation will sing Love’s song.

Wake up! Shhh. Listen... Even now the Advent word is moving in the dark, longing to be received and conceived in our hearts. Longing for incarnation, for articulation, for manifestation, all for the sake of the transformation of the world. Yes, it can all look hopeless... *nevertheless...*

Elaine Hewes

Second Sunday of Advent December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1–10

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19

Romans 15:4–13

Matthew 3:1–12

Reflections on the Texts

One evening, in a large concert hall in an American city, Wynton Marsalis, the renowned jazz trumpeter, was giving a concert. Everyone in the audience was in rapt attention as he played his last piece, a jazzy improvisational jewel of his own creation, the notes ascending into the night like stars. After the last note was played, a silence enveloped the room, as no one wanted to break the spell of beauty and mystery that filled the space, a deep sacred silence. Until, all of a sudden, in the midst of that extraordinary moment, someone’s cellphone went off, triggering from the concert-goers nearby a cacophony of irate expletives, a venomous clicking of tongues, and a myriad of hateful stares.

As the animus grew, Wynton Marsalis lifted his trumpet. When the room was quiet again, he began to play—the very melody of the cellphone ring, improvising on that melody, taking what had been a horrible affront, a shameful mistake, and using it to create something so startlingly beautiful it cut everyone to the bone—cellphone user and irate concert-

goers alike. Wynton Marsalis’ creative, improvisational, and gracious response to the horrible intrusion moved across the concert hall like fire, burning away the shame, the anger, the self-righteous disgust, and leaving no one in the concert hall that night unscathed.

It was a similarly devastatingly beautiful jazz tune that John the Baptist performed as he lifted his trumpet in the wilderness of Judea, playing the “get-down-funky-gritty-irascible-up-side-down-out-on-the-margins” song of God’s kingdom coming. John the Baptist calling the people of Jerusalem and Judea into the wild water of God’s untamed love and inviting them to tune their lives to a music that had sounded from the beginning of time, a music so deep and raw and authentic and true it promised the end of all elevator muzak, all Empire muzak, all sweet Hallmark-happy muzak—all muzak that lived in service to the status quo, the powers that be, the morally upright, the principalities and powers intent on providing practical answers to questions of love.

Out in the wilderness, far from Jerusalem and the halls of both political and religious power, John the Baptist called people to turn toward the unsettling, beautifully devastating sound of God’s song of love, pointing to the One who was coming not only to play the music, but to be the music, moving over the world with a sound so wild and a-blaze with love, nothing that was not love could withstand its white hot flame.

No wonder that John the Baptist’s cry, “repent!” (*shuv* in the Hebrew and *metanoia* in the Greek), means to “turn and go a different direction,” implying the dislocation of old patterns for the sake of transformation into something new.

No wonder the Advent greeting shared during the passing of the peace in some congregations is, “May the peace of Christ disturb you.”

No wonder Thomas Merton once said, “Advent is the beginning of the end of all that is in us that is not Christ.” (Calling to mind the story about the man who came up to a young boy as he was whittling a block of wood. The man asked, “What are you whittling there, son?” And the boy responded, “A bird.” “Well how do you know how to do such a thing?” the man asked... “Oh it’s easy,” said the boy... “I just cut away anything that isn’t the bird.”)

When John the Baptist lifted his trumpet in the Judean wilderness and played the “get-down-funky-gritty-irascible-up-side-down-out-on-the-margins” song of God’s kingdom coming, his intention was to cut away anything that wasn’t the bird, leaving in every heart only the “*point vierge*” of complete emptiness, that “virgin point” of receptivity in which the coming Christ might be received and conceived.

Some resisted of course. Mostly the ones with religious pedigrees a mile long and the ones with lots of good conduct stars. Because such cutting away hurts. Ask the concert-goers who witnessed Wynton Marsalis’ excruciatingly beautiful

improvisation on the horrible cellphone ring that night. Ask them what it felt like when the white-hot love carried in that music moved over their self-righteous anger. Ask them and they'll tell you it was so beautiful it hurt.

So too in the days of our own lives, it will take a lot of hurting, a lot of cutting and burning of a whole lot of stuff, a lot of dislocation before transformation takes place... before (to use the poetic words of Isaiah) "the wolf lives with the lion and the leopard lies down with the kid; before the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

But even now God's song of love is sounding, and the One who *is* the music is on the move. The one who is preparing the way is lifting his trumpet and playing a melody so raw and real and true and devastatingly beautiful, it promises (threatens) to cut away anything in us that isn't the bird, bringing us to that "virgin point" of receptivity in which the coming Christ might be received and conceived.

"Advent is the beginning of the end of all that is in us that is not Christ." Listen... even now Love's notes are ascending into the night like stars. Shall we tune our lives to Love's song?

Elaine Hewes

Third Sunday of Advent December 15, 2019

Isaiah 35:1–10

Psalms 146:5–10

James 5:7–10

Matthew 11:2–11

Engaging the Texts

The prophet Isaiah announces the coming of Yahweh to exiles in Babylonian captivity (Isa 35:1–10). Parched creation will thrive and people enfeebled by exile will be welcomed home in joy. The renewal of creation and the redemption of the exiles contrasts sharply with the preceding oracle in which the messenger announces Yahweh's coming as a day of vengeance for Edom (perhaps a stand-in for Babylon). For the wicked, God's coming means destruction and desolation. For the marginalized, God's presence nourishes the earth and strengthens the weak. Once God was absent from the exiles. Now the prophet proclaims the good news: "Here is your God! He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you" (v.4). Redeemed and known as God's own people, they leap and sing on the Holy Way home.

Psalms 146 is a praise song to Yahweh, the creator and redeemer. After a personal call to praise, the psalm contrasts the failure of national leaders with the effective help of Yahweh, the God of Jacob. (Verses 1-4, omitted from the

lectionary, could be added by the worship leader.) The song then declares the work of the divine who makes heaven and earth, keeps promises, gives justice and food. Then the song emphasizes the very one who does all these things and more: Yahweh sets the captive free. Yahweh opens the eyes of the blind, Yahweh lifts up, Yahweh loves, Yahweh cares, Yahweh sustains. God is the active subject of liberation for those who are oppressed, blinded, and bent low; God is the one who embraces the righteous, immigrant, widow and orphan. God subverts (twists, bends) the way of the wicked leaders who provide no help. Hallelujah!

Contrasts between the wicked wealthy and the oppressed workers arise again in the letter of James. He has just denounced the wealthy for stealing wages from the farm workers (5:4). That warning to the wealthy is the antecedent to the "therefore" in our lectionary text. James isn't counseling patience in a vacuum, but endurance in the midst of a class war perpetrated by the rich upon the working poor. Rather than succumbing to division and griping, James exhorts the community to prophetic words and actions, trusting in Yahweh who is full of compassion and mercy (v. 11).

In Matthew's text, John is in prison and hears about the works Jesus had been performing in and around Galilee. John sends Jesus a question that is key for the entire third section of Matthew's gospel (chapters 11–16): "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus responds by describing his work since his baptism by John in words that echo the prophet Isaiah. Jesus summarizes his proclamation of God's coming reign and his healing, restorative actions, but Jesus does not include cosmic judgment in this list. Then to the crowds, Jesus rhetorically describes John as "more than a prophet." Jesus' quotation of scripture alludes to the messenger that prepares the way for the descendants of freed slaves to enter into the promised land (Exod 23:20) and a prophet who prepares the way for the nation to receive the coming of Yahweh (Mal 3:1). John is the messenger who prepares for God's coming and points to Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the one through whom God's presence and reign are manifest.

Pastoral Reflections

People leap and sing for joy. Lands and waters sparkle with life. We will rejoice in Yahweh this third Sunday in Advent. See Phil 4:4, which is used as an introit on this Gaudete Sunday in some liturgical calendars. Advent candles and paraments may change from penitential purple, or expectant blue, to rosy pink. This could be a day to sing *Joy to the world, the Lord is come!*

This is also a Sunday to highlight the relationship between joy and justice, joy and resistance. Without justice our joy would be a frivolous escapade. Without joy our resistance dries up.

Ross Gay, a poet, orchardist, and professor in Bloomington, Indiana, explores these themes in his poetry collections including *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* and his lyric essays *The Book of Delights*. He helps the Bloomington Community Orchard, a non-profit, fruit-for-all “justice and joy project.” His work helps people enjoy creation and one another as they struggle against racism and poverty.

Indeed, joy is not a luxury. Joy is a divine gift, a source of power and renewal. In 2015, Afro-Latinx poet Kleaver Cruz was grieving the death of his uncle and the relentlessness of “Black death” caused by racism. One morning he awoke with a commitment to share images of #BlackJoy on his social media for thirty days. The image sharing spread like blooming flowers in the desert across the nation and world.

Broderick Greer, an Episcopal priest, wrote in the *Huffington Post* in 2015 that “Black joy is black resistance.” During the Black Lives Matter protests at the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Greer noticed black children and adults dancing. “In that moment, those dancers were participating in the old tradition of resisting the brutality of white supremacy through practicing joy.”

Essence magazine wrote that photographer Adrienne Waheed’s 2019 collection, book, and exhibition *Black Joy and Resistance* is a “reminder of everything divine about black culture.”

In the midst of deportations, failed leadership, wicked wealth, and mass incarceration, joy is a divine gift.

Mike Wilker

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 22, 2019

Isaiah 7:10–16

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19

Romans 1:1–7

Matthew 1:18–25

Engaging the Texts

During a military crisis, Yahweh sends Isaiah to give many signs to Judah’s King Ahaz (7:1–2). Yahweh instructs Isaiah to take with him his child Shear-jashub, *a remnant shall return* (7:3). The child’s name is a mixed sign at this time before the exile. Only a remnant? At least a remnant shall return.

Ahaz rejects Isaiah’s political analysis and refuses to trust Yahweh (7:4–9). So, Yahweh challenges Ahaz to ask for another sign. Ahaz refuses again. Isaiah gives another sign anyway. The main message of this sign is the child’s name: Immanuel, *God is with us*. In Hebrew the child’s mother is “a young woman” but the Greek Septuagint reads “virgin.”

Isaiah says the two minor kingdoms that frighten Ahaz will be obliterated by the time the child eats curds and honey and knows the difference between Yes and No (about two years old?).

Immediately after today’s text, from verse 17 onward, Isaiah’s scroll plunges into the dread of occupation, violence, and exile as the Assyrian Empire vanquishes the northern and southern kingdoms. A female prophet gives birth to a third child with a heavy name: Maher-shalal-hash-baz, *spoil speeds, prey hastens* (8:3).

Psalms 80 laments the destruction of the nation. It pleads for the Shepherd of Israel to help. Three names recall a unified past: Benjamin was the younger brother of Joseph, whom their mother Rachel delivered as she was dying. She named him Ben-oni, *son of my sorrow*, but Jacob called him Benjamin, *son of the right hand* (Gen 35:18). One of his descendants is King David. Ephraim is the younger son of Joseph, whose name means “God has made me flourish in the land of my affliction,” and who becomes synonymous with the northern kingdom Israel. Manasseh is the older son of Joseph, whose name means “God has dislodged me from my father’s house” (Gen 41:51–52). At the time of the northern kingdom’s destruction and exile, Manasseh, the tribe north of Ephraim, was also obliterated by the Assyrian Empire. The refrain (vs. 3, 7, 19) echoes the priest’s blessing for Yahweh’s life-giving presence (Num 6:22–26). The psalm admits the Shepherd’s judgment upon the nation may be the source of its defeat. Then it recounts the history of the nation’s development and destruction, like the growth and destruction of a vineyard (see also Isa 5:1–7).

The first verses of Paul’s letter to the Romans are linked to this Sunday’s lectionary because Paul writes that Jesus is a descendant of King David. Note that Paul says Jesus is declared “Son of God” in “the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead” and not in a special birth.

In Matthew’s text of Jesus’ birth, we are introduced to a mini-cycle that will contrast Joseph’s response with Herod’s response (1:18–2:23). Joseph is a righteous/just man, yet is encouraged by the divine messenger to reconsider the bounds of righteousness.

As in the earlier texts, we hear names full of meaning given to a child: Christ (*Messiah* in Hebrew, but not in the Greek of the gospel) means “anointed.” Anointed people include kings, priests, and prophets, and even Cyrus the Persian emperor, the non-believing liberator of Jews from exile (Isa 45:1). Emmanuel (“God with us”), Jesus (“God saves”).

Pastoral Reflections

First, I wonder how worship on this Fourth Sunday in Advent will relate to Christmas Eve. This is the only time in the three-year lectionary that we have both Matthew’s and

Luke's infancy narratives. And then we have John's prologue on Christmas Day. The different gospel texts can give different textures to each worship service.

Next, I wonder how the Fourth Sunday of Advent can relate to the next two Sundays. On Christmas 1, Matthew will tell how Joseph is warned to flee Herod's massacre. On Christmas 2, many congregations will transfer the Epiphany texts from Monday to Sunday and hear Matthew tell of Herod, the magi, and Jesus. If people come to worship on all three Sundays, how can Advent 4 prepare them to also receive the rest of Matthew's story?

Then I wonder about the particularities of the texts for today. Worship could explore all those names and titles, especially Christ, Emmanuel, and Jesus. A preacher could also delve into Joseph's reluctant response to Mary's pregnancy. Whether Mary was a virgin or not is not Joseph's main concern—he's concerned that she became pregnant because she had sex with another man. How's he going to do the right thing?

Righteousness is a theme throughout Matthew's gospel. Jesus' first words in this gospel concern how to properly "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15. See also 5:20.) Doing the right thing is more than following the legal procedures, even if we apply rules charitably.

If Joseph had separated himself from Mary quietly, he might have saved his reputation and appeared to look good and charitable in the eyes of some. With divine assurance and encouragement, Joseph becomes willing to get mixed up with Mary and Jesus. It takes the angel's repeated poking to awaken Joseph to the divine presence and to his call.

Who are the messengers God is sending to us and our congregations to wake us up? What are they saying about the danger? How are they prodding and guiding us to receive and care for Emmanuel?

Mike Wilker

Christmas Eve December 24, 2019

Isaiah 9:2–7

Psalms 96

Titus 2:11–14

Luke 2:1–14, [15–20]

Reflections on the Texts

Why ever would Luke decide to comment on the Syrian governor Quirinius' time in office when he identified the date of the Roman census? Many scholars think Luke to be Syrian—from Antioch, which would make Quirinius his

own governor. What would make you identify your state's governor when talking about the 2020 U.S. Census?

Holding that as an open question, note that the story Luke is telling is no average news report. This is the story of Jesus' birth that Luke begins by naming governor Q. What political figure or census question could possibly be important enough to win the position of "the hook" in your telling of your savior's birth? We have to ask ourselves because Luke gives Quirinius and the census exactly that prominence.

While scholars cannot look behind the curtain of history and say exactly why Luke took pains to make this link, we can say that Luke sees it as crucial that Jesus' birth should be on record in the Roman census. The geo-political hook of Luke's birth narrative makes a strong claim: the setting of Jesus' birth matters and shows that Jesus bears regional and historical significance. The response of the Roman government to Jesus reveals that the political importance of Jesus' life continues to matter: Jesus is eventually charged, tried, and executed for treason—a political charge—against the Roman government—the very place this census will record as his home.

His citizenship does not spare him from the state's oppression. When the state is threatened by people gathering to Jesus, identifying him as Messiah, he will be crucified. If Jesus was vulnerable to attack and death even though a registered citizen, how much more vulnerable still was Jesus when he was a refugee in Egypt per Matthew's account? How vulnerable are today's populations of immigrants and refugees?

In a pattern Luke uses throughout his books, Luke has woven together events from his day with the gospel story. This is a pattern that Karl Barth legendarily commended when he said that we need to preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. What are the ways that your gift to the assembly you serve this Christmas season could be following this biblical and historical tradition?

Isaiah also weaves together the news of his time with the stories of God's deliverance. Isa 9:1 tells of travesties that occurred during the Syro-Ephraimitic war when Zebulun and Naphtali were annexed by the king of Assyria Tiglathpileser III.⁷

Given this ravaged backdrop, we might expect the poem that follows to be a lament, but that's not what we get. As so often arises from the resilient voices of those who have experienced suffering, we hear a poetics of hope. God's presence in and through tragedy has created hope. In Isaiah's day that meant manipulative tools of oppression (yokes, bars, rods) had been broken, the accoutrements of war had been transformed into the warmth of a comforting fire, the child (Isaiah refers to a historic, local king) who will rule with justice had been born. This life experience of physical redemption from

7. *New Interpreter's Bible*. Volume XI. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 121–122.

desperation taught Isaiah's people how to carry hope. With that hope, they look forward.

Titus' community may have learned from Isaiah, to some extent, how to carry hope. In our pericope, Titus reminds his readers of the Christian hope that is rooted in the glory of God. Titus lifts up the primary manifestation of that hope: Jesus Christ. People are urged to strain forward in hope—interpreting both past events and future possibilities in light of hope in Christ. Yes, hope, for Titus, is about salvation. But one look at where this passage is situated and we know that hope is foundational to mundane things too. It is hope that orients people rightly toward one another in the closest—and most normal—relationships. Without excusing Titus from his problematic views of gender roles, colonialism, and slavery, we can see that Titus expects an orientation of hope in Jesus Christ to have effects at home—we treat each other well because we hope in Christ.

Your community carries hope. You are the one who can see how that hope—for individuals or for the assembly—is rooted in struggle. You, like Luke, Isaiah, and Titus, can shine the light on the path your community has taken through adversity, recalling how hope in Christ paved that road and how that road—now paved—can carry us all the more surely in step with God's glory.

Jan Rippentrop

Christmas Day December 25, 2019

Isaiah 62:6–12

Psalm 97

Titus 3:4–7

John 1:1–14

Reflections on the Texts

In my experience, the people who hear your Christmas Day sermon were there on Christmas Eve, too. They are regulars who are ready to go deep. These Christmas Day texts invite us to ask what it means to live in the hope of salvation through Christ.

Titus says it the most directly, announcing that his hearers are “heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (v. 7) Let's first be clear about what Titus did not mean by this. Being heirs of eternal life is:

- Not a signal that you worked hard enough
- Not an award for being good enough
- Not a gift to you personally
- Not an avoidance of God's judgment

- Not a guarantee of prosperity
- Not an escape from this world
- Not a free pass from helping others

Quite to the contrary. Titus shows that your access to eternal life has little to do with your hard work or being a “good person.” Titus has a pretty long litany to prove this: God didn't save you because of anything good you did. God saved you because of who God is—the one who gives rebirth through water, the one who renews through the Spirit, the one who gave you the Spirit by sending Jesus, the one who justified you. (paraphrase, vs. 5–6) Justified you why? Justified you on account of God's grace (read here: God's grace was not earned, v. 7).

So, we have the hope of eternal life because of who God is. Who God is applies not just to an individual person. Who God is applies (*period*). God conferring righteousness does not mean one escaped God's judgment. God's gift of righteousness *IS* God's judgment. It is God's judgment of humans in light of seeing them through the lens of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

What, then, does it mean to *live* today in the hope of eternal life? Far from having it easy in this world, being done with this world, or being exonerated from dealing with people in trouble, the hope of salvation plunges us deep into relationship with those most in need.

We turn to Third Isaiah, who is so upset about the conditions of his people that he “will not keep silent” and “will not rest.” (Isa 62:1) The reason for the turmoil is clear: Jerusalem must be vindicated. Her people had been shipped off into exile. Destabilization had been intentionally wrought on her politics by taking the officials and leaving the masses without their leaders. The people of Jerusalem had been wronged, they had been conquered two times in recent history. With exile borne down upon them in differing ways, their people had been exploited, demoted, conscripted, and displaced. While they hadn't necessarily been slaughtered, they were colonized, robbed, and kidnapped.

It seems that Isaiah is angry—an appropriate and righteous response to harm that devastates your people. Church philosopher Thomas Aquinas said that anger occurs when people feel they have been wronged and have an impulse to denounce the wrong. Unlike much of church tradition that has condemned anger (instead of the violence or bitterness that some take as a problematic release), Aquinas thinks wrong and violation may need to be denounced. Could anger be godly? Could Isaiah angrily denounce the Israelite's oppression? “I will not keep silent,” he says. “I will not rest.”

Destruction could not be right for a people to whom God had promised deliverance. The Israelites had been instructed on how to live in light of the hope of God's deliverance. Verse

six says that sentinels are posted and “all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who **remind the Lord**, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem.” To live in the light of the hope of God means reminding God and the world of who God is. God is one who establishes equity. Isaiah says it this way: eat the grain you grew, drink the wine you pressed, clear obstacles out of people’s way, seek out those who feel forsaken. (v. 8, 10, 12) Living in hope means having the ability to see the goodness that God’s glory brings when God comes to dwell among God’s people. Being able to see such goodness gives the ability to see the atrocious gap between God’s goodness and the harmful practices and realities in the world.

In order to remind God, we have got to know who this God is. John’s prologue provides both cosmic and incarnate views of God’s ontology.

- Jesus is from before all time.
- Jesus is the one through whom all life began to exist.
- Jesus is also the one enfleshed—with blisters and changing eyesight and all.
- Jesus is the one who has lived in my shoes.
- Jesus is the one who reveals God’s glory.

Living in the light of that glory—who became incarnate in the world once and returns again to transform the earth in light of God’s glory—means taking a disposition like John. Point to, witness to, testify to God’s goodness with certainty that evil cannot withstand such good and with determination to expose threats to justice that have no place when at odds with God’s glory.

Jan Rippentrop



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