

Preaching Helps

April—June 2020: Palm/Passion Sunday to Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Editor's Note:

Writers for this issue of “Preaching Helps” wrote their reflections before the coronavirus pandemic was known. We trust that readers will translate these insights for this difficult new day, including the need to preach on computer screen with no one in the sanctuary.

What Were You Doing 50 Years Ago?

Perhaps you weren't born yet. Maybe you were in high school or college. If you were a seminary student, you probably didn't take any courses from women because there were none on the faculty. I was a few years out of college serving as youth director at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul. In the summer of 1970, delegates to the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) convention met in Minneapolis. (Yes, in those days we said “delegates” and “convention” rather than “voting members” and “assembly.”) The resolution before the LCA convention simply amended the denomination's Bylaw by striking the word “man” and inserting the word “person.” The measure was adopted—somewhat anticlimactically—on a simple voice vote. A little more than two months later, at the ALC General Convention, the Church Council submitted a motion that “women be eligible for call and ordination in The American Lutheran Church.” The vote was more contentious, but the measure passed: 560 to 414, with one abstention.

Strange as it seems to me now, the decision allowing women to be ordained didn't phase me! I didn't rush off to seminary. When I've been asked about my sense of call, I have usually said, “God's call didn't come to me suddenly. God was patient—but persistent—and wouldn't let go of me.” Six years later I began my studies at Yale Divinity School and was ordained as a pastor in 1980, ten years after “man” was changed to “person.”

This issue of “Preaching Helps” celebrates the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women among Lutherans in North America. 2020 also marks the 40th anniversary of the ordination of women of color among Lutherans. (In 2019 “Preaching Helps” marked the 10th anniversary of policy change affirming the ordination of LGBTQ persons.) Hundreds of congregations have now been blessed by the ministries of women. Seminaries, colleges, synods, campus ministries, and churchwide agencies have benefited from the

wise, faithful leadership of ordained women. There are now twenty-three synodical bishops who are women—and the ELCA presiding bishop is a woman. Now, in 2020, it's not uncommon for a child who sees a man in the pulpit to say in surprise, “Wow! I didn't know men could be pastors!”

For this anniversary issue I've invited clergy women to write on the texts for Sundays and the days of Holy Week—a total of seventeen women serving in a wide variety of ministries. I am grateful to each of them and wish I could have included even more voices:

Amy Lindeman Allen is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary. She is an ordained Lutheran pastor, mother of three, and specializes in the role of children in both the first-century church and today. **Phyllis Anderson** is President Emerita of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, currently living in Sonoma, California. A graduate of Wartburg Theological Seminary, she was ordained in 1978, and has served as a parish pastor, as synodical and churchwide staff, and as faculty and administrator at LSTC, PLTS, and the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University. **Brenda Bos** is Assistant to the Bishop for Rostered Leadership in the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA. Before entering ministry, she worked in television production for eighteen years. She lives with her wife, Janis, their son, Joshua, and three very interesting dogs. **M. Wyvetta Bullock** is Assistant to the Presiding Bishop and Executive for Administration in the ELCA Churchwide Organization. She is also associate pastor of Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago. **Jessica Crist** is the retired Bishop of the Montana Synod of the ELCA and former chair of the Conference of Bishops. She and her husband, Turner Graybill, are parents to feminist biblical scholar Rhiannon Graybill, and Montana Attorney General candidate Raphael Graybill. **Sarah Trone Garriott**, an ELCA pastor, is the Coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council. Formerly a parish pastor in rural Virginia 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. **Mary Halvorson** and her husband, Dan Garnaas, are co-pastors of Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, a church surrounded by the University of Minnesota and the University of Minnesota Hospital. This is Mary's twenty-seventh year as pastor of Grace. When she is not wrestling with sermons, she delights in her two granddaughters, reading, running, and collecting stories and ideas.

Elaine Hewes is a retired Lutheran pastor who now does Sunday supply in a number of Episcopal and Lutheran congregations along the coast of Maine, where she has lived

for forty-two years, and where she and her husband, Michael, raised their three children. A former homiletics teacher at Bangor Theological Seminary and a lover of the arts, Elaine is passionate about finding ways of breaking open (kaleidoscoping) the biblical text using the language of music, poetry, and the “ordinary things” of our beautiful, fragile, suffering world. **Laurie Jungling** serves as Bishop of the Montana Synod. She has a doctorate in Christian Ethics and Social Theory with an allied field in Systematic Theology. Originally from Montana, she has served in various contexts including a rural three-point parish in South Dakota, a professor of religion and ethics at Augustana University (Sioux Falls), and an intentional interim pastor in several congregations in the Montana Synod. **Angela T. Khabeb** serves as a pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. A graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, she received the James Kenneth Echols Prize for Excellence in Preaching. From 2000-2002 she was an ELCA missionary in Namibia where she met and married her husband, Benhi. They have three wonderful children, Konami, Khenna, and Khonni. **Kari Lipke and Joanne Engquist** are ELCA pastors serving in downtown Seattle among the people gathered as Gethsemane Lutheran Church. In their sacred, ordinary life together—in marriage and in ministry—they seek to be encouragers of life, in love and service toward God and all the world of God’s loving. **Patricia Lull** serves as Bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod. A grateful graduate of The College of Wooster and Yale Divinity School, she was ordained in 1979. Her forty some years of pastoral service have led her into the mysteries of congregational life, campus ministry, and the world of *kubernesis* (church administration). **Heidi Neumark** is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan and executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth and young adults. Her previous experiences in congregational and community ministry shaped her first book, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*. Her second book, *Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory and Faith*, tells about discovering her Jewish roots and her grandfather’s death in a concentration camp. Her most recent book *Sanctuary: Being Christian in the Wake of Trump* will be available in September. You’re also invited to read more of Heidi’s insights on her blog at hneumark.com. **Janet S. Peterman**, an ELCA pastor, was ordained in 1981 in the LCA. She has spent the last fourteen years as an intentional interim pastor. After long work in inner city ministry, her Bishop’s staff now sends her where they need her. In her seventh placement, certain patterns have become clear, and the losses of the Christian Church in America are unavoidable. She seeks to nurture new life and to help leaders create new patterns of vitality that will be sustainable in the next pastoral tenure. She chose the grief of coming to terms with loss, which is part of transitional work, as the context for engaging the texts for Easter 3. She lives with her

family in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. **Jan Schnell Rippentrop** is a homiletics professor with the Association of Chicago Theological Schools DMin in Preaching Program, and an adjunct worship professor with Wartburg Theological Seminary. In her academic writing she is particularly interested in how eschatology liberates people to hope in and work toward the justice that God creates. She is the co-founder and pastor of JustChurch in Iowa City, a community enacting that to know Jesus is to do justice. In her teaching, preaching, and research, she is committed to interdisciplinarity, theories that have street cred, and methodologies that recognize the inherent value and wisdom that each participant brings. A conference speaker and preacher, she delights in God’s spirited movement in the fabric of our daily lives and on the streets of our public spaces. **Becca Seely** is a campus pastor in New York City. She serves as executive director of The Vine NYC, a citywide network of inclusive, ecumenical campus ministries that reach students from more than ten colleges and universities in the city. She is grateful for the chance to serve communities of college and graduate students who inspire her daily and also allow her to act like a goofball on a professional basis. An ELCA pastor, Becca also serves as Candidacy Coordinator for the Metropolitan New York Synod. She lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with her wife, Abby, and their 18-month-old son, Harry, who is decidedly full of beans.

Thanks be to God for the witness of these women!
Barbara K. Lundblad
 Editor, “Preaching Helps”

NOTE: April 5, the beginning of Holy Week this year, is known as Palm/Passion Sunday in most congregations. Two Matthew texts will be heard: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. This issue of "Preaching Helps" includes a separate entry on each text.

Passion Sunday Texts April 5, 2020

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Matthew 26:14–27:66

Reflections on the Passion

The Passion reading is very long. So why not add a few more verses? What if we begin the gospel reading at Matthew 26:6? This way we include the powerful story of Jesus' burial anointing by the woman with the alabaster jar. Jesus teaches us that the woman's actions were more than a good deed. This unnamed woman anointed Jesus as the Messiah; thereby, stepping into the role of prophet. She portrays remarkable insight that is beyond the comprehension of Jesus' closest disciples.

This Sunday carries tension. Some theologians strongly encourage that we emphasize both Jesus' triumph and tragedy—that we should approach today as Palm/Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday, as we well know, commemorates Christ's triumphant arrival in Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd. "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" I contend that in order for us to continue our journey toward the cross and on to Resurrection Sunday, we must step into both roles. We must come waving our palms shouting, "Hosanna, Hosanna!" After we have laid our palms before the Messiah, our Savior, we must then put on a different face and join our voices with that angry mob.

Of course, we are confronted with modern day practicality. I know I'm painting with a broad brush, but Christians across the nation have largely abandoned Holy Week. I'm sure there are many reasons why people choose not to complete the journey to the cross. We're busy. We're tired. This is a hectic time of the year. Well, there's nothing we can do about those reasons. But I also think that some people don't fully participate in Holy Week because they may not recognize the spiritual significance. Perhaps some of us have not realized what it means to place ourselves in the story—in Christ's story.

Even though it is challenging, let's find our faces in the Passion narrative. After all, we are in good company because many theologians agree that the same people who shouted,

"Hosanna in the highest!" would soon cry, "Crucify him!" The same people who praised him are the same people who betrayed him. Here is where palms meet passion. Here, the people would trade in their hosannas for hostility. Here is where triumph gives way to torture and celebration turns to crucifixion and a loving crowd becomes a lynch mob. One thing is for sure, when we combine Palm/Passion Sunday, we can clearly see our human condition of being both saint and sinner.

Most of us try to distance ourselves from the actions of the crowd or from the actions of Pontius Pilate. But part of the power of the Passion narrative is that it holds up a mirror to our own lives and allows us to see our own reflections. We are present in that angry crowd. We are there with the mocking soldiers, even the soldiers who nailed Jesus to the cross and pierced him in his side. You and I are there. Passion Sunday gives us a clear view of our duplicitous nature. Certainly, we can choose to look away and ignore the hypocrite in the mirror. Nevertheless, we are indeed both saint and sinner. The more we see our reflection in the Passion narrative, the more we begin to see how we crucified Christ *then* and how we crucify Christ *today*. Christ is crucified daily all around the world. When little girls are denied an education—just because they're girls—Christ is crucified. When entire families die from preventable diseases, Christ is crucified. When babies die of thirst for lack of clean drinking water, Christ is crucified. When people in our community are forced to the fringes, Christ is crucified. When people are forgotten or ignored by the very ones who should be their advocates, Christ is crucified. When people in our community choose suicide over life, Christ is crucified. When refugees are forgotten and discarded, Christ is crucified. When we remain silent to injustice around us, Christ is crucified. And when we hurt each other with gossip and rumors—Christ is crucified afresh right in our midst.

Siblings in Christ, there is good news. Our God is present with us when we have "hosannas" on our lips or "crucify him" in our hearts.

Have you ever thought about God's amazing love for us and how we don't deserve it? I think about the times in this week alone when anger, jealousy, selfishness, or hate has crept into my heart. I think about the many times I could have been kind but instead I was careless. I think about the times when I could have done right but instead, I chose to do wrong. I think about the times when instead of pleasing God, I chose, like Pilate, to please the crowd. Have you ever thought about God's amazing love for us, in spite of ourselves—and just cried?

Walking this path with Jesus through palms and passion brings us to a deeper understanding of Easter. Matthew's gospel tells us, "When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city

was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’ That’s a good question. He is Jesus. Jesus is the Hosanna of Palm Sunday and the heartbreak of Passion Sunday. Jesus is the Humiliation of Good Friday and the Hallelujah of Easter morning!

Angela Khabeb

Palm Sunday Texts April 5, 2020

Zechariah 9:9–10

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Matthew 21:1–11

Reflections on Palm Sunday

I love Palm Sunday! The windowsill in my office has a line of donkeys from around the world. When I was in college, I heard a young priest preach a sermon about how if God could use a donkey to carry Jesus into the city, God could use him, too, and all of us. At the time, I was wrestling with my own pastoral call. I found his words to be wonderfully liberating. Now I keep the donkeys close at hand to remind me.

Our text points to this as a possible direction for preaching. Jesus sends two disciples to the village of Bethphage where they will find a donkey and, in Matthew, a colt. They should untie them and bring them to Jesus, answering any objections with “The Lord needs them.” How many have been labeled as too young (Bethphage means “house of young figs”), too queer, too black, too different in some way and unwilling to be restrained by a church’s limited vision to serve God? How many of us have internalized feelings of inadequacy when facing all the challenges before us? Like the disciples during the final week of Jesus’ life, there are times when we just don’t measure up. Nonetheless, “Untie them and bring them to me,” says Jesus, “because I need them.” Such liberating words! We might even hear echoes from the Gospel of John where Jesus uses the same word—“Untie him and let him go”—at the raising of Lazarus, the reading just one week before Palm Sunday this year.

It’s worth noting that Matthew has the odd detail of Jesus riding both a donkey and a colt, taking the parallelism in Hebrew poetry and making it literal. I have not encountered any clear explanation for Matthew’s decision to do this, but I like the inclusivity of ages represented by an older donkey and a younger colt and the indication that carrying Jesus forward is a team effort.

Another Palm Sunday theme in Matthew is lifted up by the Spiritual, “Ride on King Jesus, No Man can a Hinder Thee.” Some churches shy away from facing difficult topics and realities. I recently was invited to speak with a group of

Christian and Jewish seminarians who had just read Martin Luther’s “On the Jews and Their Lies,” a 65,000-word anti-Semitic treatise used by many, including Hitler, to inflame and justify murderous violence. One of the Christian students noted that many congregations are not familiar with Luther’s hate-filled words. “Wouldn’t it be better not to educate them about it because it would just be very upsetting and perhaps create bad feelings?” She is not alone in hesitating before raising uncomfortable conversations in church.

A few chapters before Palm Sunday, Peter raises a related concern when Jesus broaches the unpleasant topic of undergoing great suffering, being killed, and on the third day be raised (Matt 16:22). Peter rebukes Jesus, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you”—or by proxy to him and the other disciples. The third day can seem far away in the midst of conflict and suffering. Although Jesus’ response to Peter, “Get behind me Satan,” can seem harsh, it’s a reminder that we are not dealing with the hindrance of human powers “but against the rulers, against the authorities...against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” It can point us away from demonizing one another in order to direct our focus and energy where they belong.

Jesus could have avoided a trip into the heart of conflict, but he rode on into Jerusalem and entered the temple where he knocked over tables and cast out those who were cheating the poor. For nearly four decades, I have served congregations where we took our Palm Sunday procession outside the church building and into the streets of New York City, first in the South Bronx and now in Manhattan. It’s a reminder of our call to public ministry and presence to face the authorities of this world with a vision of the world as it should be. Our procession is led by a cross-bearer, followed by a child riding on a pony—because donkeys can just be too cantankerous—one year we had one who wouldn’t budge! If the pony walking down Broadway is not enough to grab our neighbors’ attention, we have a mariachi band with us. Along with waving palms we carry signs to announce the reign of God-values: justice for immigrants, Black Lives Matter, queer is beautiful, worker rights. Even if we were to simply parade around the church, it’s possible to feel powerless before the principalities and powers of our day, while wanting to make a real difference. Palm Sunday reminds us that we do not go forth to face any death-dealing powers alone.

Jesus is within reach. He rode a donkey. Low to the ground. The mounted police of the NYPD ride large, tall horses, as did the legions of imperial Rome. Besides being visually imposing, the height of a horse offers a better vantage point to control a crowd. Jesus chose the donkey, closer to the people—not to control, but to accompany. A contrasting use of power is described in the Philippians reading: “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as

something to be exploited, but emptied himself...and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

As Jesus enters Jerusalem, “the whole city was in turmoil.” Matthew actually says that the city was shaken, part of one movement with the Easter earthquake soon to come. This is why congregations avoid discomfort at our own risk. It’s part of the path to resurrection, the agitational, seismic shifting business of Easter. Ride on, King Jesus!

Heidi Neumark

Maundy Thursday April 9, 2020

Exodus 12:1–4, [5–10], 11–14

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Reflections on the Gospel

They say you can’t command people to love. Love is something you either feel or you don’t. Love can’t be forced or bused or legislated or taught. They say you can’t command people to love—except, Jesus did. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Jesus gave this command shortly after he had washed the disciples’ feet, after they had shared the Passover meal together. In John the next three chapters take place around that table. Jesus knows this will be his last chance to talk with the disciples before he is taken away to be crucified. What does Jesus want them to remember? “I give you a new commandment.” But it isn’t new, is it? The heart of Torah was summarized in love commands: Love God with all your heart, soul, might, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. Maybe it was the next part that was new: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” What does Jesus mean? We might understand it this way: *Because* I have loved you, you should love one another. OR *since* I have loved you, you should love one another. But there is another possibility: *In the way that I have loved you*, you should love one another.

“In the way that I have loved you”—what does Jesus’ love look like? Then and there at the table, Jesus took off his robe and took up towel and basin, bent down and washed the disciples’ feet. Like a servant, he got down. This is a **bending-down kind of love**.

What else do we see in John’s gospel? In chapter 4 Jesus meets a woman at the well. A Samaritan woman. What did love look like at Jacob’s well? “Give me a drink,” Jesus said to

her—knowing full well he shouldn’t be talking to a woman in public or drinking from a Samaritan’s cup. What sort of love did Jesus show us at Jacob’s well? This was a **reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love**.

Jesus met another woman in chapter 8. Her story is sometimes found in italics at the bottom of the page because some scholars question its authenticity. (Or maybe the story is troubling.) Jesus kneels down to be with this woman in the midst of a vicious circle, surrounded by her accusers. They are waiting to stone her for adultery, and they had the written law on their side. Jesus enters her silent world. He writes on the ground. Not once but twice. Finally, he speaks: “Whoever is without sin cast the first stone.” When he looks up, they have all walked away. What kind of love is this? This is a **people-before-rules kind of love**.

We can’t go through every chapter of John’s gospel, but let’s stop briefly in chapter 11. Jesus’ friend Lazarus has died and has already been in the tomb four days. When Jesus tells Martha that her brother Lazarus will rise again, she replies, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus turns to her and says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” What sort of love do we see at the place of death? This is a **here-and-now-don’t-wait-until-you-die kind of love**. I AM the resurrection and the life. I AM. Present tense.

“As I have loved you...” Jesus doesn’t leave us wondering, making up whatever kind of love we want.

- This is a bending-down kind of love.
- This is a reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love.
- This is a people-before-rules kind of love.
- It’s a here-and-now-don’t-wait-until-you-die kind of love.

A few days after their last meal, Jesus will look down from the cross. His mother and the disciple whom he loved will be there. Jesus will say to his mother, “Woman, here is your son,” and to his disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that hour the disciple will take her into his own home. This is a **family-creating kind of love**. Jesus creates a new family in which water is thicker than blood. He reshapes the meaning of “family values.”

“As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” By this kind of love everyone will know. Not by correct doctrine nor by liturgies high or low. Not by knowing you’ve been born again or memorizing the words of the creed. But by this love you have for one another: this bending-down, foot-washing kind of love; this reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love; this people-before-rules kind of love; this here-and-now-don’t-wait-until-you-die kind of love; this family-creating kind of love.

Discipleship will be measured by this kind of loving. We now read “disciples” as extending to the Church—Jesus measures the Church by this kind of loving. The Church has measured itself by certain norms, often called “the marks of the Church.” Over the centuries the Church has been charged with many things: charged with being irrelevant or trying too hard to be relevant. Charged with being heretical and with being too dogmatic. Charged with being old-fashioned and with trying to be too modern. Charged with being too liberal and with being too conservative.

Jesus is still waiting for the Church to be charged with too much loving. They say you can’t command people to love. **Except...**

Barbara K. Lundblad

Good Friday April 10, 2020

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 10:16–25

John 18:1–19:42

In many congregations the texts for this holy day are shared without preaching, so it may seem adequate to move ahead without reflection on the lengthy narrative from John’s gospel. However, we contend that care needs to be taken with the reading itself, particularly because of the appalling history of how John’s passion has been employed in the church to declare Jewish “culpability” in the death of Jesus. To be sure many parishioners will not hear overt anti-Semitism in the reading of John 18:1–19:42, particularly because several translations have addressed this issue with linguistic adaptations. For example, the Greek word “*Ioudaioi*” is now rarely translated as “the Jews” but more dexterously speaks of those who are residents of Judea, the Roman name of that area. Yet, even with linguistic alteration, it remains probable that harm is done by not addressing a potential for misinterpretation. Krister Stendahl used to tell preachers that we bore responsibilities not only for what we said but also for what was heard. So often that standard seems an impossibly weighty burden, still it also provides a worthwhile challenge to continually remember the power of our texts, both biblical and interpretive. How we read this gospel narrative, what words we print to “prepare” the assembly to listen, and the prayers with which we surround the text all have potential to reframe what too frequently has been a death-dealing “text of terror.” Preachers and liturgists do well to consider how we communicate the context for the cross within systems of oppression and the cruel violence of ancient Roman power.

For those who preach on Good Friday, it may be useful to

reconsider theology of the cross, looking not only at Luther’s historic writings but also at twenty-first century texts such as Douglas John Hall’s *The Cross in our Context* (2003), James Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011), and *Wild Hope: Stories for Lent from the Vanishing* (2020). Together these invite us to broaden our scope from narrow interpretations of the cross as a means of salvation “for me,” pressing instead to an ever-expanding context. As Hall puts it, “By definition, the theology of the cross is an *applied theology*. How *in this world of the here and now* are we to perceive the presence of the crucified one, and how shall we translate that presence into words, and deeds—or sighs too deep for either?” (p. 42, italics Hall’s).

As examples of this “applied theology” we consider two lenses to invite more expansive consideration of the cross in context—race and ecology:

Race

On one wall of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, colloquially known as the Lynching Memorial, these words are etched beneath the rusty steel columns that hang from the ceiling, hundreds of them, representing the over 4,000 known victims of racial terror lynching in the United States:

For the hanged and beaten.

For the shot, drowned, and burned.

For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized.

For those abandoned by the rule of law.

We will remember.

With hope because hopelessness is the enemy of justice.

with courage because peace requires bravery.

with persistence because justice is a constant struggle.

with faith because we shall overcome.

When we gather in the shadow of the cross on Good Friday, we do well to remember that Jesus did not simply die; Jesus was subjected to the most humiliating and painful death possible. In this act God permanently joined God’s self to human suffering, especially to suffering that is unjust, humiliating, terrorizing. Further, by this awful death God equips us as those who love Jesus to approach others’ suffering instead of being repelled by it or trying to avoid it: we are conditioned by our faith, with the cross at the center and the dying Jesus never far from our collective conscience, to see God in all suffering.

Preachers might share a short reading from James Cone and one’s own brief reflection as necessary preludes for the congregation to hear important truths for our age in the story

of Jesus' crucifixion. One method we have used to set this tone is juxtaposing examples of North American lynching (stories available through the Equal Justice Initiative website), with lines from John's gospel. For example:

The memorial reads "For the hanged and beaten." Elizabeth Lawrence was lynched in Birmingham, AL, in 1933 for reprimanding white children who threw rocks at her. *The soldiers kept striking Jesus on the face.*

The memorial reads "For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized." A black construction worker was lynched in Camp Blanding, FL, in 1941 for insisting that a white co-worker return his shovel. *They cast lots for Jesus' clothing.*

Ecology

In January 2019 the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg declared, "Our house is on fire." Global economists at Davos may not have heeded the warning, but millions of others have. Human reconciliation traditionally has been the core of Holy Week proclamation. But with awareness of the burning house should not Good Friday proclamation also articulate God's reconciliation of the whole world in God's saving ways (cf. 2 Cor 5:19)?

One could take as preaching task on Good Friday a challenge to reveal God's hidden presence in creation (a presence many parishioners have experienced—at mountain summits, in the dance of thunderheads over a prairie, or in waves of a Great Lake or an ocean) and to name the inclusion of that good creation in God's work on the cross. Liturgy and preaching could then assist in naming how our insatiable appetites, our denial of climate change, and our hopelessness in the face of it all are forces that crucify the body of God anew today.

Kari Lipke and Joanne Engquist

Easter Sunday April 12, 2020

Jeremiah 31:1–5

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

Colossians 3:1–4 or Acts 10:34–43

Matthew 28:1–10

Reflections on Easter

Ever since the very beginning, Easter has been a wild child, with a propensity for throwing open windows and coloring outside the lines—which should come as no surprise really, since one of her parents, *Ruah*, is always and forever improvising on the saxophone, filling creation with melodies both unsettling and excruciatingly beautiful. And her other parent, *Sophia*, is always going about the world leaving paradoxes, poems and dangling participles under people's pillows (and next to their books about the "power of positive thinking" and the "nine steps to successful living").

Given Easter's lineage it's no wonder she has trouble daily deciding whether to wear muck boots or toe shoes, or to go barefoot altogether. It's no wonder she likes hanging out on the margins of things where opposites mingle and boundaries blur and answers aren't as important as questions. It's no wonder that she once baked an apple pie for Adam and Eve, and another time invited Lot's wife for tea, and on Christmas Eve often places a beautiful little green snake next to the baby Jesus in the nativity scenes of many churches, although few people notice because a serpent in the stable is not what they're expecting to see.

Despite Easter's preference for spontaneity, she is infinitely patient, and understands why, when people see her for who she truly is, they don't always invite her in. This doesn't upset her as much as you might imagine, because she knows she'll try again. Really, there's only one thing that causes her untold sorrow, and that's the way she's been relegated to one morning a year, and there, in that small space of time and place, subjugated to words like "happy" and "triumphant," and domesticated by Hallmark's interpretation of her meaning and being.

Which is why Easter is so grateful for the way the story of Jesus' resurrection is told in the Gospel of Matthew, doing to its readers the very thing Easter is up to in the world *as the earth quakes and the heavens open and lightning strikes and an angel descends and the stone is rolled back and guards shake and fear overtakes and the women come and see and go and run and gasp and clasp and cling and sing and go and tell and then propel in future tense to go and see in Galilee the one who went and goes before...* The very velocity and vibrancy of the verbs themselves going up

and down and back and forth, undermining any notion that Easter is tame or that people can stay the same in her presence.

All of which would be reason enough for Easter's appreciation of the way Matthew tells the story. But even deeper is her gratitude for the way in which all of those vivacious and vibrant verbs live in service to the perfect participle the angel uses when he identifies the risen Jesus as "the crucified one" (*ton estauromenon*)... Because, as Easter knows, the Greek perfect tense indicates a "completed act with ongoing consequences"....

Which means, as Easter knows, "*Jesus' crucifixion was not a temporary episode in the career of the Son of God, a past event nullified, or exchanged at the resurrection for heavenly glory*" (*New Interpreter's Bible*), but rather something like cellist Vedran Smailovich playing Albinoni's "Adagio in G Minor" outside a Sarajevo bakery for forty days in honor of the forty people killed by sniper fire as they waited in line for bread during the Siege of Sarajevo in 1992. Vedran Smailovich donning his tuxedo, setting up his chair in that place of death, and playing Albinoni's "Adagio" every day for forty days as each day additional members of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra joined him...

The drawing of the bow across his love-strung body in that place of death offering a glimpse of what Easter knows to be true of Jesus' crucifixion. And that is this: *Just before the last breath,/ Just before the final gasp and sigh,/ Just prior to the grip of death/ Screeching through the starless sky,/ His stretching into the breach/ of retching grief/ Was the moment/ When the movement/ Toward Easter began./ That bow drawn deep/ Across his love-strung frame/ A music wild,/ Unleashed,/ Untamed.*

What Easter knows is that she was never more present than she was on Good Friday, when in the seeming absence of God, Love drew the bow across Love's love-strung frame for the sake of taking into Love's self all the hatred and scapegoating, the violence and vitriol the world had to give, and gave back only love, releasing into the world there-by a music wild, unleashed, untamed...a presence in the midst of absence that, once let loose in the world, will find a way to rise again and again and again.

All of which is to say that Easter considers Easter morning to be an excruciatingly beautiful confirmation of what happened on Good Friday as the accompanying suffering love of God was forever let loose in the world, going ahead to every Galilee to be seen and known whenever love is made real and incarnate and present in the midst of absence and death. And while Easter celebrates with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary at the sight of the empty tomb, mostly she's busy out in the world throwing open windows and coloring outside the lines.

Elaine Hews

Second Sunday of Easter April 19, 2020

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3–9

John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

Doubt is a common thread that runs through the lessons appointed for the Second Sunday of Easter. All three turn on dynamics between doubting and believing, between wavering faith and great faith. In very different ways, they each present the resurrection as an antidote to doubt.

The opening verses of 1 Peter proclaim the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in terms that are full-throated and straight-forward. We hear the good news that by the great mercy of God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, we too have received new birth, salvation, and an imperishable inheritance in heaven. This affirmation was originally intended to reassure and comfort Christian communities in Asia Minor who were experiencing trials of one kind or another. They were suffering. They were too far removed in time to have known Jesus themselves, and yet they believed—mostly. The writer invokes the resurrection to strengthen their wavering faith, to renew their sense of community and to inspire their missionary zeal. Resurrection is encouragement in time of doubt.

In the lesson from Acts, we hear Peter preaching to the great crowd in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Newly filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter convincingly proclaimed Jesus, whom God had raised from the dead, as the Messiah. He appealed to his fellow Jews, who did not yet believe, by comparing the resurrected Jesus to their great king and prophet David, who "both died and was buried, and his tomb is here with us to this day." Long ago David had foreseen the resurrection of a Messiah who would succeed him one day. For this crowd of seekers and doubters, the resurrection was confirmation that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

In the story of Thomas from John's Gospel, the doubt is more prominent and more personal. The writer lets us glimpse the struggle between doubt and belief going on inside of Thomas. The resurrection, or rather the reports of the resurrection, raised Thomas' suspicions and doubts. Thomas knew Jesus. He had experienced his wisdom and compassion and power. He had been among his closest followers. Jesus had called him friend. And now Jesus was dead. Thomas' grief was complicated by the joy of the other disciples, who claimed to have seen Jesus, who said he was alive. Thomas refused to believe until he saw the resurrected Jesus for himself, until

he could put his own finger in those horrible wounds and know this resurrected being was really his Jesus. And when he did, the doubt disappeared. Thomas believed. He proclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” Resurrection became an experience of recognition.

Pastoral Reflections

This theme of “resurrection as recognition” is where I would go if I were preaching on the Second Sunday of Easter. I would take as my guide Robert Smith’s remarkable commentary on the Gospel of John, *Wounded Lord: Reading John through the Eyes of Thomas*¹, written in the last year of his life. Robert Smith was a beloved professor of New Testament and the editor of this “Preaching Helps” feature in *Currents* for many, many years.

In this book, Smith challenges the traditional characterization of Thomas as the man of little faith, the doubter who demanded extraordinary tactile proof before he would believe that Jesus was alive. Instead, Smith sees Thomas as the one who finally understood who Jesus was, crucified and risen Lord. Of all the disciples, Thomas was the one who grasped that the identity of Jesus was most profoundly revealed on the cross, in his death, in his wounds. Thomas had to see that the wounds were still there. Jesus’ core identity had not changed. This was the same Jesus, known by his wounds in life, in death, and in his glorious resurrection.

Thomas’ focus on the wounds of Christ opens fruitful avenues for preaching. Through Thomas’ eyes we see that Jesus’ self-giving love and willing vulnerability are the perfect incarnation of God. God’s way of being is revealed in Jesus’ care for the poor, his blessing of children, his kindness to outcasts, in his death. The enduring wounds are proof that God’s way is the way of the cross, not the way of power and domination. The wounds do not go away. Jesus carries them with him when he returns to glory. The wounds are part of the core identity of God for all eternity.

The wounds on the body of the glorified Jesus also show us the pattern of the Christian life. Jesus calls us to live in solidarity with all the wounded ones as he did. Because the one we worship as Lord and God has holes in his hands, we do not need to hide our wounds or pretend to be invulnerable. There is no shame in our scars when we share them with our Lord and God. We can even embrace the mystery of death confident that we are accepted with all our wounds. Jesus, who bore the marks of death on his glorified body, empowers us to accept our limits and live boldly with our wounds. Robert Smith lived such a life and worshipped such a God. I

1. Robert H. Smith; Donna Duensing, editor. *Wounded Lord; Reading John Through the Eyes of Thomas; A Pastoral and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009).

was privileged to preach on this text at his memorial service in the Chapel of the Cross at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2006.

Phyllis Anderson

Third Sunday of Easter April 26, 2020

Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19

1 Peter 1:17–23

Luke 24:13–35

Engaging the Texts

The Acts text introduces Peter’s Pentecost sermon, then jumps immediately to its conclusion to show its result—the people’s reaction to his preaching. After telling the story of Jesus, including his unjust persecution and death at the hands of the crowds (represented by those listening!—that’s the sermon we don’t hear, but to which they respond), they take full responsibility: “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ [They] said..., Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven...” (vv 37–38). We are to model ourselves on their eager responsiveness! Oh, that we had such energy in our preaching, or the people’s responses! We might schedule a baptism on this day to feel the enthusiasm of parents and sponsors responding eagerly to the promise of new life.

Psalms 113–116 are called the *hallelujah* psalms because they all include “Praise the Lord” (Hebrew: *hallelujah*). In the Jewish liturgical tradition, they were used in connection with the great festivals. [<http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/acas31.shtml>]

Christians may not recognize the English translation of “Praise the Lord” as “Hallelujah,” but we should grasp the connection! Using this psalm in the Easter season, we are reminded that even with resurrection, Jesus carried the marks of crucifixion with him. Just so, we bear the marks of our turmoil and losses with us. I hear the harmonies of Richard Smallwood’s version of *I Love the Lord, who heard my cry, and pitied ev’ry groan...*, slow and plaintive: *Long as I live, and troubles rise, I’ll hasten to his throne*: a much beloved version of this psalm in the African American communities where I have long served and still live. [*Hymns, Songs & Spiritual Songs* #362]

Notice in the well-known resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus in Luke that the disciples are at first disappointed. Resurrection doesn’t look like what they had hoped for. They wanted something more, something bigger:

“But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” (v. 21) Commentators often seek details that can’t be found in the text: more information about Cleopas (he’s only here in scripture) or the town Emmaus (it’s out and away, but where, that’s not so clear). Some details of scripture are hard to pin down. But there’s a shape in this Lukan text that’s vibrant and alive, surely as much for us today as it was for those who encountered that stranger on the road the first Easter evening. That is what engages us, as much as the disciples on the road, that we meet someONE, who changes us and our hopes.

Pastoral Reflections

Perhaps you have experienced this yourself: congregations can go through years, yes, even decades of slow, steady decline. Of losing ground for so many years that nobody remembers when it started... Then it is time to get a new pastor, and suddenly there is so much fear and anxiety. Will they even survive?

Rarely are the questions as bold, as self-reflective and as faith-filled as the one the listeners to Peter’s sermon ask! Ah, that we might so inspire each other to such boldness and faithfulness! Given where we stand right now and given that we have this gift of the gospel, what then should WE do?

Alas, it can be hard to know where to start. But it can help to name the grief of the losses we are experiencing, if we can bear to speak them. We who have placed the seed of the Word into our children, as faithfully as we have known how to do it, have watched many of them walk away from the Church to fill their lives with other things.

Jesus, stay with us! We have no imagination left, so little faithfulness, and we are afraid.

Early in my ministry I knew an elder, Betty, who was the last in her family line. Her mother died in childbirth with her younger sibling. As each of my three children turned 20 months, she reminded me that was the age she was when her mother died in childbirth, when her only sibling was stillborn. That grief shaped her life, but with a depth we only knew after she died.

The church inherited Betty’s few personal effects, mostly some historical documents. We discovered that all the people who were dear to her died in a cluster of weeks around the date of her mother’s tragic death: her father, the two aunts who raised her. It was startling when we discovered that Betty died eighty years to the day of her mother’s death in childbirth.

But I know another story about Betty, as well. When she was dying, the church choir she had sung in for fifty years came to her nursing home and surrounded her with song. She who could no longer even speak, raised her head and mouthed the words with them of her favorite hymn: *My faith looks up to thee, thou lamb of Calvary, Savior divine...*

There’s a report from the early 1920s about an expedition to Antarctica. In the account, it was related that the party of

explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was *one more member* of their group than could actually be counted. The poet T. S. Eliot heard their story and saw again in his mind the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus. He writes:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you...
— But *who* is that on the other side of you?
(T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” Lines 360ff., page 48, *Complete Poems and Plays*)

Wherever we are on the road, Jesus meets us and we encounter the Living God. In the meeting we become people with a life, a hope, and a future.

Janet Peterman

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 3, 2020

Acts 2:42–47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19–25

John 10:1–10

Engaging the Texts

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Our texts today move a conversation about salvation beyond the eschatological, offering us glimpses of what the abundant life Jesus promises looks, feels, and tastes like here and now.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, the primary metaphor in our text from **John** is of Jesus not as shepherd, but as a gate. Since today’s loudest Christian voices are often exclusionary, it will be helpful to challenge the notion that this passage is about heavenly exclusivism. Our pericope comes immediately after the story of the man born blind, whom Jesus embraces in the presence of those who seek to exclude him. Noting this will help clarify that Jesus is an open gate through which all people are invited, not a locked door with a secret password. Our world is full of thieves and bandits who tell us that abundant life means wealth, stuff, achievement, and status, and that we must jump impossibly high fences or bloody our hands tunneling our way to *enough*. Too often we forget that there is an open gate right in front of us, beckoning us in. Jesus calls us by name and knows us for who we truly are, not who we pretend to be. He invites us into community where *everyone* may share freely in love and no one is on their own.

In **Acts**, we catch an embodied glimpse of abundant life. We encounter a community that is deeply rooted in mutuality and relationship. Everyone has enough, and God's gifts are shared freely. Prayer, gratitude, and shared meals anchor life together. Love of God, neighbor, and self integrate seamlessly. Moreover, it is clear that the gate to this community is open wide—all who desire to partake of the abundance they share are welcomed joyfully to the table. Because the pastoral images in **Psalm 23** are almost too familiar, it may be helpful to focus instead on the image of the feast here. Like the man born blind in John, the psalmist is accompanied in the darkest valley and invited to a place at God's banquet table. Though his enemies sought his exclusion and shame, God treats the psalmist as an honored guest. Here abundant life looks like inclusion, sufficiency, and the conferring of dignity on one whom others seek to reject and belittle.

The early Christians to whom **1 Peter** is addressed were a persecuted community, likely because their practices and beliefs threatened the status quo. The preacher will be wise here to trouble the idea that God desires suffering while communicating that to follow Christ is to hold open a gate that many powerful forces would like to see shut, even by violence. Yet the good news is that the abundant life Jesus promises is available to us even amidst suffering, and that God prepares a place of honor for us even when others would exclude us. I think of sit-ins during the Civil Rights movement, where young people sang songs of faith at the lunch counter even as they were refused service and abused. Unjust persecution, while never desired, can help us realize how impotent those forces that seem most powerful in our world are to destroy the peace or steal the abundance that comes not from physical security, but from love freely shared with God and neighbor.

Pastoral Reflections

It's hard not to notice that the community described in Acts seems to be getting a bit more action than many of our congregations and ministries today. People are flocking to it, and it isn't because of a clever new social media outreach campaign. No, this community is attracting scores of people because its members live together in ways that reflect something fundamental about who God is and offer a taste of that abundant life God promises.

In the campus ministry I serve, we recently set about crafting a communal "rule of life." Students identified practices we could incorporate into our life together that would reflect who we believe God is calling us to be. They decided it was important to share our pronouns each week, so that our ministry is a place where everyone is known for who they truly are. We would stop using disposable dinnerware and wash our own dishes to better care for creation. Students would bring in their used takeout containers, so we could

share weekly dinner leftovers with the staff of the church where we meet, and with students among us who struggle with food insecurity. Do these practices make our ministry into the seeming utopia of Acts 2? Maybe not, but I think they bring us a bit closer to living as the body of Christ.

The texts this week invite preachers to help people ask vital questions. How can our faith communities create the conditions for abundant life to be known and shared? How might we live together differently to better reflect what we believe about God? How might we who proclaim Jesus hold the gate open even wider? How might we set a place of honor at the table for those who have been excluded? How might we share our abundance more completely, or adopt new practices of gratitude? Preachers have the opportunity this Sunday to invite their communities into self-examination and joyful transformation, so that all those who hear the voice of the Church will recognize in it the trustworthy voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Becca Seely

Fifth Sunday of Easter May 10, 2020

Acts 7:55–60

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

1 Peter 2:2–10

John 14:1–14

Engaging the Texts

Acts 7:55–60

The stoning of Stephen brings us face-to-face with the reality that believing in God does not exempt us from suffering. In fact, sometimes our faith may put us in harm's way. The good news is that God never abandons us. In the good and bad times, we can entrust our lives to God.

1 Peter 2:2–10

Peter reminds us of whose we are. "Like newborn infants, we belong to God. God's people "called out" *ecclesia*. A church called out for a purpose. Called out to be living stones, God's spiritual house. Called out to believe Jesus' words and actions and give witness by continuing his works.

John 14:1–14

John is the most eschatological of the four gospels. The writer stretches our imaginations into another world from the beginning to its ending. John immediately tells the reader that Jesus is God (John 1:1). We follow Jesus in the first 12 chapters as he gives us signs through miracles and healings.

When we enter the second section of the gospel, beginning in chapter 13, we listen in on Jesus' dinner conversation with his disciples. There we overhear a lesson on servanthood as Jesus washes the disciple's feet. Then we encounter an unfolding drama that predicts betrayal, denial, and death. We move to chapter 14 and discover the discussion at dinner is pushed deeper into the difficult conversation of Jesus' departure and separation.

Jesus opens the dialogue with instructions to his disciples to not let their hearts be troubled. Do not be worried, anxious or afraid. The oscillation of faith and doubt sweeps over us in these two chapters almost without breathing space. The confusion in the room seems thick enough to be cut by a dinner knife.

Then, it all seems too much to handle. Just as Jesus comforted the disciples with words that emphasized his love and care for them, he confronted them about already knowing the place where he was going and how to get there. Thomas argues, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus' response gives us one of the best known "I am" statements of Jesus. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Jesus' antidote for the disciples' and for our troubled hearts is to believe. The Greek word, *pisteuo*, to believe, is used more in John's gospel than in any other. The disciples are to believe in, rely on, trust, and have faith in Jesus. To believe his words and his actions. To believe Jesus' words are God's, his actions are God's, and that he and God are one. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

The dinner conversation goes even deeper as chapter 14 comes to a close. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit. Jesus would not leave the disciples alone, but would send an advocate, helper, comforter.

What does it mean to believe in and trust Jesus, when his words are difficult to hear and understand? Is it finally that faith is a gift of God that enables us to believe? Thank you, Jesus.

Pastoral Reflections

This Fifth Sunday of Easter is also Mother's Day. Remembering the positive mother figures in our lives can bring us comfort. The text from 1 Peter reminds us that we are like newborn infants longing for spiritual milk. The gospel from John 14 is a portion of scripture often used to comfort those who mourn or are experiencing distress.

Today, we look back from the cross and the resurrection on this text where Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure. "I am going away," "Lord, have mercy." "I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself." "Thank you, Jesus." Most folks in the African descent community have heard and spoken this refrain of lament and praise. The

oscillation and rhythm of "Lord have mercy" and "Thank you, Jesus" have carried generations through the Saturdays of our lives—"Saturday" being a metaphor for the time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

How does one get through the fear of abandonment, separation, betrayal, denial, or any of the distresses of life? Jesus told the disciples it would be better for them if he went away. Usually when someone tells you that you will be better off without them, they are just trying to leave you without hurting your feelings. This was different. Jesus had a plan for the continued care of his followers and the continuation of his ministry. The Holy Spirit would come and be their advocate and friend.

Jesus promised to be with us and care for us through it all. Like a good mother, Jesus will not abandon us or leave us alone. We are to believe him, take him at his word and trust God's promises. When faith and doubt play in our lives like twins who love and struggle with each other, we can finally believe in and rely on Jesus.

M. Wyvetta Bullock

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 17, 2020

Acts 17:22–31

Psalm 66:8–20

1 Peter 3:13–22

John 14:15–21

Reflections on the Texts

Today we listen in as Paul preaches to an intellectual, secular crowd. He is savvy in using language that will draw outsiders to the faith. John's gospel addresses and reassures the church in Jesus' farewell discourse. Every time we preach, we speak to this tension: the secular world and the life of faith. These texts provide a way to address this tension. Both texts describe the interrelatedness between God and creation. There is no fracture between the Holy and creation, between the secular and sacred, between the church and the world: "the spirit abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:17). These texts bring to mind a complex and beautiful Celtic knot. Our identity is inherently intertwined with others and with God, with church and society, in a spiritual journey that tends the interior life and the exterior life of the neighbor.

George MacLeod, the Scottish pastor and founder of the Iona community, told this story in a sermon:

Years ago, there was a terrible drought in Canada. If rain didn't come at once, thousands would be ruined. So the word passed around that the next afternoon there would be a service in church to pray

for rain to come at once.

From long distances God's faithful people came. But there was one strange part to this story—only one person brought an umbrella. Why? Because she expected it to rain. There was really only one faithful person there and she was a little child. Her faith was declared in an act.

In his farewell address, Jesus reassures his disciples, "I will not leave you alone." Did the disciples believe Jesus would really accompany them in his absence? Did this ease their troubled hearts enough to carry their umbrellas of faith into the world, trusting God's immediate presence and the Spirit's guidance?

The Greek word for advocate, *paraclete*, means, "one called to your side," a word used to describe a person who stood up with another who was on trial. With no court-appointed lawyers in Jesus' day, defendants had to try their own cases. A *paraclete*, an expert in Roman law, sat with the accused. Their role was not to address the judge, but to encourage, guide, and help throughout the trial.

How can the preacher help listeners imagine this same *Paraclete* guiding and encouraging them in whatever "courtroom" struggles and challenges they face—to help them realize God's desire of shalom: peace, wholeness, and healing for them and all God's creation?

The Spirit draws us into the very presence of the life of the trinity. She comes to us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Like a relay race, Jesus' breath is passed on to the Spirit who continues to breathe life, courage, and inspiration in us—to enliven and restore community, to release us from fear and timidity.

In Sallie McFague's book *Life Abundant*, she reminds us that God, in Jesus, breathes the spirit into our very beings, transcendent and radically close. God is the one who is more awesome than all the galaxies in the universe and nearer to us than our own breath. This God is the one who invites us into community to live and flourish together as God's beloved.

McFague writes that Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, an abundance that demands a cruciform life. This means a give and take among all the creatures and entities on our planet, involving sacrifices by some so others may survive. A cruciform kind of generosity is the way back to God; it means to live differently, with frugality, making sacrifices so all members of the global family may thrive.

But we have done a grave disservice to our Creator and our interdependence as we neglect, hurt, and destroy the earth and her creatures. Consider planning your worship and preaching for this Sunday around "Care for Creation." Our climate crisis is a spiritual crisis, requiring us to reconsider what it means to be human. These ancient texts call us back

to our interdependence and the gift of humility.

The language in John's gospel is totally relational. I in you, you in me, the father in me, I in him, we in each other. Interdependence. Like the earth's processes, we are all wrapped up in each other. We can only thrive *together*, in this magnificent web of life.

Once, as part of a sermon, I threw a huge ball of yarn from the pulpit into the congregation. Whoever catches it throws it to another worshipper, with each person holding onto the yarn they caught. As the yarn is thrown around the sanctuary, a web is created in this art installation flash mob. Scissors were on hand for people to cut the yarn and make bracelets for each other.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples had to live a new way. Jesus assures them they had what they needed—the Spirit at their side. They were called to be Church—to live differently. We are being called to live differently, faithfully, subversively, as we care for the earth and our siblings who share the same air, water, and light. This ecological crisis is an opportunity to check our trust—do we believe the advocate will be at our side whispering encouragement, empowering us, bringing us toward life and meaning in ways we never expected? God makes a covenant with us, promises to be with us and with this world. We are in it together, related, interrelated, and dependent upon each other. And into the world we go with our umbrellas of faith.

Mary Halvorson

Ascension of Our Lord May 21, 2020

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Reflections on Ascension

Reading the last words of Luke and the first words of Acts is a strange experience. The first chapter of Acts feels like something of a recap, like the words of our favorite television show, "Previously in the Life of Jesus..." In both stories we hear Jesus telling his disciples they will receive power. In Luke they are told "I am sending you what my Father promised." In Acts, Jesus says "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." Perhaps this is the difference time brought: in the gospel telling we only know power is coming. By the time the book of Acts is written, we understand that power to be the Holy Spirit.

Of course, the Holy Spirit is the main character in the book of Acts, and Jesus is the main character in the book

of Luke. Perhaps the author decided to name the Spirit specifically in Acts and leave it a mystery in the gospel of Luke.

Jesus' story ends with his ascension in the gospel. The apostles' story begins with this same moment. It's good storytelling. The hero is gone, and his followers must rise to the occasion.

Jesus had to leave the earth. If Jesus had stayed on earth, we would have *always* expected him to do all the work. We would have counted on Jesus to do the preaching, the teaching, the healing. Sure, in the gospel stories, the disciples went out and were amazed by their abilities, but they still came back quickly to be with Jesus. Who can blame them? But that model did not create a succession plan. Jesus' ascension allows for the next wave of the Jesus movement to begin.

Acts 1:11 has those wonderful words, spoken by angels while the disciples were gawking at the clouds: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Their words are a wonderful compliment to the angels' admonition at the empty grave in Luke 24:5, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" The church is not called to stare at Jesus. The church is called to go out into the world and make disciples.

Jesus is clear about this, in both Luke 24:48 and Acts 1:8. He tells the disciples, "You are my witnesses." A witness leaves the scene of an experience and talks about it. The experience is over, but the story lives on in the life of the witness. Christianity is much more than a belief in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christianity is also *the story, told over and over again*. Jesus wanted faith in him to be participatory. He needed witnesses. He needed storytellers. My friend Marc Portillo explains it so plainly: Jesus chose fisherman to be his disciples "because fishermen know how to tell a good story."

And what a story it is. Jesus walked the earth teaching and healing. He suffered and died. Then he rose from the dead. It's incredible. And yet, Jesus commands "that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations" (Luke 24:47). "Keep telling them they are forgiven," Jesus says on his way out. This is the message that matters most.

But where does Jesus go? We know he has conquered death. He will not die again. We profess he is seated at the right hand of God. The apostle Paul is the one who introduced this concept. This is where the Ephesians text comes into play. In Ephesians 1:20–23, Paul tells us God has seated Jesus at God's right hand, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion."

This concept of the "right hand of God" comes from Psalm 110:1 (quoted by Jesus) where "the Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Also in Psalm 118:16, "the right hand of the Lord is exalted, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly." You can see how placing Jesus at the right hand of God gives

him authority and power over all the world. Jesus' life and teachings are legitimized in a deeper way. Jesus' message, the one about forgiveness of sins, is legitimized in a deeper way.

The Holy Spirit gives believers the power to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Knowing that Jesus is seated at God's right hand gives that gospel a power that is matchless throughout the world. That power could not have happened while Jesus walked the earth. We needed Jesus' resurrection to defeat death. We needed Jesus' ascension to usher in the evangelizing of the entire world. Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? You've got work to do: go and tell the people, "Your sins are forgiven." We have this on the highest authority, Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of God.

Brenda Bos

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 24, 2020

Acts 1:6–14

Psalm 68:1–10, 32–35

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

John 17:1–11

Engaging the Texts

John 17 is not an ascension text. This chapter comes shortly before Jesus is lifted up on the cross. Even if your congregation did not observe Ascension Day on March 21, the Acts story appears here in an abbreviated version. If you don't want to miss out on ascension, the preacher may find it useful to expand the Acts text and make it the focus of this Sunday's worship. If not, some similar themes are heard in the gospel this week. We've spent a lot of time with the gospel of John on the Sundays in Lent. The preacher and the assembly should by now be familiar with John's voice and story, which can be very useful for engaging another one of Jesus' complex monologues.

Echoing the ascension scene in Acts, this is also a transitional scene in the story of the church. As we pause for a moment here, Jesus reminds us of everything that came before. As the disciples listen in, maybe they remember the glorious signs they have seen Jesus perform. Each of these signs pointed to some aspect of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Eavesdropping on the prayer we sense some of the intimacy of this relationship in action. Once again, the disciples find themselves confused by Jesus' words, bringing to mind many other times they did not get what he was saying. Intrigued, but confused, those within earshot tend to draw in closer to Jesus, lingering a little longer. As we see again and again in John, the result may not be greater understanding, but rather, a deeper relationship with Jesus.

This is not the first time we have seen Jesus pray like this. Recall the moment before raising Lazarus where Jesus prays very publicly for the benefit of all who hear. Perhaps we are to think back to that moment when Jesus approached the tomb, then astonished all with new life. That resurrection was the dress rehearsal for what would come next. Don't forget that the raising of Lazarus is also the occasion for Jesus' opponents to begin plotting against him. Both of these prayers anticipate threat as well as promise. The word "glorify" in Jesus' prayer may sparkle and shine, but it is also tarnished with grim foreboding.

This prayer does not simply direct the listener to look back, but it makes a turn toward the future in the final verse of the pericope. In the verses that follow Jesus shifts his focus to the future of the ministry and his hopes for the disciples. While we may stop short of hearing the rest, we do get a hint of what may be coming by including verse 11. Jesus begins the prayer by drawing our attention to the past but leaves us facing the unknown future. However, the disciples do not go forward unequipped. Jesus prays for the resources they will need in the days ahead—protection, grace, unity, and relationship.

Pastoral Reflections

I'll never forget what it was like to proclaim portions of Jesus' last supper monologue when I was preparing to leave my first parish. I had not yet resigned. As I spoke those words of goodbye I was painfully aware of everything that was already taking place—and all that they did not know or could not understand. Caught up in my own intense emotions, Jesus' rambling and repetition made so much more sense. Of course! How does one say goodbye—honoring the time together, communicating the love that is felt, expressing hope for those they are leaving behind? It is impossible to put a relationship into words. Jesus has tried throughout John, but ultimately all words and signs point back to the truth that a relationship cannot be explained, it can only be experienced.

To this end, consider how you can help your assembly experience Jesus in this moment. This passage is a little complicated, but it is not long. Could this be an opportunity for the preacher or someone else to commit these words to memory, try to embody them? The experience of this passage should be listening to someone praying from the bottom of their heart, not reading from a page. There is intense emotion here. Imagine watching someone you love deeply praying out loud on your behalf. Imagine that this prayer comes moments before the parting of death. Words will fail to express what body language can convey. If preaching is an event, so should be the proclamation of the gospel. It will not be possible to explain it later if it isn't captured somehow in the telling.

The Church is on the verge of Pentecost, but isn't that

always the case? We are always poised, waiting to receive the next inspiration, the next equipping, the next sending out. Both Acts and John remind us that the present moment is only to be a brief respite. The two men in white will not let the disciples keep staring up into heaven. Jesus will call an end to this dinner party and lead the disciples out into the night. The Church is to keep moving. We need these moments to gather, to look back to the past, and also to hear the promises of the future. But it won't be too long before some messenger shows up and reminds us that it is time to get going again.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Pentecost Sunday May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1–21

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

John 20:19–23

Engaging the Texts

For Pentecost Sunday the first decision a preacher needs to make is which lessons will be heard and in what order. The lectionary texts are all full of possibilities, but this is a Sunday when it may help to focus on just one or two of that rich array. All three lessons lift up the surprising transformation that comes in the presence of the Risen Christ.

Acts 2:1–21 begins with a small, remnant community gathered in prayer, waiting for the promised appearance of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly, the disciples are thrust out of that liminal time and into God's future by the explosive arrival of wind and fire, reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis 1. Some of the noise is their own speaking in a variety of languages. There is no explanation of how they tumbled out the door, but the scene quickly shifts to the street where others are amazed by the sound of such public witness in a multiplicity of languages by this small band of Galileans.

The response among the city dwellers and festival visitors is amazement and perplexity—amazement to hear so many distinctive languages and incredulity that such exuberant testimony could come other than by drunkenness. As will happen throughout the Book of Acts, it is Peter who steps forward to give meaning to what is being seen and heard. The living God is at-work and the gift of prophecy or truth-telling is bursting forth, just as the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28–32) had promised would happen at some far-off, future time. That time has now arrived.

This pattern of something new breaking forth in surprising ways will continue throughout the Book of Acts. As illustrated here, the new thing is from God and comes as

God's news is announced afresh. It is Jesus, who stands at the center of both the announcement of surprising news and the new community formed in its wake.

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13 complements the variety of languages on the Day of Pentecost with the variety of gifts, forms of serving, and activities that the Spirit stirs up in the church. Two features are worth noting. Such diversity is good. From its earliest days the church has blessed multiple forms of giftedness and expressions of faith. The Spirit does not require standardization but shows up in unique ways within the lives of Christians. Also, all gifts, forms of service and activities are for the common good. Paul's analogy of the body still speaks. Like the passage from Acts, it is Christ who stands at the center of the Spirit-infused community.

John 20:19–23 offers yet another glimpse of the remnant community. They have gathered on Easter evening and their waiting is tempered more by fear than prayer. The heaviness of Easter grief dissipates when the now risen Christ stands in their midst. A single word changes everything. The word is "peace," spoken by Jesus. His speaking is accompanied by the testimony of showing his once wounded hands and side.

The risen Christ appears, and like the morning of Pentecost, Jesus breathes the new life of the Spirit into those who wait, immediately sending the gifted community out into the world. Those sent are not only emboldened as witnesses but are given the transformative power of God to forgive and reconcile. Though the new community in Christ is not explicitly described, it is implied in this text as the gift of Spirit propels the recipients into God's future.

If that were not bounty enough, Psalm 104:24–34, 35b is resplendent with praise for God's wondrous creation and the marvelous things that happen when God sends the Spirit upon the earth. The Day of Pentecost is not only a day for humans; it is a day to remember that in Christ the whole creation in being made new.

Pastoral Reflections

I am not scheduled to preach on Pentecost Sunday this year, but I envy those of you who are. The opportunities to craft a faithful sermon are many. Here are a few reminders I would place before myself as a preacher.

First, let God be the big voice on this day. The events of Pentecost are God's doing. From the raising of Jesus, to the sending of the Spirit, to the showering of the church with gifts the prime actor is the Living God. That is good news to hear in every generation, because we are often tempted to rush forward with our own strategies and innovations for renewing our communities of faith.

Second, don't fall into the trap of placing this new, Spirit-infused community over against the Jewish community, still bound in covenant to God, as Paul writes in Romans 9–11.

The Living God is able to move in multiple dimensions, far surpassing our linear logic about the old being supplanted by the new. After all, Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival long before it moved on to the Christian calendar.

Third, don't miss an opportunity to emphasize what happens when God shows up. Dramatic as each lesson is on its own, all three proclaim a forward-moving God who uses the gifts and testimony of ordinary women and men, young and old, to proclaim God's surprising, transformative action in every generation. Possibly the most surprising message to hear in the church today is the call that sends everyone into public witness and exuberant faith out into the streets.

Patricia Lull

Trinity Sunday June 7, 2020

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

Matthew 28:16–20

Trinity Sunday gives the preacher the opportunity to go in at least two directions. One is to focus on the doctrine of the Trinity. The other is to focus on the Genesis story.

The Trinity

My experience is that few preachers take this annual opportunity to explore this central tenet of our faith: the Trinity. There are varied reasons: "It's a mystery," "It is hopelessly androcentric," "It is based on a Greek philosophical system that no longer makes sense." Might this Trinity Sunday be the time to challenge some of the assumptions that we have about the Trinity?

Our recently adopted social statement "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action" reminds us:

The ELCA affirms the creedal witness to the mystery, relations, and actions of the three persons of the Trinity. At the same time, this church holds that exclusive use of a male-oriented formula to refer to God is problematic. The use of expansive language for God reflects faithfulness to God's self-revelation in the Scriptures and in human experience.²

Although the ELCA Conference of Bishops declared in 1991 (before there were any women bishops): "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' is therefore the only doctrinally acceptable way for a person to be baptized

2. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action." (Chicago: ELCA, 2019), 55.

into the Body of Christ,”³ theologians and practitioners have challenged the exclusive use of male imagery for the divine in the intervening twenty-nine years.

Numerous scholars have offered alternative presentations of the Trinity that expand our understanding of God and critique a purely masculine interpretation. A good place to start is Gail Ramshaw’s *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*.⁴ A decade earlier, Sallie McFague explored models of God as mother, lover, friend.⁵ Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff wrote: “God seen as communion and co-existence can be both masculine and feminine, giving us a more complete and integrating experience of God.”⁶ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, using *perichoresis* (a dance-like interrelationship) posits that the Trinity offers Christians a non-male, relational and dance-like understanding of the divine.⁷

Elizabeth Johnson includes a rich and challenging chapter, “Triune God, Mystery of Relation,” in her award-winning *She Who Is*.⁸ Catherine LaCugna describes the quintessential icon of the Trinity (the three angels at Mamre) as embodying hospitality, and an open circle that includes, rather than excludes.⁹ Caryn Riswold¹⁰ and Cheryl Peterson,¹¹ along with many others, offer fresh ways to imagine the Trinity, which is so central to our Christian faith. If you want to dive deeply into the significance of the Trinity on this Sunday, here is your chance.

Creation

An alternative on this Sunday would be to embrace the beautiful creation story in Genesis 1–2. It offers an opportunity to present a Lutheran understanding of creation, in contrast to a more fundamentalist “creationism.” Indeed, in addressing the separate but parallel truths of theology, science,

and poetry, the preacher has the opportunity to offer a broad vision of God the creator. At the same time, it presents the opportunity to address environmental concerns.

Yes, we believe in creation. This story (and other creation stories in the Bible) use poetry and metaphor to tell deep truths of the faith. This is poetry, not science. We do not confuse the two. We can embrace both because they are different lenses on the truth of life. This is an important witness in a time when biblical literalists grab the limelight and claim to speak for all Christians. This witness is also important because we live in a time of hastening ecological demise.

Phyllis Trible writes:

How beautifully Genesis 1 depicts the cosmos and all therein. It yields a green earth. Who, then would not choose this liturgy, rather than the *Enuma Elish*, for an environmental narrative?¹²

Desecration of God’s creation is based on a misunderstanding of the words “have dominion” and “subdue,” (Gen 1:26); Trible writes:

The verbs themselves signify God’s gift, not a human right. They assign responsibility to preserve and promote the goodness of God’s creation.¹³

She concludes her essay:

Though abundantly blessed, the cosmos and all therein are not secure from the threat of chaos—a threat both endemic and acquired.... Without commitment to stewardship, to caregiving for the sake of the heavens and the earth and all therein, without the exercise of human dominion rightly understood, creation may well revert to chaos.¹⁴

Elizabeth Johnson writes:

A flourishing humanity on a thriving earth is an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the global vision theology is being called to in this critical time of Earth’s distress. Ignoring this vision will keep churches locked into irrelevance as today’s terribly real drama of life and death is being played out in the natural world.¹⁵

Other theologians to address ecological issues are numer-

3. Minutes, ELCA Conference of Bishops, March 8–11, 1991, (Chicago: ELCA, 1991), 19–21.

4. Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language*. (Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

5. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. (Fortress Press, 1987).

6. Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*. (Orbis, 1988), 122.

7. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ*. (Fortress, 1983), 127.

8. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. (Crossroad, 1993).

9. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “God in Communion with Us: The Trinity,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna. (Harper One, 1993), 83–84.

10. Caryn D. Riswold, “Inhabiting Paradox: God and Feminist Theology for the Third Wave,” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, ed. Mary J. Streufert. (Fortress, 2010).

11. Cheryl Peterson, “Spirit and Body: A Lutheran-Feminist Conversation,” in Streufert, ed., *Ibid*.

12. Phyllis Trible, “The Dilemma of Dominion,” in *Faith and Feminism: Ecumenical Essays*, ed. B. Diane Lipsett and Phyllis Trible (Westminster John Knox, 2014), 24.

13. *Ibid.*, 30.

14. *Ibid.*, 32.

15. Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Ecological Theology in Women’s Voices,” in Lipsett and Trible, *Ibid*. 201.

ous. Some are: Rosemary Radford Reuther,¹⁶ Paul Santmire,¹⁷ Sallie McFague,¹⁸ Larry Rasmussen,¹⁹ and Cynthia Moe Lobeda.²⁰

Reclaiming Genesis from fundamentalists is a wonderful exercise in how Lutherans read the Bible, how we embrace both faith and science, how we care for the earth, and how we appreciate poetry.

Jessica Crist

Second Sunday after Pentecost June 14, 2020

Exodus 19:2–8a

Psalm 100

Romans 5:1–8

Matthew 9:35–10:8

Tough Reflections on Tough Texts

Preachers, we've got a problem. Texts for the Second Sunday after Pentecost (A) have been called exclusionary, triumphalistic, and conquest narratives. There is so much in these texts that one could easily avoid these wince-inducing interpretations. But I find it is only faithful to wrestle with them as they have been wrestling with me. So, what I provide in the next paragraphs is a wrestling, a journey of faithful encounter with a living word in the presence of a loving God and dislocated people.

Reading **Exodus 19**, we are literally in the middle of the book, a place of heightened chiasmic significance where the next chapter will yield the Ten Commandments. The Israelites are also in the middle of a journey having struggled through phase one of their escape from Egypt, often named the "Wilderness of Sin." They now pause for a month or two (the rest of the book of Exodus, Leviticus, all the way through Numbers 10:10) at the base of a mountain before they continue into the second phase of their wandering called the "Wilderness of Sinai." They camp at Rephidim—a spot in the middle of a harrowing journey, the place where the commandments are given, the site where Moses will respond to mounting criticism and complaint by striking a rock for water—an action that will cost him entry into the Promised

Land. Moses at age 80 will hike up and down this mountain seven times in the next several chapters. A lot is happening here between God, Moses, and the Israelites.

In the text, the voice of God reminds Moses of "what I did to the Egyptians," which scholars figure refers to folding the sea back over the Egyptians as they pursued the Israelites. The treatment of the Egyptians is put into contrast with the treatment of the Israelites, who were borne on eagles' wings and brought to God. The voice of God continues, saying that of all the peoples of the world, the Israelites will be the "treasured possession," the "priestly kingdom," the "holy nation."

Robert Warrior, distinguished professor of American Literature and Culture and citizen of the Osage Nation, penned an oft-quoted article that helps us see layers of complexity in this text. He begins by acknowledging that the Exodus image of God who takes the side of the oppressed has given hope to many who (have) suffer(ed) under cruel oppressors. Without diminishing that reality, Warrior lifts up another. He writes, "As a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians who stands in solidarity with other tribal people around the world, I read the Exodus stories with Canaanite eyes. And, it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation."²¹ He points out that already in Genesis when Yahweh covenants with Abram, it is clear that the land to be given is a land inhabited by many peoples: Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaim, Amonites, Canaanites, and Jebusites. A similar promise is made to Moses when he is commissioned in Exodus 3. Warrior says, "The land, Yahweh decided, belonged to these former slaves—from Egypt and Yahweh planned on giving it to them using the same power used against the enslaving Egyptians to defeat the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. Yahweh the deliverer became Yahweh the conqueror."²² Religious Studies scholar Nathaniel Samuel Murrell builds on Warrior's scholarship from a Caribbean perspective. He writes, "I seek to present a perspective that challenges interpretations of the Exodus that disregard or do not deal effectively with those aspects of the Scriptures which make us uncomfortable or which we cannot in all honesty name as 'liberating'... I therefore hope to question any elitist, privileged and definitive readings of Exodus. In so doing I locate myself in a space that has often been at the receiving end of triumphalist interpretations of the Exodus."²³ I welcome preachers into the discomfort and

16. Rosemary Radford Reuther, *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies & Human Liberation*. (Seabury, 1993).

17. H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. (Fortress, 1985).

18. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. (Fortress, 1987).

19. Larry Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. (Oxford, 2012).

20. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*. (Fortress, 2013).

21. Robert Allen Warrior. "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today" in *Christianity and Crisis* 49(12), 261–265.

22. *Ibid.*, 262.

23. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell. "Dangerous Memories, Underdevelopment, and the Bible in Colonial Caribbean

questions that come with honestly grappling with privilege and position, travesties and triumphalism.

The New Testament is not immune to texts that alarm those who hear scripture with an awareness of the Osage, Canaanite, and Caribbean perspectives reverberating above. In the appointed **gospel text**, which begins Matthew’s “mission discourse,” Jesus sends the disciples out to share the Good News: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Now Jesus and the first disciples were focused on Israelites, so scholars suspect this phrase was not needed in Jesus’ day. They think instead that it was added because the early church was struggling with how to define boundaries regarding who got to hear the Good News.

Gentrifying neighborhoods that price out people who have lived there for years, slashing affordable housing plans from grants, and settlements dotting Palestinian lands are current examples showing that reading with what Warrior calls “Canaanite eyes” needs to be an ongoing practice. Narratives we find in Exodus, Matthew, and beyond that raise concern need to be recognized as concerning. On a post-colonial view, it is important to acknowledge and resist ways that Canaanites and the land have been repeatedly rendered voiceless.

I certainly do not intend now to tidy this up with a bright bow, but I pledge solidarity in continued wrestling with some ideas as we move forward. First, take up a perspective in which it is holy to find problems disquieting—this is an honest way to engage with scripture believing in a living God, living word, and living world. Then, wrestle with ambiguity. Take plurality seriously. Pay attention to multiple social locations. Remember that your liberation is tied up with everyone’s liberation; you are truly free only when all your neighbors, including the living earth, are truly free. I will end with Warrior’s own suggestion that people try to take up a Canaanite lens in both their theological reflection and their political action.²⁴ How would a Canaanite family hear this news, and, knowing the loving God you know, what Good News do you have to proclaim to this family?

Jan Rippentrop

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 21, 2020

Experience” in *Religion, Culture, and Tradition in the Caribbean*, edited by Hemchand Gossai and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell. (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), 12.

24. Warrior, 264.



2020 Ad Pricing and Specifications

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is now accepting advertisements in our quarterly journal. Please see full details in the ad rate sheet at the end of the Introduction (page 3 of this issue).

Publication Dates and Deadlines

The journal, *Currents in Theology and Mission*, is published four times per year: January, April, July, and October. Ad deadlines for each issue are one month prior to publication (December 1, March 1, June 1, September 1). Late submissions may be published in the next issue. Issue-specific themes are available from the co-editors: [Craig Nesson](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

Size and Placement Options

Full page ads are placed at the end of articles. Fractional page ads are placed within articles. You may specify an author, the Introduction article, or any of our sections: Book Reviews, Preaching Helps, Listening to Immigrant Voices, Currents Focus. For specific article or section content per issue, please contact the co-editors: [Craig Nesson](#) and [Kadi Billman](#).

Premium placements are: at the end of the Introduction article, within Book Reveiws, within Preaching Helps. These are our most popular sections.

FORMAT AND SIZE

	PLACEMENT	
	PREM.	REG.
• Full Page: 7.125" wide x 10" high	\$ 450	\$ 380
• One Column (vert): 3.5" wide x 10" high	\$ 250	\$ 200
• Half Column: 3.5" wide x 4.75" high	\$ 135	\$ 115
• Half Page (horiz.): 7.125" wide x 4.75" high	\$ 250	\$ 200

25% discount for 4 consecutive placements from the same advertiser (content may change).

Billing

New advertisers must include payment with order.

Returning Advertisers: Bills are sent after publication.

Jeremiah 20:7–13

Psalms 69:7–10, 16–18, [11–15]

Romans 6:1b–11

Matthew 10:24–39

Engaging the Texts

From the application of the themes of discipleship and resurrection life described in Romans to the theodicy with which Jeremiah wrestles, to Jesus' image of the sword, today's texts are filled with theological and practical questions. A common theme that seems to unite them, though, is that of conflict.

When Jeremiah shouts, "Violence and destruction!" (Jer 20:8), commentators diverge as to whether he means violence wrought by his own people, his opponents or God, and when. However, what *is* clear is that proclaiming the Word of God is not a peaceful experience. The prophet associates his vocation with "reproach and derision" (Jer 20:8), echoed by the psalmist (Ps 69:9–12).

Similarly, Jesus warns that a life of discipleship will not be easy; like Jeremiah, opponents will malign them (Matt 10:25). Indeed, not long after these warnings, Jesus' opponents associate him with Beelzebul, "the ruler of the demons." (Matt 12:24). Such danger could even cause the disciples to lose their lives (Matt 10:39). Nor is conflict as a result of the Gospel limited to one's enemies. Households will be divided (Matt 10:35–37). In the Roman context, even the churches themselves appear divided. Jeremiah, if he is interpreted as lamenting the violence that God has allowed to come upon him, expresses this conflict in terms of the human and the divine.

In short, proclaiming the Word of God is not easy. Or, at least, it was not easy for David (to whom our psalm is attributed), Jeremiah, Jesus, the Matthean disciples, the Roman churches, or Paul. Nor was it easy for the communities in which they lived and among whom, generations later, their experiences and traditions about them were recorded and preserved. Even first-century Jewish messianic expectations of God's anointed who would bring peace presumed that the messiah would achieve this peace through engaging the struggle between what is good and evil in the world. Such expectations were embodied in the messianic movement associated with Simon bar Kokhba's violent revolt against Rome a century after Jesus' crucifixion.

The Word of God was celebrated as worthy of praise and capable of deliverance (Jer 20:13). Its constancy is a feature of God's steadfast love and faithfulness (Ps 69:13). But neither God nor Jesus promise that the pursuit and proclamation of God's Word will be peaceful or easy.

Pastoral Reflections

Many twenty-first-century Euro-American Christians like myself may recoil at the harshness of Jesus' words in this pericope. In an atmosphere so full of political and physical conflict in which violence and destruction threaten schools, churches, shopping centers, and the very air we breathe, we crave a word of peace. It is understandable to prefer Isaiah's prophecy of the peaceable kingdom (Isa 11:6–7) to Jeremiah's "dread warrior" God (Jer 20:11). We prefer Isaiah's messianic vision of a "Prince of Peace" (Isa 9:6) and the heavenly host proclaiming, "peace among those whom God favors!" (Luke 2:14) and Jesus' beatitude to the peacemakers (Matt 5:9) rather than a messiah who has "not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt 10:34).

Yet, the discomfort felt at connecting the proclamation of God's Reign with anything less than serene harmony can be a function of Christian complacency. As a millennial (or xennial) born and raised in United States suburbs, I have largely been sheltered from the most gruesome effects of the violence endemic in our present world. As we celebrate the anniversaries of the right of some (not all) women to vote and later the ordination of some (not all) women to minister in the church, I fall among those privileged some whose demographic initially benefitted. Born a generation later, I have never had to fight for such rights.

From the distance of privilege, it is easy to skip straight from violence to peace, from history to celebration. However, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, their contemporaries did not have that luxury; nor do many faithful people today. For them, proclaiming the truth of God's Word was and is dangerous. There remain women (and others) in the United States who cannot exercise the right to vote and whose ministry as women is resisted. These women who seek to proclaim the truth of God's love which is the backbone of a messianic peace, are continually met with resistance on the part of those who fear altering the status quo. If we're being honest, there are a lot of us for whom following the demands of God's prophetic justice would negatively impact our status quo. So, proclamation leads to conflict. To division. Even among households—among families, among churches, among individuals struggling with God and how God is calling us to respond.

The message of today's gospel is not primarily (or even secondarily) addressed to questions of pacifism or gun control, although the juxtaposition between peace and the sword may make it tempting to read it as such in today's political climate. It's not even a particularly unique Christian message, as the readings from Jeremiah and the Psalms make clear. The recurring message in today's texts is that following God is not easy. Nor is it supposed to be. It means making hard choices;

being willing to lose some privilege for the sake of the good. It means *using* privilege to speak a word of God's truth and love. The peace Isaiah proclaims is not a surface calm, it is a deep and lasting reconciliation that begins only when we trust, as Jesus and Jeremiah did, that whatever may come, all God's children are precious and worth fighting for.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost June 28, 2020

Jeremiah 28:5–9

Psalm 89:1–4, 15–18

Romans 6:12–23

Matthew 10:40–42

Engaging the Texts

The coach gathers the players and gives them the plays before sending them onto the court. The conductor gathers the orchestra and inspires the musicians before sending them onto the stage.

This is what Jesus is doing in Matthew 10. The teacher gathers his disciples, gives them authority to heal and proclaim, then sends them out to the surrounding communities, sharing his final instructions concerning the who, what, where, when, how and why of their mission.

Only in the context of these instructions can we fully understand Jesus' closing words of encouragement in Matt 10:40–42. For these words are not mere final instructions; they describe the vision guiding the disciples' mission, a community of radical welcome beyond anything we can imagine.

While these verses at the end of Chapter 10 are packed with meaning, three words help us see the community Jesus is describing. First, the word "you," or rather its plural, "you all." Jesus proclaims, "whoever welcomes you all, welcomes me...and the one who sent me." The "you" Jesus is talking to are Jesus' disciples, both then and now. "Whoever welcomes you—my followers, my messengers, my emissaries—welcomes me, and therefore God."

Jesus is offering a promise both to his followers *and* to those who welcome them: you all will be received as I am and those who accept you will receive the reward: me and the new life I bring. For we are all one and the same.

The second word is "whoever" which appears four times. "Whoever" is one of those words that opens doors and breaks down the barriers that humans like to construct between us and them. "Whoever" replaces human identity groups with the character of God's community.

In these verses, Jesus reminds us that God's community is not first and foremost about our human constructed identities, but about being Christ's welcomers and welcomed no matter who we are. Whoever welcomes the disciple will receive the reward the disciple has already received. "Whoever" welcomes is welcomed. That is the community Jesus promises here.

The third word in the text is what the NRSV translates as "welcome" (*dexomai*), which appears six times. We often use the word "welcome" to describe hospitality, inviting into our lives the presence and identity of another. Certainly, this is part of the welcome Jesus is naming: inviting someone in and treating them with dignity and worth.

But in the context of Jesus' instructions, the meaning of this word goes deeper than greeting a guest with warmth. The Greek word *dexomai* means to receive and accept, to take someone into ourselves as one of our own, and therefore Christ's own. In these verses, such welcoming means not just receiving and accepting the message-bearer as they are but also the message they bring and the Christ who stands at the heart of that message. "Whoever receives you and my message, receives me...and the God who sent me."

Pastoral Reflections

In these three verses, Jesus is describing the character of God's community (kingdom): radical welcome, acceptance, and transformation through the receiving of another who is Christ for us and for whom we are Christ. This community is a network of interwoven relationships, not constructed by the followers, but by the Spirit as we plant the seeds in our proclamation of and faithful receiving of Christ's message and messengers of healing, hope, and new life in God's community.

What does God's community of radical welcome look like? To see the fullness of this community, we first need to leave behind the command and demand that often distort Jesus' meaning. These words are not a command: "you must welcome others to receive your reward." Nor is it a demand I use against others: "you must welcome me to receive your reward."

When we use Jesus' words as command, welcome often becomes little more than friendliness.²⁵ This friendliness invites newcomers into what already exists and then expects them to change to fit into the current system. The welcomed are told: "We're glad you joined our family. But it's OUR family and we hope you like the way we do things. If not, there's the door."

On the other hand, when we use Jesus' words as a demand, welcome easily turns into colonization where the welcomers

25. Ruth Fletcher, *Thrive: Spiritual Habits of Transforming Congregations*. (Energion Publications, 2015), 75ff.

are expected to change into what the newcomer demands while the welcomed get to stay the same. The welcomer is told, “We’re glad you welcomed us into this family. But none of this is working for us so we’re going to fix you. If you don’t like it, there’s the door.”

But Jesus’ words in this passage aren’t demand or command. They are a vision, a description of a community of mutual transformation that happens when together we proclaim and receive God’s reward of: 1) right relationship with God and whole-y relationship with one another (righteousness); 2) death and new life in Christ (the prophet’s reward); 3) acceptance into God’s abundant life through Christ; 4) the mutual healing and transformation received in Jesus’ living water.

In God’s community, both the welcomed and the welcomer are transformed into Christ’s identity. In God’s community, all “whoevers” are received as equal partners with gifts, ideas, and experiences to share. In God’s community, every member of the community says to every other: “We want you to share your Spirit-transformed self with us so that we too can be transformed into whoever Jesus is calling us to be as his followers.”

To paraphrase Episcopal priest, Stephanie Sellers, God’s community is finally about everyone finding themselves so utterly accepted and embraced by God that we can’t help but run into the community to share God’s welcome with others.²⁶

Laurie Jungling

26. Stephanie Sellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other and the Spirit of Transformation*. (Church Publishing, 2006), 18.