Preaching Helps

January—March 2020: After Christmas to Almost Holy Week

2020: Perfect Vision and Preaching

When I retired and moved to Minneapolis I went to the DMV to get my driver's license. "You don't need glasses," the official told me after I read the letters on the chart. I was surprised since I had long worn glasses for distance. Did I now have 20/20 vision or did Minnesota have an easier test? Even with permission to put my glasses away, I still wear them most of the time when I drive.

Do we have 20/20 vision in our preaching? Probably not. We miss things in the text, we assume what the text says because we preached it three years ago, or we have a certain style of preaching that works so there's no need for new glasses. Year A of the lectionary moves from Matthew into wonderful narrative texts from John's gospel. In this issue of Preaching Helps, I invite you to consider three different forms or models of preaching for Lent 2, 3 and 4: a Teaching Sermon on John 3, a First-Person Narrative sermon on John 4 and a Drama Conversation on John 9. A few words about each form…

Teaching Sermon on John 3:16. This familiar verse comes at the end of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. That encounter offers wonderful opportunities for preaching so you may choose a narrative sermon on Nicodemus and Jesus. But in verse 11 Jesus shifts from singular "you" to plural, looking over Nicodemus' shoulder at us. This Sunday is a good time to consider the meaning of Jesus' life and death as we move toward Jerusalem. In this case, the focus is on a verse many people know by heart, a verse that is often misunderstood. A teaching sermon is not a lecture and hopefully, it is not boring. A teaching sermon may be an "onion sermon," peeling away layers of assumptions. John 3:16 does not say "God sent his only son *to die for us*." A teaching sermon can bring insights from theologians or biblical scholars without showing off. The example engages the work of New Testament scholar Marcus Borg. Some people will be excited to learn from scholars; others will be suspicious. You know what will reach people where you are. A teaching sermon can challenge dangerous interpretations but never leaves a pile of rubble. The final section of the example is a positive reworking of John 3:16, holding exodus, exile, and priestly stories together. (See Ron Allen, *The Teaching Sermon* for deeper understanding of this form.)

First-Person Narrative Sermon on John 4. A narrative retelling sermon is not repeating the story. In this form, the preacher finds ways to bring listeners' experiences into the biblical story. Most narrative retelling sermons will be in third person, like most biblical stories: "A Samaritan woman came to draw water…" But occasionally the preacher speaks in first person, in this case as the Samaritan woman who forgot her water jar. While this model is probably rare, it can be very powerful. The preacher remains a preacher, not an actor. No costumes are needed. The preacher sets up the narrative so listeners will go along. (Some in the congregation may resist.) How can the Samaritan woman reach out in present time to invite people into the story? This retelling uses "emptiness" as a way for listeners to consider the empty places in their lives.

Drama Conversation on John 9. In his classic commentary on John, Raymond Brown affirms this long story as a drama.[1] Today, the gospel reading and the sermon are woven together as one piece. Members of the congregation are invited to present the play (avoid "then he said"–just speak the lines as the narrator moves the story along.) The preacher converses with the drama. This conversation can happen along the way or at the very end of the play. What does this drama tell us about conversion? Is it once-in-a-liftime or over a lifetime? How can people with disabilities shape the conversation? (See Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability;* Nancy Eiseland, *The Disabled God;* and Nancy Mairs, *Waist-High in the World.*) Is this the time to deal with the problem of "the Jews" being blamed for Jesus' death, rather than on Good Friday?

In a newsletter or at the beginning of Lent, the preacher may invite congregants to listen to different ways of hearing the gospel on the following Sundays. If we as preachers are accustomed to one model of preaching, trying new forms can spark our own creativity—even if we never see with 20/20 vision.

We welcome two new writers in this edition of Preaching Helps: Kristin Foster, pastor on the Iron Range of Minnesota and John Rohde Schwehn, pastor in New Brighton, Minnesota (a bit further south!) For three decades, **Kristin M. Foster** served as pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Mountain Iron, on Minnesota's Iron Range, where she and her husband Frank Davis raised their two children. She led the congregation on a journey through a devastating fire, becoming a rural Reconciling in Christ congregation, and hosting the Iron Range Earth Fest in the heart of mining country. Kristin co-chairs the NE MN Synod EcoFaith Network Leadership Team. She was the recipient of the 2019 Yale Divinity School Alumni Award for Distinction in Congregational Ministry. **Sarah Trone Garriott**, an ELCA pastor, is the Coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC). Formerly a parish pastor in rural Virginia

1. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 376–382.

and suburban Des Moines, she now works with faith communities across the religious spectrum to support the DMARC Food Pantry network. In addition to interfaith work, she regularly preaches in Christian congregations that welcome women in their pulpits, and presides at the table of ecumenical partners. **Ron Luckey** received a B.A. from Lenoir-Rhyne University, the MDiv from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry from Lexington Theological Seminary. After forty years in pastoral ministry, he retired at the end of 2012, having served as pastor in North Carolina, campus pastor at Clemson University, and pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Lexington, Kentucky for twenty-five years. He has been involved in community organizing in Lexington since 2001 with the founding of BUILD (Building a United Interfaith Lexington through Direct Action). He has been a member of the ELCA's Community Organizing Advisory Team, vice-president of the board of Directors of DART (Direct Action Research and Training Center) and has co-chaired the Indiana-Kentucky Synod's Community Organizing Resource and Engagement Team. He has received training through DART, the Gamaliel Foundation and National People's Action. Ron is a certificated instructor in Kenpo karate and holds a fifth degree black belt. He and his wife, Pacita, a retired public school teacher, have four grown children and six grandchildren. **John Rohde Schwehn** serves as a pastor at Christ the King Lutheran Church in New Brighton, Minnesota. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife, Anna, and their two daughters. The youngest daughter, Mira Martha, was baptized this past All Saints Sunday, and she cried the entire time. When he's not pastoring or chasing children, John and a friend sometimes reflect on the lectionary texts in front of a microphone, and post these reflections online as the Brew Testament Podcast. **Susan P. Thomas** is an ELCA pastor who lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire. She has served in campus and congregational ministries in North Minneapolis (Holy Nativity Lutheran Church), Cambridge, Massachusetts (University Lutheran, MIT and Harvard), Hanover, New Hampshire (Our Savior Lutheran and Dartmouth College) and with Global Mission in Vienna (the Vienna Community Church related to the Reformierte Stadtkirche) and Jerusalem (the English-speaking Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in the Old City, in cooperation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jerusalem and the Holy Land—where she believes she was the first ordained woman since Mary Magdalene to serve as the called pastor of a worshipping community.)

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

Second Sunday after Christmas
January 5, 2020

Jeremiah 31:7–14
Psalm 147:12–20
Ephesians 1:3–14
John 1:1, (1–9) 10–18

This Sunday, you will likely be choosing between the assigned texts and those of the Festival of Epiphany (celebrated the next day). Both choices richly cap Christmastide. Both sets of texts are "full of grace and truth," glorious and hard.

Engaging the Texts

Jeremiah 31:7–14

God gathers together a great scattered company of the vulnerable, consoling them in their weeping and giving them bountiful life—their sorrow exchanged for gladness.

Psalm 147:12–20

The joy in God's graciousness continues, its power extending even to snow and frost and melting waters.

Ephesians 1:3–14

The wide reach of redemption was destined from the beginning and has been lavished upon us. God stuns us further with the gracious promise "to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth," bringing renewed life and hope to us now.

John 1:1, (1 –9) 10–18

A riff on God's bold enfleshment of the eternal Word in Jesus, the poetic affirmation and exaltation of all things earthy and humble that have come into being through God.

Pastoral Reflections

These are cosmic texts, moving from the beginning of all things to "neighborhoods" made sacred through Christ's presence (see Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of John 1:14—"The Word became flesh and blood, and *moved into the neighborhood*. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.")

Such fullness language is challenging in a world also full of grief, even when it acknowledges that grief (Jeremiah 31). We cannot pretend that people the world over aren't suffering separation, treachery, hunger, fear. The global refugee crisis continues to grow and deep divisions assail us. We find ourselves searching with others through the rubble of cities,

villages, lives, for the great in the small, for the holy in the common, for God incarnate somewhere, anywhere—maybe here. Maybe now. For this mess of a world that we've inherited and hardly improved is not God-forsaken. In fact, we've just celebrated holy incarnation, "God with us," in wondrously stirring ways.

Claiming and holding to God's fulsome promises is what it means to be faithful to the gospel. Can we continue to live with the tension we feel between fullness and grief?

Perhaps. If we begin by recognizing that God is not a crumb-scatterer but a crumb-gatherer. God is not just a drop of water on a thirsty tongue but an overflowing cup. The God we proclaim does not disdain the meagre crumb or the tiny drop—or, it bears remembering, the human infant born among cattle who soon becomes exiled from his homeland. Indeed, God becomes incarnate in these very things. We dare not say, "It's just the crumbs for me." Those crumbs are holy. They contain the whole.

In Bethlehem (yes, *that* Bethlehem, in the West Bank), the Reverend Mitri Raheb, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, founded The International Center of Bethlehem, which has grown over the years to include a school, a college, and many cultural offerings. See http://brightstarsbethlehem.org/mitri-raheb-reverend-director-of-the-international-center-of-bethlehem/. In a place that has been isolated by a separation wall and whose Palestinian citizens frequently undergo scarcity, intimidation and attack by Israel, the International Center will not let go of Jesus' promise later in John's gospel, "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). It calls people to live an abundant, hope-filled life even in the midst of hardship.

The fullness of God overflows into creation, great and small.

As it did from the very beginning, when stars and planets and air and birds and trees and people dropped out of that overflowing cup that was God.

As it did later, at that very particular time, when the fullness of God overflowed into the feedbox of a cattle shed in Bethlehem.

And God's fullness overflows now, when the Word is spoken and the bread and wine is shared and there is enough for everyone with some left over and we are strangely filled by our God who is never used up, who is never diminished, who is *full* of grace and truth. Our God, whose lifeblood was poured out in Christ for us. Christ's love didn't trickle out. Christ gave himself completely for us, not counting the cost.

To be full-of-Christ, the Word made flesh, is to be where human need is deepest, where there isn't enough health and food and wholeness (or holiness) to go around. Such fullness is not a bag filled with spiritual goodies. Rather, we are filled with our common need of God.

This is our fullness. We are filled with our common need of God.

The fullness that we have received is the fullness of God's incarnation in human flesh.

Never again can we claim to be separate from those in need, lest we separate ourselves from God.

Never again can we refuse to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.

The grace upon grace that we have received is the profound love of God in Christ for all of creation. That means, as Martin Luther noted, *"We are people baked in the same loaf."* Thus, we don't give to the poor out of our goodness or largesse; we do so because there is no distinction between us. In his 1519 Treatise on the Lord's Supper, Luther wrote, *"We are bound with all the wretched little people of the earth. You must fight, work, pray for them, and if you cannot do other, at least have heartfelt sympathy."*

Our overflowing God has baked us into the same loaf. Surely, even its crumbs are intended to nurture and fill this beloved, beleaguered creation.

Susan P. Thomas

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2020

Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12
Matthew 2:1–12 (13–23)

If you haven't directly dealt with the consequences of the first part of Matthew's birth narrative on the First Sunday after Christmas (Matthew 2:13–23), consider using Matthew 2 in its entirety as today's Gospel, perhaps as a dramatic reading.

Engaging the Texts

Isaiah 60:1–6

These Third Isaiah words are addressed to returned exiles living under less than ideal circumstances in Judah. They look forward to yet greater fulfillment and joy, well-being, international regard, and the return of those still scattered ("sons and daughters"). It's a "we-have-hope-but-we're-not-quite-there-yet" passage.

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

This psalm references foreign kings bringing tribute, connecting to the sages' visit and gifts to the Christ child.

Ignore that part. Rather, pay attention to the surrounding reminders of what makes for a just ruler who "defends the cause of the poor, gives deliverance to the needy, and crushes the oppressor." This is a ruler who deserves homage.

Ephesians 3:1–12

See Second Sunday after Christmas (January 5) comments on the Epistle text.

Matthew 2:1–12 (13–23)

Having decidedly arrived at the wrong king's abode (*not* the home of the king who deserves homage), the foreign sages receive guidance from scripture scholars to locate the right place. Later, a divine warning in a dream leads them (wisely) not to return to Herod's palace with news of their success. The raging king will not let this rebuff go. The Holy Family escapes, joining centuries of refugees fleeing for their lives. A targeted massacre of Bethlehem infants ensues. Beyond Matthew's account, there are no extant records of a massacre of children in Bethlehem under Herod the Great. Would this shameful deed have been recorded among the king's exploits? Perhaps it didn't merit comment. Just a small number of children in a not very important village on a day a king was angry.

Pastoral Reflections

Joseph wakes up from his first dream, where the angel tells him not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. And he says to himself, "For the sake of the child, I will follow through on my promise to Mary."

The sages wake up from *their* dream. They, too, listen to its warning. They say to one another, "For the sake of the child, we won't return to Herod. We'll take another way home. We won't collude in his evil plans."

And Joseph dreams again, hearing the urgent warning to take the child and his mother to Egypt until further notice. "For the sake of the child," Joseph says to himself, "we will leave that which is familiar and take a different road so the child is out of harm's way."

As we look at our individual and societal decisions today, is the question we should be asking: "What should be done for the sake of the child?" I think an epiphany is possible if we compare Matthew's story to our own. Here's what's been revealed to me.

First, don't acquiesce to policies that make innocent people more vulnerable to harm. Ask what this policy means for children. What effect does it have on *their* quality of life, *their* future, *their* world?

Second, get the child out of harm's way. Herod is on the move. Herod is *always* on the move. When you wake up from being warned, don't delay. Get up and move that child.

Third, don't allow foolish people and malevolent leaders to determine the agenda for the rest of us. Don't collude. We need clear-eyed Wise People, guided by the light, to step up and govern in the best interests of the child.

Fourth, be prepared for a long, arduous journey, with significant setbacks along the way. The sages traveled from afar and back again by a different—probably longer—way because they listened for God's guidance. The Holy Family traveled across the Sinai into Egypt and lived there for many years.

Fifth, don't be afraid. In scripture, divine warnings and announcements are accompanied by words that acknowledge our fear but encourage us to move forward: "Do not be afraid. The Lord is with you."

Sixth, keep watching and listening. The landscape may change. Look beyond short-term actions to the child's *long-term* interests. Joseph waited patiently in Egypt until discerning it was safe to return to raise the child in his homeland, for Herod was dead.

The sages and Joseph watched and listened for signs and for warnings, taking roads they hadn't expected to travel. Joseph couldn't stop Herod's soldiers, but he *could* do his best to get the child out of their murderous path. And, when conditions changed, he worked to bring that child back.

Three fourteenth-century mosaics in Istanbul's Chora Church depict remarkable scenes: One badly damaged mosaic is a chaotic scene of the massacre. The second is a sword-swinging soldier outside a rocky hillside containing a hidden cave, where Elizabeth and her infant son John the Baptist have taken refuge, eluding Herod's slaughter. The third and most important may be a scene that Rita Nakashima Brock references here: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/slaying-of-the-innocents-and-the-meaning-and-message-of-christmas_b_2332617. "A line of mothers, still disrobed and clothed in private garments with their hair unloosed, stand before [presumably] Herod on his throne. Each mother stares at Herod intently, shaming him with her eyes. This final image suggests that community's understanding of the moral courage of [these] women and the shame and moral culpability of the elite who pay others to do their dirty work and cause so much suffering."

We need the moral courage of those mothers who stand before Herod, calling him to account for their children's deaths, just as we need the practical action of Joseph, protecting the child by whatever means he can. If we don't hear *this* message in the Christmas/Epiphany story, its meaning for our world is thin and hollow.

Susan P. Thomas

Baptism of Our Lord
January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42:1–9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34–43
Matthew 3:13–17

Reflections on the Texts

The texts for Baptism of Our Lord Sunday lift up water and word. As water has the power to give life and take it away, so does the word of God. Divine speech births new creation, whether it's the creation of the cosmos or the new life given to people who live in fear. Water often accompanies these divine speech acts. In the church, the two become one in the sacrament of baptism. In water, we are drenched in the word and born into new life, joined to Christ forever and sealed with the same Spirit that was present at the creation of all things.

Before diving into the Old Testament texts, it may be helpful to revisit Genesis. Chapter 1 gives the picture of a creating God who brings life into harmonious being. By breath (*ruach)* and speech, God tenderly, lovingly creates and calls everything GOOD. Genesis chapter 7, by contrast, shows the devastation that water brings in flooding and death. In this case, God's speech enacts a horrific end to a sinful humanity, and it is only a faithful remnant that survives.

Isaiah 42 is addressing those who, like Noah's family, have lived through a world-ending ordeal. They are still suffering the consequences. God's "chosen" Servant will bring God's new creation into being. However, the author pauses to remind us of who this God is: "the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out…who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it" (42:5). The Hebrew word for breath or spirit, *ruach,* is the word used in Genesis 1:2 when "the breath from God swept over the face of the waters." *Ruach* is used here when God announces he has put his "spirit" upon the Servant (42:1), and again when God declares that he gives "*spirit* to [all] those who walk in [the earth]" (42:5). In a hopeless place, God's spirit is blowing upon all people. Through God's Servant, the same life-giving *ruach* is about to do "new things" (42:9).

Psalm 29 elevates the gentle breath of God into a full-throated, powerful voice! "The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the glory of God thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters" (29:3). When reading Psalm 29, I don't know whether to feel fired up or frightened. Here the connection between God's Word and the waters is clear. The psalmist brings us from the glory of creation to the terror of floodwaters in only a few verses, harkening back to the Great Flood of Genesis 7. Thankfully, the psalmist ends with a word of peace (*shalom*). Still, this Psalm gives the sense that we stand vulnerably within a world that howls and whirls around us. The God of *shalom* may sit above it all—and even give us strength—but from where will our help finally come?

In Acts 10, God's powerful speech act comes from the mouth of a preacher. Our reading ends at verse 43, but a remarkable thing happens in verse 44: "While Peter was *still speaking*, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word." This story falls within a larger narrative of Peter taking "the word" to a Gentile community. All are baptized into Christ. For those of us who study what makes an effective sermon, here is an answer: tell the story of Jesus! This is really all that Peter does. Stories are what happen when God's word gets wrapped up in the messy lives of God's people. We see the word—hidden but ever-present—in our lives, and, with Peter, we connect it to the story of Jesus crucified and risen.

The waters of baptism are the central place where Christians connect our human story to the story of Christ. More than this, in baptism we actually are *joined* to the story of Christ. At Jesus' baptism, the speech of God thunders through the heavens: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). We recognize this voice. It is the same voice that, in Genesis 1, breathed all creation—including the waters of the Jordan—into being and called it GOOD. Beloved.

The identity that water and word confers calls us into a radically different way of living. Jesus' own ministry is clearly influenced by the leadership style of Isaiah's servant: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (Isa 42:3). When God's spirit fills us, we inhabit this gift of life by lifting up the weak, caring for creation, and bringing forth "justice for the nations" (Isa 42:1). As I write these reflections, media blasts nonstop coverage of presidential impeachment hearings. I—along with the nation—have no idea where these proceedings will lead. It is impossible to guess what will have come to pass upon the powerful by this Sunday in January 2020. It is wearying.

In a world where powerful forces swirl uncontrollably around us, it is all the more important to rest in the identity of our belovedness. This Sunday, remind your people who they are: completely known, completely loved, and completely forgiven by a tender-hearted God who has "taken us by the hand and kept us" (Isa 42:6). Along with Peter, tell the story of Jesus, the man who the powers "hanged on a tree" but whom death could not contain. The life-giving Spirit of the living God rests upon each one of us in these strange and uncertain times. We belong to a blessed creation that God has saved time and time again. There is nothing in all creation that could ever take this true identity away from us. By water and the word, we have been born into eternal life with God, and it is here among us now.

John Rohde Schwehn

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 19, 2020

Isaiah 49:1–7
Psalm 40:1–11
1 Corinthians 1:1–9
John 1:29–42

Reflections on the Texts

God's light has come—now where do we see it shining? Today's texts draw our attention not only to God's redeeming light, but to those who bear witness to its radiance. Prophets are those faithful women and men who refocus our vision on the truth of God's liberating love, on the light of our salvation. Preachers may elucidate these texts from a place of authority, even from an elevated pulpit. In the biblical witness, however, God raises up prophets not from the high places, but from the low; not from the strong and confident, but from the weak, the oppressed, and the suffering.

Isaiah 49 tells of a God who brings light to those who have been conquered, humiliated, and sent into exile. The speaker—known as the Servant—is sent not only to address despairing exiles, but to proclaim God's liberation and righteousness to *all* nations. Though confident in his calling ("Listen to me!" "Pay attention!"), he humbly acknowledges he has also "spent my strength for nothing and vanity." This Servant has experienced times of frivolity and times of suffering, yet God chooses to proclaim something enduring and true through him: salvation is coming and it will shine "to the end of the earth."

We see clear similarities between the Servant and the psalmist. The singer of Psalm 40 has experienced first-hand God's liberating light: "He drew me out of the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock." Whereas the Servant received a "mouth like a sharp sword," the psalmist received "a new song in my mouth." Both of these witnesses see themselves as vessels announcing the saving acts that God has already decided to perform. While our preaching may not reach "the end of the earth," the desired audience of the psalmist is "the great congregation." What song has God put on your heart? What story of God's saving light can you simply not "restrain [your] lips" from telling? May the "great congregation" hear it on Sunday morning!

Next we come to Paul's generous greeting to the church in Corinth. We could look closely at this letter, or, on this weekend when we commemorate Martin Luther King Jr., we might consider a modern-day epistle, written in direct conversation with Paul. Each year on this weekend, I make a point to read Dr. King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." It's a clarifying, prophetic text, written to a particular people in a particular moment, yet it remains timeless for our work around racial justice and reconciliation.

"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here," he writes. "Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns [think here of the Servant], and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world [the Corinthians], so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town."[2]

From a dark prison cell, this prophet refocuses the vision of white Christians (or "the white moderate") toward the truth of Christ's liberating light. Many who were sympathetic to the Civil Rights movement found it easier to remain safe within the walls of white privilege and unjust laws. The nonviolent actions that leaders like MLK enacted were meant to "bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive…Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed…"

This prophet exposed tension and injustice to the light, to the truth of liberation and reconciliation he believed was possible. The preacher may decide to connect Dr. King to John the Baptist who, in the gospel text, points us to Jesus Christ, the "Word made flesh," the light shining in the darkness which the darkness did not (and has not) overcome (John 1).

What does Jesus say to those who choose to follow him at John's urging? The very first words Jesus utters in John's gospel come as an open question: "What are you looking for?" he asks the nervous would-be disciples. "Where are you staying?" they reply. "Come and see," Jesus calls.

God's light has come; now where do we see it shining? Jesus invites us today to "come and see." Where does the Crucified One always lead us? To the cross. "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here," wrote one who followed the light of Christ into a dark jail cell in 1963.

It's worth noticing that the invitation to "come and see" is heard three more times in John's gospel, but not by the One you might expect.

First, only a few verses later, Philip invites a skeptical Nathanael to follow the teacher from Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael asks out of his prejudice. "Come and see," Philip replies. Philip is the first disciple to point another to the light. Jesus' own invitation is now on the lips of his followers.

The circle of inviters who point to the light grows even wider. The second utterance is spoken by the first true evange-

2. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]," accessed November 15, 2019, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

list in John's gospel, a Samaritan woman who encounters Jesus at a well. Considered a foreigner by Jesus' Jewish community, she invites everyone to "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" (John 4:29).

Finally, a grieving Mary invites Jesus to "come and see" the place where her brother, Lazarus, has been buried. This invitation causes Jesus to weep (John 11:32–35) and brings Lazarus forth into the light of day.

Following the light of the Crucified One means tuning our ears to the invitation from those at the margins to "come and see": the imprisoned, the foreigner, the persecuted, the grieving, those on the front lines in the struggle against injustice. May we all hear "the new song" these prophets are singing, trusting that the light of Christ is leading us to the ends of the earth.

John Rohde Schwehn

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 26, 2020

Isaiah 9:1–4
Psalm 27:1, 4–9
1 Corinthians 1:10–18
Matthew 4:12–23

Engaging the Gospel Text

A cartoon: Two people are sitting at the kitchen table, probably a husband and wife, still in their bathrobes. She's reading the morning paper, evidently a story about some crime. She reads aloud, "He was released on his own recognizance." Then, she says: "We're all out on our own recognizance, aren't we?"

Well, I guess we are, most of us anyway (if we can afford to pay bail). Behind the cartoon, there is a piece of truth that the woman in her bathrobe understood. From the book of Genesis on, it has been clear that God created human beings with the possibility of saying "no" as well as "yes." We can't explain any better than the ancient writers why people often choose wrongly, preferring evil to good, greed over generosity, war instead of peace. We only know that God's covenant was given to people who had already chosen wrongly and made myriad mistakes.

God let us out on our own recognizance. When Jesus came to Capernaum, it was still true. He came opening up the kingdom of God to those who had not been invited before. But they, too, would have to make a choice: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" Jesus didn't say, "Repent—or else." What he said was different. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"—the same words John the Baptist had said to the crowds who came out to the Jordan. John had made it very clear that in Jesus this word would no longer be promise, but presence. If the kingdom was indeed present why didn't Jesus say, "the kingdom of heaven is here" or "the kingdom of heaven there"? Why didn't Jesus locate the kingdom more clearly?

What is it about "at hand" or "come near" that is different from *here* or *there? At hand* is somehow expectation and fulfillment at the same time. *Come near* moves us—we stand on tiptoe to get a better look. *At hand* is urgent, but also hopeful. It is like that time just before sunrise when the light begins to change the sky ever so slightly. We see the outline of trees, the silhouette of buildings, the movement of people on early-morning streets. The dawn is "at hand." It is not here. It is not now. But the dawn is breaking in. We can go out believing the night is over, the day is at hand.

Repentance is born not of coercion but of mercy. Not from angry threat, but from the loving promise that you will not be cast off. The One who crossed the Jordan has not come to destroy us but to draw us back to the very heart of God. We begin to catch a glimpse of life's deep meaning buried beneath the piles of work on our desks or hidden behind our attempts to put our best foot forward (fearing always that even our best foot will never be enough). "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," said Jesus. You can pick up your life and walk.

And some did. Some picked up their lives and moved into the morning light. So the story moves on to the Sea of Galilee. It seems strange, even absurd that these fishermen immediately left their nets to follow Jesus. Where were they going? They didn't know. What would they be doing? They didn't know that either. Who was this one who called them? Well, that wasn't completely clear. Pastor/novelist Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "…the voice that we hear over our shoulders never says, 'First be sure that your motives are pure and selfless, and then follow me.' If it did, then we could none of us follow." Whatever it was, those fishermen knew they had to get up from where they were to find out. They discovered what we may be discovering, too: Jesus is the one we are free to follow or not to follow, the one we come to know fully only by following *before* we are ready.

The kingdom of heaven has come near. The commonwealth of heaven is at hand. Jesus will not coerce us to repent, will not force you and me to follow. We're out on our own recognizance. But that doesn't mean we have been left alone. Do you remember Emmanuel? The angel whispered this name to Joseph in a dream: "the child shall be called Emmanuel" (which means 'God is with us')." Matthew will not let us forget the name we first heard in Chapter 1. That promise is also there in the very last words of Matthew's gospel. "Remember,"

said Jesus, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." *I am with you.* Not "I was with you" (though that is true). Not "I will be with you after you die" (though that, too, is true). *I am with you always.* That includes right now, while we're out on our own recognizance. Emmanuel, God-with-us. The kingdom of heaven is breaking into the present tense of our lives.

Barbara K. Lundblad

[This Sunday may also be observed as Presentation of the Lord. Notes on those texts are included following this section.]

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 2, 2020

Micah 6:1–8
Psalm 15
1 Corinthians 1:18–31
Matthew 5:1–12

Engaging the Texts

Here we are in the middle of the season of Epiphany which is supposed to be a time to see things in a new light, find new insights, see new visions. Yet, many are in the middle of winter, longing for more light, looking forward to a change in the seasons. The excitement of Christmas is behind us and Lent is still a few weeks ahead. Today is also Groundhog Day, an annual observance for people so desperate for spring they will seek its sign in a ritual involving a large rodent. Once again we have the familiar, repeating scriptures of the lectionary cycle. It doesn't seem like the ideal time for epiphany. Can something new be revealed, even as we return to the same old history, prophecy, and teaching? Let's look at two of our most quotable passages for today: Micah and Matthew.

Like the mountains before a solitary pleading human voice, the people have been stubbornly unresponsive to God's word. We are told of the generations that came before, a seemingly never-ending cycle of deliverance and rebellion. God does not give up on the people, sending prophets time and again to speak a word of judgment and promise. Distracted by trying to find the least embarrassing pronunciation of "Shittim," for your Sunday lector, we may miss out on wondering, "just what happened on the way from Shittim to Gilgal?" Beginning in Numbers 22, we read about more drama while camped at Shittim before crossing the Jordan into the promised land. Balak could not get Balaam to curse the people, instead he ends up blessing them three times over. While God's efforts to protect them from Balak's sabotage are quite extraordinary (complete with talking donkey cameo), the people still manage to fail in a rather ordinary way. They curse themselves by sliding into the worship of local gods. They just let it happen, no conniving villain or evil schemes necessary. Again, there is spectacularly terrible judgment (slaughter, plague). Again, it isn't the end. A few pages later in Joshua we see that the people finally cross the Jordan, waters parting to let them walk on dry land. At Gilgal they set up twelve stones to remind them of this moment in the long arc of God's deliverance. Did those stones do the trick and at last help them stay faithful? Unfortunately, we know that the answer is no. Nevertheless, Micah 6 issues a powerful and succinct statement of faithful living and calls those who come after to listen and respond.

Matthew draws a line of continuity from the past to the present through Jesus. In these first chapters the past is present everywhere one looks: in Bethlehem, on the banks of the Jordan, in the wilderness, high up on the mountain side. Important things have happened here, but this isn't just a sightseeing tour of Israel's greatest moments. New history is being made. As soon as Jesus begins to teach, it is clear he is doing something a little different from tradition. This is Jesus' first opportunity to teach in Matthew, his first words of instruction after calling his disciples. Blessings that sound like woes are an interesting counterpoint to exciting healings and adoring crowds. It's not exactly the pep talk they were expecting, and the teaching only gets more daunting as it continues. But in the background of all of it, may we remember the people of Israel trying and failing, again and again. And again, and again, may we remember God going to spectacular lengths to deliver them.

Pastoral Reflections

In anticipation of preaching these same scriptures again, I will be watching the movie "Groundhog Day." Perhaps you, too, have seen it a few dozen times. In the film, Bill Murry plays a weatherman assigned *ad nauseum* to cover Punxsutawney Phil's big day. Also named Phil, he despises everything about his day: the place, the people, the spectacle, the repetition, his task. As the day unfolds, he shows himself to be a truly horrible, perhaps unredeemable person. Then through a magical twist he is forced to live this same day over and over. We often think that a change of pace, a new place, some different circumstances will change a life. Instead, submitting to the sameness is what makes the difference for Phil. He eventually finds new life in the middle of the same old, same old. But first, it takes a long time (100 days, a millennium, who knows?) and quite a few hilarious screwups (failed escapes, self-destruction, debauchery, nihilism, gaming the system) before he finally is changed and set free. In the depth of his despair, Phil pontificates about God's role in the universe in relation to his plight. Phil says, "Well, maybe the real God

uses tricks, you know? Maybe he's not omnipotent. He's just been around so long he knows everything."

Pastors know the struggle of feeling like no matter what we try, nothing really changes. It's the same story to preach week after week, year after year. Your people know this feeling, too. They are struggling through the repeating challenges of getting the work done, paying the bills, making meaning, finding joy. We may be tempted to start a sermon series after Christmas to avoid slogging through the same territory. But instead, what about doubling down on the same old scriptures? It is in the repeating cycles of history that God's faithfulness is known. The people of Israel needed to return to those markers and milestones, the traditions and the holy places to remember. More than going through the motions, this is the practice of faith. Practice means repetition with intention and care. The hope is that eventually, someday, with practice the people will get it right. The word will be heard. The promise will be trusted. They will be faithful. It hasn't happened yet, but each time they fail, God's grace is revealed anew.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Presentation of the Lord
February 2, 2020

Malachi 3:1–4
Psalm 84
Hebrews 2:14–18
Luke 2:22–40

Sacred Texts and Secular Festival

The Presentation of the Lord coincides with another festival, the presentation of the groundhog in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. The first official Groundhog Day was celebrated in 1887, based on a Pennsylvania Dutch superstition. The name "Phil" was first associated with the creature around 1961, perhaps inspired by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and the royal fever of the time. What does this have to do with the scriptures at hand? Probably nothing. But it is likely that more of your congregants will be aware of Phil's presentation in Punxsutawney than of Jesus' in the Temple. Also, considering the popularity of Netflix Series "The Crown," many of them would find a connection between the groundhog and Prince Philip quite entertaining. Apropos of nothing, in Virginia another name given for groundhog is "whistle pig." This name refers to the high-pitched whistle the animal makes when in distress to warn the rest of its colony. It's a fun mid-winter diversion to go down this "groundhog hole." But for now, back to business. Let's take a closer look at Luke to better understand why this occasion might be worth commemorating.

Luke goes to great effort to establish Jesus' family as observant and obedient to law. The walk from Nazareth to Jerusalem would have taken roughly thirty hours, probably longer with a baby in tow. After all that effort, instead of a lamb, they offer "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Even this "cheap" choice may have been a financial sacrifice for the family. It was inconvenient to travel to the Temple and expensive to participate in the Temple practices. Not all people could or would have made the effort, customary or not. This ritual is clearly very important to Mary and Joseph. But the act is not only important to the child's family, it is significant to the wider community. Unbeknownst to the family, Anna and Simeon have been waiting their whole lives for this moment. Mary and Joseph are reminded that they are part of a surprising extended family through their faith. Simeon's words draw the child and his parents into the epic story of God's deliverance. Anna's proclamation then turns the story outward to the rest of the community gathered in the Temple.

Pastoral Reflections

I can't help but come back to Groundhog Day in the pastoral reflections. According to tradition, Phil is a harbinger of an early spring only if it is cloudy. A sunny day will result in a shadow and six more weeks of winter. It seems to me that if sunshine was a sign of foreboding, the Pennsylvania Dutch were a pessimistic people. There is also a shadow looming in the moment of Jesus' presentation. Simeon's blessing is also in good part a threat: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." Poor Mary. Each of the festive occasions in chapter 2 also point to future gloom. But as a parent, I can attest that there is always a bit of terror mixed in with the joy. At each milestone or celebration there is an awareness of how things could be otherwise. Many a parent finds themselves worrying even more in anticipation of a special occasion. Today Malachi speaks of the Day of the Lord in these mixed terms, bright and destructive "like a refiner's fire." No matter how far a civilization has come, our human bodies remain vulnerable and the future uncertain. We turn to our rituals hoping to gain insight or control. But if we are truly paying attention, we are reminded of our place in the cosmos and the dependence on God's mercy.

Rituals like Jesus' presentation are a way to put us in our place, and that's not a bad thing. Mary and Joseph are reminded that they are part of a bigger family, a bigger story. When confronted with the overwhelming realities of life (change, challenge, suffering, death) it is too much for one person, or one family to handle on their own. Rituals such as dedications, baptisms, confirmations, even ordinations remind the individual and the family that they are not in this life alone.

Instead, the ritual is an opportunity to be reminded that we are part of a community. In our individualistic culture, this is sometimes difficult to understand. In a first-century view of self and world the idea of self and world was not so distinct. In fact, Mary and Joseph's calculation about making the trip to the Temple would have been based more on tradition and communal practice than their own time and money. It may take some extra effort to help your people understand this way of seeing the world. Or, maybe it is more relatable than we might think. How many of your young parents presenting children for baptism are coming out of familial expectation? This, again, may not be a bad thing. In the rituals is an opportunity to speak like Simeon to the family about their place in the family and the story of faith. There is also an opportunity to proclaim like Anna to the community about the child/family and the hope they embody for the community.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 9, 2020

Isaiah 58:1–9a [9b–12]
Psalm 112:1–9
1 Corinthians 2:1–12 [13–16]
Matthew 5:13–20

Engaging the Texts

The Gospel reading assigned for this Sunday concludes the introduction to what is traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount, which began with the Beatitudes addressed in last Sunday's Gospel.

The images of salt and light found in verses 14–16 are rich with metaphorical possibilities. Jesus' audience not only understood the practical uses of salt—it flavors, preserves, and purifies—they also honored its religious use as an essential part of ritual sacrifices. They undoubtedly did not quibble when Jesus talked about salt losing its saltiness. They and Jesus knew this was not possible but that it was possible for salt to be contaminated or watered-down.

As for light, many would have undoubtedly heard "You are the light of the world," as an echo of the prophet Isaiah's pronouncements that Israel was to be a light to the nations. Jesus makes clear that the goal of the people's vocation as salt and light is not to draw attention to their righteousness but in order that others might give all the honor to a God worth praising.

It is theologically essential to note that in these verses Jesus is not *prescribing* ethical behavior ("You ***should be*** salt…light"); rather he is *describing* his audience's conferred identity ("You ***are*** salt…light.") The inescapable implication is "Now that you know who you are, behave like it." Jesus then offers a word of caution. It is possible, he says, to disregard one's vocational identity (salt can lose its taste and light can be hidden.) Time and again, the church has proven Jesus' point by not showing itself to be the salt and light that it is. However, even when that happens, its vocational identity still holds ("You are…") and beckons a return to faithfulness. As the Eagles sing in "Hotel California," "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

At first glance, verses 17–20 may seem to be an abrupt change of subject. Jesus goes from speaking about identity to what seems like a somewhat academic discussion of the law. But what Jesus is actually doing is furthering his explanation of what it means to be salt and light. To live as a community of salt and light is to be devoted to Torah and even to be held to a higher standard than the letter of the law requires. In the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will expand the meaning of this higher standard which "exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees."

Pastoral Reflections

In this Gospel reading, I am drawn to Jesus' image of "light" and by the simple but life-altering word, "are" he attaches to it. The oppressed people to whom Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount had been called a lot of things in their lives but "light" was not one of them. "Light" was a title appropriated by Caesar and his kind. It was a term synonymous with power and glory. And here were peasant farmers, and women and children (at the very bottom of the social and economic ladder) being given an astounding and entirely unexpected new identity: "You are light."

It is important to note that the "you" Jesus uses here is the plural "you." He is speaking primarily not to individuals, but to the revolutionary community he is building. Let the preacher's sermon reflect that communal emphasis in today's sermon. Jesus' audience may not have understood everything their new identity entailed, but they rightly assumed it involved what he had talked about in his "sermon" just a few moments before. That to be the light of the world had something to do with "Blessed are the merciful"—being merciful in world made dark by those who lived by "an eye for an eye." And "Blessed are the peacemakers"—non-violently resisting the darkly oppressive weapons of Rome. And "Blessed are the meek"—relentlessly doing the righteous thing in a world made dark by unrighteousness.

Let the preacher make clear this Sunday that Jesus tells his original audience what they ***are***, not what they ***should be***. "You ***are*** the light of the world." The identify issue has been settled. They ***are*** light. The only remaining issue is, "What will you do with this identity? Will you shine like the light you are or will you betray your identify by hiding the light?"

There are countless ways for the church to be light in this world. A significant part of the preacher's task on this Sunday is to invite the congregation to imagine what the church looks like and sounds like when it is fulfilling its mission of being light given the current local, national, and world scene and to remind the church that wherever it is dark and the church shows up, God smiles and the world breathes a sigh of relief.

On the day of our baptism, the pastor echoes Jesus' words found in this Gospel reading, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." In those words there is both the grace and the assignment found in today's Gospel text. Remember the words we sang as children? "Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine." One could do worse than sing, "This Little Light of Mine" as the Hymn of the Day on this Sunday.

Ron Luckey

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 16, 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15–20
Psalm 119:1–8
1 Corinthians 3:1–9
Matthew 5:21–37

Notes on the Text and Implications for Preaching

The twentieth century Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler acknowledged what the preacher and many in the congregation are thinking when confronted by the challenging words in today's Gospel reading: "The Sermon on the Mount seems to present a desirable—and impossible situation."[3] He goes on to confess that the first reaction to Jesus' words in this text is to domesticate them into something we can live with instead of confronting our "demonic human capacity to settle for less than the mad obedience that God requires."[4] Sittler is right. In this demanding pericope, we are met with God's "mad obedience" and at the same time our "demonic capacity to settle for less." Any sermon on this Gospel reading should address both of these realities, not domesticating Jesus' sky-high expectations while at the same time not losing sight of the grace that saves us.

In last Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus declared: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." In today's reading he makes uncomfortably clear what that word" fulfill" means. As a devout Jew Jesus revered the Torah as "the revelation of God's will, a kind of divine blueprint for human action."[5] What his audience would come to discover that day on the mountain was that his intent was not to contradict or discard the Torah as obsolete but rather, to go deeper than the written words of the law and get to the "heart" of the matter. They would go back down the hill convinced that Jesus viewed keeping the law as a matter of one's internal disposition and not simply about what one's hands are up to, what one's mouth says, or what one does with what's below one's belt.

In the cases Jesus lifts up in these verses—murder, adultery, marriage and divorce, one's reaction to personal affront, love of neighbor, the taking of oaths—he ratchets up the divine expectation until his listeners can't help but understand what he meant in verse 20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

It would probably be helpful for the preacher to imagine for the congregation what Jesus' original listeners thought that day when he said what he said, because that is very likely what the preacher's congregation is thinking. Many of Jesus' listeners would not have seen themselves as murderers or adulterers. Furthermore, many had long ago excused themselves for feeling or doing some of the things Jesus was talking about. "How can I control what I think and feel? Besides, I'm only doing what everybody else does. This is just how the world works." But up there on that mountain (and down here in the pews!) they and we leave our world and find ourselves invited into Jesus' world, a world that defies conventional wisdom. A world being made new even now by the power of God.

In Jesus' world, murder can occur without spilled blood and adultery can happen with a simple glance. In Jesus' world, worshipping God is an act directly connected with being reconciled with others. In Jesus' world, there is no lying, only truth-telling. In Jesus' world, marriage is not an easily disposable commodity. In Jesus'world, labeling and name-calling are not excused with, "I'm only human." In short, Jesus is laying out "a description of the life of a people gathered by and around Jesus."[6]

Let the sermon on this Sunday boldly and unapologetically plumb the outrageous dimensions of the mad obedience God requires while daring to name our "demonic capacity to settle for less." But let the sermon be equally explicit that there is no room for despair in these verses. Instead, a sermon on this text should give rise to a deep sense of gratitude that those who fall short of the mark are still God's kind of folk,

3. Joseph A. Sittler, *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 77.
4. Ibid.
5. Daniel Harrington in the *Sacra Pagina* commentary (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 91.
6. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* in the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Press, 2015), 61.

and to a profound dependence on God and our siblings in the community to assist in our striving for nothing less than the obedience God requires, and to the soaring freedom that comes from knowing that our relationship with God is not conditioned upon our success in being "madly obedient" but on ***God's*** mad obedience to God's people.

Today's Gospel reading, then, is a case study in law and gospel. It sets the bar insanely high which gives us a lifetime's worth of things to ponder and on which to work both individually and corporately. When all is said and done, it does even more. It serves as a reminder that the kind of people Jesus chooses as his church are those who know deep down they are sinners who have the privilege of leaning into God's power and on God's mercy as they strive to pursue the mad obedience that God requires.

Ron Luckey

Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 23, 2020

Exodus 24:12–18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16–21
Matthew 17:1–9

Engaging the Texts

People who hear these readings will surely hear a connection between Exodus 24 and Matthew's transfiguration story. Matthew has plotted his gospel to frame Jesus as the new Moses. From the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) to the Judgment of the Nations in Chapter 25, Jesus engages in five teaching sessions, mirroring the five books of Moses. In both Exodus and Matthew, a cloud signals the presence of God. Both texts come together when Moses—along with Elijah—appears on the mount of transfiguration. Moses, the Law and Elijah, the Prophet appear on the mountain talking with Jesus. Too bad we'll never know what they talked about!

The narrator in Matthew tells us that all this happens "six days later." Six days after what? After Caesarea Philippi, after Peter's confession, after Jesus' first words about suffering and dying and rising, after Peter's refusal to hear such talk, after Jesus rebuked Peter, after strange words about finding your life by losing it for the sake of the gospel? "Six days later." Perhaps this is a deliberate doubling of Jesus' prediction "and after three days rise again." Or could it simply be sabbath? After six days God rested and invited all of us to do the same.

Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to go with him up the mountain. They were invited into that mysterious space where the membrane between heaven and earth is so thin you can almost see through it. Jesus was transfigured—*metamorphoomai* is the Greek word, as in what happens when a worm-like larva becomes a beautiful butterfly. Jesus' face shown like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Later in Matthew, almost these same words will describe the angel at the empty tomb: "His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow." (Matt 28:3) Is this vision on the mountain a promise of resurrection after Jesus' talked about dying? Like Peter we try to pin everything down—build three dwellings, capture the moment, hold on to what we cannot hold.

But while Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them and God's voice interrupted Peter: "This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased." The very words Jesus had heard at his baptism. But God wasn't finished: "Listen to him." The dazzling vision leads up to those three words: "Listen to him." Listen to everything Jesus said in his first teaching session on another mountain.

"Listen to him." This is why we need to go up the mountain again every year, even if we don't know how to explain it or talk about it, even if we find ways to discount it or even deny it. The call to be on the way with Jesus is not an easy journey. This is why the transfiguration story comes where it does—after Jesus' words about suffering, dying, and rising again.

Pastoral Reflections

How do we speak about the presence of God? The Israelites experienced the presence of God in a cloud that led them by day, a pillar of fire by night. Few of us have seen such signs, yet we long for the assurance of God's presence. Pastor/novelist Frederick Buechner put it this way: "It is not objective proof of God's existence that we want, but, whether we use religious language for it or not, the experience of God's presence. That is the miracle that we are really after."[7]

But this miracle is hard to pin down and surely hard to put into words. Years ago my dad was in a terrible car accident. After intensive care, he spent weeks in the rehab center. Day after day he struggled to make the connection between a picture of an ordinary object and the word that names it. Hammer. Window. Chair. Sometimes he said the right word instantly. Often, he failed. "Sometimes," he said, "I feel like I don't know anything." I took his hand over and over, "Daddy, you know lots of things. You just can't find the words now."

How can we find the words to talk about the presence of God? Sometimes, we feel like we don't know anything. Being part of a congregation isn't so different from being in the rehab center. We struggle together to find words for what we believe about God or how to describe the presence of God.

7. Frederick Buechner, "Message in the Stars" in *The Magnificent Defeat* (HarperOne, 1985), 47.

Sometimes we don't even have the alphabet. So we borrow words and images just as God's people have done for centuries. A cloud. A dazzling light. Or the still, small voice Elijah heard on another mountain. We borrow words and prayers and songs others have passed down to us. This is what we do when we come together on Sunday. I don't claim that every worship service is a mountaintop experience! But I do know that it's very hard to follow Jesus without the company of others. Without a vision beyond ourselves, we would be likely to give up.

Jesus finally ***does*** say something on the mountain. After God spoke from the cloud, the disciples fell to the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus came and touched them and said, "Get up and do not be afraid." Get up, Peter, James, John—add your own name here.

Maybe that's what we should say to each other at the end of worship: "Get up and do not be afraid." *Thanks be to God!*

Barbara K. Lundblad

Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 *or Isaiah 58:1–12*
Psalm 51:1–17
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Reflections on the Texts

What text will we choose for Ash Wednesday? Many preachers are weary of Matthew 6 year after year after year. It's not only weariness but the way this gospel text seems to contradict the focus for this service. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (6:1). So should we wipe off the ashes as we leave worship? That seems to be the message of verse 17: "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face…" We do well to remember that these verses come from the middle chapter of the Sermon on the Mount. That first teaching session in Matthew lifts up Jesus' call to ethical living, righteous living (5:20). Putting ashes on our foreheads cannot be separated from the larger meaning of Jesus' first radical sermon.

The Joel text offers themes that connect more closely to the beginning of the Lenten journey. "*Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."* These words from the prophet Joel replace "Alleluia" as prelude to the gospel reading in many congregations on the Sundays in Lent. We may have sung them so often we no longer think much about them. "Return to the Lord your God for…" For? What for and why? The prophet could have followed that word *for* with many different endings…

…*for* you haven't been to church in a long time
…*for* you might die tonight
…*for* you've messed up and need to ask for forgiveness
…*for* if you don't, you'll be sorry

But the prophet didn't choose any of these chastisements and threats. What the prophet said was very different: "Return to the Lord your God, *for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."*

I remember one Lent years ago when I was a pastor in New York City. Our seminary intern planned a Lenten series on prayer. The first night we were divided into small groups, each group talking about a different petition of the Lord's Prayer. In the open discussion that followed one of the boys—I think he was about 11 or 12 at the time—talked openly about praying in the middle of the night, praying because he was afraid of going to hell. Now, I knew his family well and I couldn't imagine that his parents had threatened him with the fires of hell to get him to behave. I also knew that he didn't hear much about hell from the pulpit. Yet, there it was inside him—that fear that he wasn't good enough, that he'd done things too terrible to be forgiven, that he was going to hell. Perhaps classmates in school talked about hell. Maybe he heard about hell on television or in a movie. Perhaps it was the easy way some people say, "Go to hell." While Jesus hardly ever talked about hell, others—especially preachers—have talked about hell quite a bit. We wouldn't have been surprised if the prophet had said, "Return to the Lord your God for if you don't, you'll go to hell."

Perhaps the fear of hell is in our genes. I don't know. The existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said that human beings go through life with one of two basic outlooks:

- Others are looking at me with a suspicious stare OR
- Others are looking at me with a loving glance

Is that how we feel about our relationship with God? Is God fundamentally suspicious, judging my every thought and action? Or is God looking at me with a loving glance? I'm thinking about that young boy from many Lents ago who spoke so honestly about his fear of going to hell. Where did it come from? The culture, perhaps, or something inside him. It may have been unhealthy guilt.

> False guilt lures us from a focus on what we have done to an absorption with how bad we are. The mood moves from "I have failed here" to "I am a failure." I lose sight of the particular behaviors that I can and should change. I even lose sight of the relationship that I have injured…the focus is on me—my wretchedness, my failure, my pain.[8]

8. Evelyn and James D. Whitehead, *Expressions* magazine: October/November, 1987.

When we focus on our wretchedness, failure, and pain, we can't even begin to imagine that God is gracious, that God wants us to return. All we can do is try to hide.

As we begin Lent together on this Ash Wednesday, the prophet invites us to come out of hiding—for the fear in our genes is overcome by the love in God's heart. Whatever we've taken into ourselves from the culture, from childhood's put-downs or adulthood's failures—none of this can separate us from God's abounding, steadfast love. The sign we wear on our foreheads is not only the honest reality of dust and death, but the promise that NOTHING can separate us from the abiding love of God.

> "Return to the Lord your God, for…
> …God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Barbara K. Lundblad

First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12–19
Matthew 4:1–11

Engaging the Texts

"What do you expect me to do? I'm only human!" Only human. Jesus did not apologize. We miss the full impact of this story if we forget what happens immediately before Jesus' temptation. Matthew 3 ends with the story of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. When he had been baptized, the heavens opened to him, and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Matt 3:17–4:1).

Only human? Of course not! It was not John the Baptist speaking; a voice from heaven spoke: "This is my Son, the Beloved." This one who went under the waters of the Jordan like hundreds of others heard words not spoken to anyone else: This is my Son, the Beloved.

With those words in his ears, Jesus was led up into the wilderness. Still wet with Jordan's waters, he was led into the desert to be tempted by the devil. When the story was over, there he was, only human. He hadn't proved a thing. He didn't perform even one miracle. He didn't prove his trust in God by jumping from the pinnacle of the temple. He didn't gain power over all the kingdoms of the world. He stood there, still hungry, only human.

And God was still God.

> Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart…Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deut 6:4–5, 8–9).

These are the words inside the mezuzah that our Jewish neighbors reach up to touch on their doorposts. "*Shema Israel.*" Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. This is the word Jesus took into the wilderness. Thus, the song is not quite right: "Jesus walked this lonesome valley. He had to walk it by himself." Jesus didn't go alone or empty-handed. Jesus was led by the Spirit and sustained by the ancient word. Every response Jesus made was a quote from Deuteronomy, including his final word about worshipping God alone. In the wilderness Jesus reached up, touched an invisible mezuzah and slammed the door in Satan's face. "Away with you!" Jesus said, not through his own will-power but in faithfulness to the One Holy God. Jesus of Nazareth, named "Son of God," refused to be God.

Only human. That was what Adam and Eve couldn't tolerate. They wanted to be God. The point of that ancient story is not that women brought sin into the world. Remember: it was Adam who laid the blame on Eve, then blamed God for giving him Eve in the first place! "You will not die," the tempter said, "…you will be like God." Being human is not enough! You can be like God. Maybe, you can even be God. *"If you are the Son of God," the tempter said, "command these stones to become bread." Son of God, that's what the voice said. You're more than human. Why be hungry? Change these stones to bread and eat. Eat*. They ate the fruit of the tree, then looked at themselves and saw that they were naked. They had always been naked, but now they were ashamed and covered themselves. Suddenly, they were ashamed of being only human.

Adam and Eve are in our genes; they are our kinfolk. Their story is in our bones and in our being, for we, too, long to know what only God knows. The most tragic errors the church has made throughout history have come from the temptation to be God: to establish holy empires and condemn dissenters, to claim certain signs as the only valid proof of salvation, to equate one social system with the kingdom of God. It is very hard to let God be God.

But Adam and Eve are not our only ancestors. Jesus, too, is our kin. We may dismiss him as a brother because of the voice from heaven. "This is my Son, the Beloved." Jesus wasn't only human. He was the Son of God. That's what the voice

said and that's what the creeds say. But what do those words mean? What does it mean to be the Son of God? That question brings us back to the wilderness. Jesus, you have heard the voice from heaven, now what does it mean? What does it mean to be the Son of God? The tempter offered Jesus several possibilities for what the Son of God should do and be. "Be like God," the tempter whispered. "You are God, aren't you?"

Jesus reached up and touched the word. The answers he gave were not his own. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to lead us back to the heart of God. In the faithful, human face of Jesus we find our way home, back to the garden where the tree of life is planted.

Only human. It is not an apology.

It is the only way to let God be God.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Second Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2020

Genesis 12:1–4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1–5, 13–17
John 3:1–17

A Teaching Sermon on John 3:16

One verse in today's gospel is so well-known that someone can print "JOHN 3:16" on a sign and hold it up in a football stadium, assuming people know what it means. This verse has been the explanation for everything Jesus did and all he was. But sometimes a verse becomes so familiar that we assume we know exactly what it means. Sometimes we even hear things that aren't there: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to die for us…" But the text doesn't say "to die for us." Hymns and liturgy filled in the missing words. In Bible camp we sang, *"For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son to die on Calv'ry's tree, from sin to set me free…"* What does it mean when we say God sent his son to die for us? Did God want Jesus to die? What sort of love is this? Questions like these have driven some people out of the church. Questions like these can also move us deeper into the life of faith.

In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,* Marcus Borg invites us to go deeper. John 3:16 was his first memory verse, a verse that became so troubling that he became a "closet atheist" during seminary. Yet, he devoted his life to studying and teaching the New Testament, especially the life of Jesus. Somewhere along the way, he met Jesus again for the first time and that made all the difference.

His experience may be very different from yours or mine, but he invites us to question assumptions and be open to meeting Jesus again. To say "Jesus died for our sins" is not only a limited picture of Jesus, but a distorted picture. According to Borg, the problem is seeing Jesus only through one narrow lens. He invites us to see Jesus through three stories rather than one. He calls them "macro stories"—large stories that shape both Old and New Testaments: the Exodus story, the Exile story, and the Priestly story. Each story shapes faith in a different way; each identifies a problem and offers a solution.

THE EXODUS STORY: the problem is slavery and oppression. The solution is freedom and liberation. This is the story of God freeing Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the story remembered each year in the Passover Seder. This is the story Jesus remembered when he said, "The Spirit has anointed me…to let the oppressed go free…" This story has lived in struggles of captive people in every generation—slaves in this country longing for freedom, the long fight against apartheid in South Africa, the struggles of liberation communities in El Salvador. The Exodus story also lives in personal stories of bondage and freedom told and retold in a thousand AA meetings in church basements around the country.

EXILE STORY: this story is not as familiar as the exodus but Israel's greatest literature was written during and after the traumatic exile in Babylon. The problem is estrangement and abandonment: "How can we sing God's song in a strange land?" The solution is homecoming, return, acceptance: "I have called you by name; you are mine," says God. Your exile is over. This is the father running to embrace his prodigal son in Jesus' parable. This is the writer of Revelation crying out: "Behold, the home of God is with mortals." We hear Jesus calling to us when we sing: "Come home, come home, you who are weary, come home."

PRIESTLY STORY: This isn't really a story but a way of seeing. The priestly story is centered in the temple. This is an identity story, separating God's people from the larger culture. The priestly writers wrote and edited many books of the Old Testament, including the glorious creation litany in Genesis 1—verses crafted as liturgy with the repeated refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day…" Images in the Priestly Story come from the Day of Atonement when the priest offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. The problem addressed by the priestly story is sin and guilt. The solution is forgiveness brought about by sacrifice: the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the people. The blood of Jesus, Lamb of God, poured out for us. It is this story alone that has interpreted Jesus' life and especially his death. It is this story alone that has shaped our hymns and our liturgies.

For Borg the sacrifice story alone offers a distorted vision of Jesus and the life of faith. John 3:16 says nothing about God giving Jesus to die for us. The Apostles' Creed says nothing about that either. Jesus was "crucified, died and was bur-

ied"—but sacrifice for sin isn't mentioned.

To see Jesus more fully we need to *hold all three stories together*—not to make Jesus more palatable, but because one story alone distorts who Jesus is.

- God loved the world so much, loved you and me so much, that God sent Jesus into this world to set us free from oppression and every form of bondage.
- God loved the world so much, loved you and me so much, that Jesus came to bring us home to God. "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you," Jesus said. "Come to me, all you who carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."
- God loved the world so much, loved you and me so much, that Jesus came to forgive our sins—and he forgave sins often before he died. "Your sins are forgiven," he said to those who had heard only condemnation. Jesus says the same thing to each of us now.

We need three stories to see the fullness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This means singing hymns beyond the Lent and Holy Week sections of the hymnals, inviting poets to write new words to Lenten hymns, searching for art work that lifts up all three ways of seeing Jesus. During these days of Lent how can we help people meet Jesus again for the first time?

Barbara K. Lundblad

Third Sunday in Lent
March 15, 2020

Exodus 17:1–7
Psalm 95
Romans 5:1–11
John 4:5–42

A First-Person Narrative Sermon on John 4

[A First-Person Narrative sermon is a retelling of the biblical story from the perspective of one of the characters, in this case, the Samaritan woman. The preacher needs to set up the sermon so people will come along. You do not need to wear a costume: you remain the preacher not an actor. You know people in the congregation better than this writer. You might ask a question: "What if we could get inside the memory of this woman?" Or, more directly: "This morning I invite you to imagine the Samaritan woman coming to us in this moment. You may find this hard to do—especially since I'm a man—but I hope you will be willing to be surprised." Then, take a moment before you begin the story…]

To this day, I have no idea what happened to my water jar. Not that there was anything special about it—it looked like every water jar in Sychar. Maybe it was picked up by a passing caravan and carried off to Egypt! But it was a strange thing to leave behind! No one goes to get water then leaves their water jar behind. Well, almost no one. That day, I ran back to town empty-handed.

That was years ago but I can remember the day as clearly as I see you. I remember what I forgot. And what he forgot. I'm talking about Jesus, you know. He forgot all sorts of things that day. Right from the beginning, he forgot the rules about Jews and Samaritans. "Give me a drink," he said. I reminded him of the rules, but it didn't seem to make any difference to him. Then, he forgot he was thirsty and started talking to me about living water—implying that I should have asked him for some if I knew who he was. How could I have known who he was? I knew he was a Jew. I knew he had asked me for a drink. But I didn't even know his name. So I took him literally when he talked about living water gushing up like an eternal spring. Believe me, I hated going to the well day after day. I never went in the early morning with the other women. I always went at noon. Who would be there at the hottest hour of the day?

Just me and a stranger from Galilee. It crossed my mind, "Maybe he's crazy"—talking about living water and not even having a bucket! But he never explained what he meant—in fact, he changed the subject. I said, "Give me that water" and he said, "Go, call your husband." I have no idea why I told him the truth. "I have no husband." It was a foolish thing to say to a strange man outside the village at noon. But he already knew I'd had five husbands and I wasn't married to the man I lived with now.

Then, I changed the subject. I know it must seem like I didn't want to talk about my past or my present, for that matter. Perhaps that was true, but it was more than that. I can't fully explain. I sensed that he was a prophet and I had never met a prophet. So I asked him about God. Who could I have asked before? Who would have imagined that I ever thought about God or about worship? So, I asked him things I'd wondered about for years. "God is spirit," Jesus said, "and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth."

That, I remember. It wasn't a matter of mountains or temples. We could worship right there at the well. That's how I felt when I heard his words. Why did I suddenly think about Messiah coming? It really had nothing to do with my question about the mountain. Or maybe it did. I sensed that God was there, at that moment. I wouldn't call it a vision and I know it wasn't a dream. How can you describe something like that? I knew it in my head, but it wasn't the same as a rational thought; I felt God in my heart, but it was more than emotion. I'm trying to remember: did he really say, "I am he"? It seemed preposterous or too good to be true. That's when I

forgot my water jar. And I forgot that I always tried to avoid my neighbors, forgot their stares and snickering, forgot what they thought of me—I forgot all of that and ran back to rouse the whole town. Why did I think they would listen to me? "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

Did you hear what I said? I was so careful. Not even "I think he is Messiah" or "Could he be Messiah?" No, I didn't dare that much. I gave them and myself the benefit of the doubt: I qualified everything. "He cannot be Messiah, can he?" Maybe that's where we begin, leaving lots of room for the possibility that it isn't true. Not wanting to be disappointed, let down. Not wanting to seem like a religious fanatic! Oh, we're full of reasons for not believing. We can fill our lives with so many things—projects, work, ideas, questions, schedules—husbands! I suppose we all have our own ways of filling our lives so we don't have to notice the emptiness.

But the emptiness can be our teacher.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2020

1 Samuel 16:1–13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8–14
John 9:1–41

Sermon as Drama: John 9

"We have here Johannine dramatic skill at its best."[9] Raymond Brown wrote these words in his classic commentary on John's gospel and when he taught this text at Union seminary, he said, "This is the time to play!" So, why not today? Invite the congregation to present the drama and the preacher will offer comments along the way.

Scene One: Jesus Meets a Man Born Blind (9:1–7)

The blind man has no lines and no one says anything to him. It's the disciples who ask a theological question about blindness and sin. They talk in front of the blind man as though blindness also means he cannot hear! "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," says Jesus. Was the blind man relieved? We may wish Jesus had stopped there but he goes on to say, "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Did God make him blind? Some people with disabilities believe they were created as they are and they are not mistakes. God's works are revealed in this man, but not immediately. "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," Jesus said after spreading mud on the man's eyes. (The narrator steps forward to tell us that Siloam means "Sent.") We can see a connection with baptism in the waters of Siloam—but be careful! The waters don't wash away the "sin" of blindness; Jesus has already said there's no connection. We don't know how the blind man found the pool, but we know he came back seeing, and Jesus was gone.

Scene Two: The Neighbors (9:8–12)

You'd think the neighbors would recognize him! Perhaps they only knew him as "a man born blind" and never asked his name. Sometimes people with a disability are known only by their disability. It's hard to really believe that people can change, perhaps hard to believe that *we* can change. Have you heard a story at an open AA meeting, thinking, "I can't believe she ever acted like that!" If you have ever seen such change, or if you've experienced it in your own life, you might understand the neighbors a little better.

Scene Three: The Pharisees Interrogate the Man (9:13 – 17)

The Pharisees come off badly in the gospels. But the Pharisees are not of one mind. Some say Jesus failed to observe the sabbath, but others argue, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" Don't make the Pharisees into cardboard characters. Search inside yourself. Do you think Christians who vote for the opposite political party have a warped sense of the gospel? Find a place inside yourself where you think those who disagree with you are bad people.

Scene Four: The Parents Questioned (9:18–23)

The narrator's language has changed: No longer "the Pharisees," but "the Jews." This is strange because everybody in this story is probably Jewish. John is transposing a later time onto the play, a time when those who believed Jesus was Messiah were cast out of the synagogue. The parents enter the drama not only to verify that their son was born blind; they're also here so the narrator can talk about the conflict with the Jews. The parents don't even have a chance to celebrate their son's healing.

Scene Five: More Interrogation (9:24–34)

The man who had been blind comes back but he's not the same as when the play began. He's more feisty and confident now. He takes on the clergy, weary of their repetitious questions, and pushes them with a question of his own: "Do you also want to become his disciples?" He must be claiming to be

9. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 376.

Jesus' disciple when he says "also." Something has happened to this man that didn't happen at the moment of healing. There's no evidence that he was cured because he had faith. He didn't praise God or run to follow Jesus. He spoke of "a man called Jesus," later on, "a prophet." Now, he claims that Jesus must be "from God." Is John giving voice to the conversation inside the man's head? Have you ever argued with yourself—as though your head was filled with a debating squad! "I used to believe these stories, but now they seem childish." *"Has anybody ever proved them false?"* Conversion isn't once in a lifetime but over a lifetime. The man's testimony is too much for the religious leaders, so they drive him out.

Scene Six: Jesus Returns (9:35–41)

When the man is left alone, Jesus returns. Does John the dramatist want us to know that we won't be left alone in our faith struggles? Jesus will find us, alone with our own questions. We are reminded of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman last Sunday when Jesus announced, "I am he, the one speaking to you." (4:26) Now Jesus reveals himself as the Son of Man—"the one speaking with you is he." The formerly blind man says, "Lord, I believe." He didn't say that when his eyes were opened; he didn't say it under interrogation. But he says it now and worships Jesus. He didn't see the light before, but now he believes the one who is light for the world. Sometimes we are so certain of what we believe or don't believe that there's not even a crack for Jesus' light to get in.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 29, 2019

Ezekiel 37:1–14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6–11
John 11:1–45

Pastoral Reflections on the Texts

When I read scripture, I hear voices, the voices of my people at Messiah Lutheran Church in Mountain Iron, the parish I served on the Mesabi Range of northeastern Minnesota for a span of three decades. They are the voices of people who allowed me to know them, to baptize their children and preach at their loved ones' funerals. They are the voices of those who do not risk hope offered glibly. They give it a long stare, a *don't you dare make a fool of me.* They are more accustomed to living with *Sisu,* Finnish for "stubborn tenacity." They may take no for an answer from life, but they don't intend to take bullshit.

I hear the scripture readers making their way to the lectern. I hear their voices finger the words, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes awe-fully, often both. These are real voices of real people, voices that come through an orchestra of lungs, larynx, tongue, lips, life. You cannot extract the text from the voice that forms the words, and the life that forms the voice. Here. Now. They are voicing the voiceless, sounding out the syllables of a sacred word that works more as vibration than definition.

The vibration stirs the air, enters ears. Something happens.

When I read Ezekiel 37, I hear Scott's voice. It is not the fifth Sunday in Lent, but the Vigil of Easter at Messiah. It is dark. Scott was the one who most often read Ezekiel, Scott, who sings like drawn honey, who prays like a spelunker. Scott, whose three major back surgeries have not relieved his chronic acute back pain. I hear Scott's voice, refusing false light, taking us to the valley of dry bones, demanding urgency, probing the taut muscle of the prophet's question. *Can these bones live?* Even the candles whisper, "*We don't know."*

Prophesy to the bones, prophesy to the breath, prophesy. Children rattle wooden clappers as the bones come together. Someone breathes directly into the microphone when he says *Prophesy to the breath*. When the people of God rise to Scott's voice in the final verses, knees creak. Papers rustle. Laps unfurl. They know they have been summoned, included, raised from a bone pile. *For what?* They sense it is for something large. They wait for what's next. Scott's voice brought them through, raised them to their feet, and left them standing there. The air keeps vibrating after the words have ended.

Is not this the kind of sermon you want to preach? A sermon whose voice keeps vibrating after the words have ended? A sermon that takes people down to the valley of dry bones? A sermon that faces the haunted question without flinching, *Can these bones live?* A sermon that dares to raise the dead, because nothing less than resurrection will do?

You may have reason to believe that your listeners want a clear and thorough explanation of the biblical texts, not a sound vibration; that they want you to tell them that things are not really so bad as that valley of bones. You may assume they want you to dish up an improvement plan or a dose of easy comfort. If so, you underestimate your people. Actually, they are listening for a voice to speak the truth their bones already know. *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.* Many of our listeners are already haunted in the middle of the night, in the midst of their news feed. They need a voice inviting them to be haunted together. They need someone to come with them to the valley of human and ecological devastations. They need someone willing to be aghast at the ghastly. (I started a list of examples for you. It grew too long, ending with Exxon Mobil's thirty year orches-

trated denial of their own climate science, a lie whose cost may be life itself.)

To be haunted, together, is the opposite of despair, the opposite of cynicism, the opposite of resignation or fatalism. There, reduced to sheer silence, we can hear the voice summoning. Prophesy to those bones. Prophesy to the wind. Invite the dead to stand together.

On Saturday, March 28, the weekend of this Fifth Sunday of Lent, an EcoFaith Summit will take place in Brainerd, Minnesota, convening people throughout the Upper Midwest around the theme from the haunting hymn, *Now the Green Blade Rises: The Easter Gospel for the Whole Creation.* Organized by the EcoFaith Network of largely rural Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA, the event will ask, how do we proclaim the Resurrection for a creation being crucified? What do we hear when we listen to the voices of our youth and young adults who are engaging with the climate crisis? Where are green blades rising in our midst? We will visit the valley. We will rattle some bones. We will summon the breath of the wind.

When you sit down to read these ancient texts for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, do not read the words first to understand them, to analyze, dissect, explain, interpret, or even apply them. Read them as if you are listening, listening for voices vibrating in the air. Whose are they? Coated with saliva, moist with mystery, the words leave your throat's warm darkness, born into their own sound, sent out to rattle the bones, to let word turn to living flesh, to raise the dead.

Here.

Now.

Kristin M. Foster