Preaching Helps

October 3–December 26, 2021:
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost through the First Sunday of Christmas

Reading the Bible Aloud in Church

My colleague Robert Seaver taught at Union Theological Seminary for over fifty years. He had retired at least twice before I joined the faculty in 1997. I remember standing with Bob when members of the 50th Anniversary Class came to campus for their reunion. I heard more than one of them say to him, "Your course was the most important one I took in this seminary." Bob taught "Voice Building" which wasn't so much about increasing a student's speaking volume as it was about getting rid of the tension that kept students from claiming the authenticity of their own voices. He also taught a course with a rather mundane title, "Reading the Bible Aloud in Church." In that course he helped students present the biblical text aloud in a way that engaged the written words as well as listeners. Bob died in 2009. I have seldom, if ever, heard anyone who could read a text conveying such deep meaning. It wasn't that he pronounced "God" in a particularly holy way but that he said "God" in a way that told listeners that he knew who he was talking to or about.

Over the past year most parishioners have heard texts read aloud from a computer screen. How did that change how the scripture text sounded? Was it more distant since reader and listener were not in the same room? As congregations move back into worship spaces, this is a good time to be more attentive to the presentation or performance of the biblical text itself. Some have suggested that the texts should never be printed in the bulletin or projected on a screen. Scripture texts are meant to be heard, not read. (Yes, those who have difficulty hearing are grateful for printed words; pastors may encourage people to take the texts home and read them again during the week. You can still encourage people to look up and listen when the texts are read during worship.)

This issue of *Currents* includes a very helpful essay by David Rhoads, a New Testament scholar who taught for several years at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He was so passionate about the oral nature of the biblical texts that he memorized the entire gospel of Mark and performed it over 200 times! His essay offers practical help for memorizing and presenting the text as well as theological reasons why this makes a difference. I encourage every preacher to read his essay whether or not you intend to memorize Mark or any other biblical text! Of course some texts are easier to memorize and present than others. Stories are usually easier than dense theological letters—but even the letters must have been read aloud in Philippi or Corinth since not everyone could read. You can also take a deeper dive into Rhoads' work in his book *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel* (Fortress Press, 2004).

Rhoads' essay is also a gift to share with lectors in the congregation. Make copies to share with lay readers—you can assure them that you don't expect them to memorize their assigned texts! If possible, offer regular workshops on "reading the Bible aloud in church." These workshops can be for anyone interested in being a lector, as well as those who have already volunteered. Encourage people to read the texts aloud before they read in worship. When I was teaching, I always encouraged my preaching students to move around with the text they were preparing to preach. Do whatever your body wants to do: where do you feel like crying or laughing? Where do you need to fall down or hit something? Getting the words of scripture inside your body gives new understanding of the text itself and brings vitality to your presentation of the text in worship, even when you're standing still at the lectern. The text matters. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us…" So may it also be with the words on the page: may they become flesh and live among us during worship.

I give thanks to the writers for this issue of Preaching Helps. Some of them finished their writing as Hurricane Ida flooded their towns, their churches, and their homes. Some are in new calls, one was elected to the Iowa State Senate, one recently retired, one became a new mother. From California to New Jersey and in between, all of them are faithful pastors struggling to engage the biblical texts for preaching, willing to share their insights with you.

Joel Bergeland is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Zion recently removed all of their pews to better welcome in the community, and now their church building serves as an arts space, a farmer's market, a yoga studio, and a nonprofit meeting hub. In his personal life he likes exploring the Berkshire Mountains with his husband and their dog. **Christa M. Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a B.A. in English and a Masters in Teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa started her career as a high school teacher in Columbia, South Carolina. She was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a Ph.D. from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. **Caleb Crainer** (he/him/his) serves as pastor at St.

Andrew's Lutheran Church in Los Angeles, California. He is a product of Valparaiso University, The Graduate Theological Union, The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, 4 billion years of evolution, friends, parents, and a fair amount of Star Trek. As things reopen you might find Pastor Caleb feeding stray cats, fostering kittens, and adopting kittens. **Brad Froslee** serves as Senior Pastor at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic Brad has found joy in cutting down trees and mowing the lawn on the farm he grew up on near Vining, Minnesota; engaging in projects in the Twin Cities around expansive language and racial justice; kayaking with his husband, Bill; and listening to his son sing (whether around the house or in outdoor concerts). He is passionate about preaching, worship, and prophetic witness, and when possible traveling, and working on genealogy and poetry projects.

Sarah Trone Garriott serves as coordinator of Interfaith Engagement for the Des Moines Area Religious Council Food Pantry Network. She regularly preaches and presides at Christian congregations throughout Iowa. Each summer she coordinates a camp for high school youth and incoming Drake University students to explore the diverse religious communities of the Des Moines Metro area and to create digital storytelling projects about their own faith (more about the camp at www.iowainterfaithexchange.com). In 2020 she was elected to the Iowa State Senate for District 22 (Windsor Heights, Clive, Waukee, and parts of West Des Moines). During the daily prayer in the Senate Chamber, Senator Trone Garriott shared prayers written by Iowans from the Muslim, Jewish, and Sikh communities. **Amanda Gerken-Nelson** (she/her/hers) is the Executive Director of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM). ELM organizes queer seminarians and rostered ministers, confronts barriers and systemic oppression, and activates queer ideas and movements in the Lutheran Church. Amanda resides in the unceded territory of the Wabanaki Confederacy, now called Portland, Maine, with her wife and son. **Mary Halvorson** recently retired after thirty-five years in ministry. She spent the last twenty-eight years serving as co-pastor, with her husband, at Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mary currently consults with congregations as a Bridge Builder, as well as tends gardens and trees.

Barbara K. Lundblad (she/her/hers)
Editor, Preaching Helps

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 3, 2021

Genesis 2:18–24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2–16

Engaging the Texts

Jesus' teachings on marriage, divorce, and children are only in response to an attempt by his opponents to trap him. It's important to keep that frame of reference in mind as we read these texts. Jesus is not making grand theological pronouncements, he's navigating a difficult situation. Jesus ignores the Pharisees' initial question and responds to their question with a question of his own, "What did Moses teach you?" They cite a passage from Deut 24:1-4, but a close reading of that text reveals a hypothetical scenario, not a clear set of legal guidelines. So what exactly is the Pharisees' "test" that Jesus is navigating? Our other readings for this week provide some insight:

The context for this psalm about God's majestic name, like Mark 10, is also one of conflict, where God's name is both exalted by offspring and assailed by opponents in verse 2. Psalm 8 focuses on the central question in verse 4: "What are mortals that God cares about them?" Then the praise to God shifts to praise of mortals in the second half of the psalm. The author reiterates that God created humans and gave humans the responsibility to care for creation (referencing Genesis 2). Notice that the psalmist does not give humans dominion over one another.

The epistle of Hebrews is another text that focuses on relationality. It devotes a lot of time to explaining who Jesus was and is for God's people. Jesus is identified as God's appointed Son (and heir), who was formed as a human yet transcended that initial relationship to become closer to God, even superior to the angels. This is the potential of children, of siblings, of a new type of family with God. Christ is analogous to an elder sibling who endures hardships so that younger siblings do not have to suffer.

The "test" of the Pharisees tries to make Jesus choose between scriptural proof-texting and lived experience. Saying "Yes" or "No" to divorce both have pitfalls. As always, Jesus comes through with a savvy response. Instead of playing into their "test" Jesus pulls out Gen 1:27 and 2:24 to illustrate that God's ideal plan was for equal relationality between spouses. Genesis envisioned relationships with equal partners full of mutual support, respect, and safety. The word "helper" in Gen 2:18 does not indicate lower status like "servant," but rather indicates equal or higher status. Jesus' commentary ignores

the Pharisees' question about divorce, and focuses on remarriage. In this way he sidesteps their "test" and shines a light back on them.

Amy-Jill Levine helpfully points out, "To claim that Jesus "liberated" women from a repressive Judaism by forbidding divorce and so protecting women's rights is facile, wrong, and bigoted."[1] Jesus is not correcting Jewish tradition, but rather cleverly pointing out how the Pharisees' "test" only reveals their own weaponizing of scripture at the expense of God's calling for humans to care for each other.

The disciples are caught gate-keeping for Jesus and excluding children. Jesus snaps at them to "let [the children] come to me." In welcoming children, Jesus prioritizes the most vulnerable individuals.

Pastoral Reflections

As a child of divorced parents, this pericope has historically been a difficult one for me. Over time, I've come to better understand and appreciate my parents' reasons for separating and the ways their decision impacted my life. There are certainly divorced people in your church, and this text is often not heard as gospel for them. Furthermore, the text from Genesis (and the one Jesus quotes) have been used to harm transgender and gender non-binary people. Rather than repeat those tired, hate-fueled interpretations, I invite you to consider more expansive interpretations beyond the Pharisees' "test."

Jesus is being publicly challenged about his own theological stances. I wonder if he will join in the condemnation chorus about divorce or if he might offer a measure of grace instead. Divorced people were in the towns and villages where Jesus preached as well as our congregations. We do well to avoid the "test" of rules that force a narrow understanding of human relationships. The Bible is actually full of many different examples. The Gospel of Mark mentions a few central women by name (Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome) with unknown marital status. We also hear about unmarried male disciples. Together they are creating a new family. "Chosen family" is a term that many people who have been hurt by these texts know well. When the family you're born into is hostile or dangerous, we create new family units and close supportive relationships with others.

I read these texts as good news for people who've been condemned or neglected by religion because of their relationship status. The "test" is not about how much harm you can inflict with scripture, it's about how much love grows from God's word. Scripture is interpreting scripture and we are also part of this living conversation. The Gospel of Mark quotes the reading from Genesis and the Epistle to Hebrews quotes from Psalm 8 which also picks up the Genesis text! Partners navigating their relationship each face unique challenges and joys. God's love is foundational for people who need to exit an abusive relationship and for those who want to enter into a life together. When human dignity and respect is prioritized over arbitrary religious rules, human relationships can flourish in many forms.

Caleb Crainer

1. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: the Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (Harper One, 2007), 143.

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 10, 2021

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Psalm 90:12–17
Hebrews 4:12–16
Mark 10:17–31

Engaging the Texts

In the reading from Amos 5, we hear a Southern prophet preaching against the ways of the Northern Kingdom. Amos eviscerates the upper-class mistreatment of vulnerable people. This was during a time of relative prosperity in the area, but that abundance did not "trickle down." Amos repeatedly mentions the city gate as the site of justice to emphasize that justice must be done publicly and visibly. The warnings are coupled with threats of divine retaliation. The oppressors will be prohibited from enjoying the fruits of their duplicity. It's not clear if God intends to smite the wicked here or if the poor will rise up and reclaim what's theirs. Maybe both.

The pericope of Psalm 90 picks up the final section of the psalm which includes a request for human awareness of our life circumstances and divine rescue followed by several requests. Each plea is for aspects of a good life. The author asks for grace (vs. 13), love (vs. 14), a long life (vs. 15), good descendants (vs. 16), and our good work (vs. 17). This psalm tends to reinforce the idea that good things in life equate to God's favor.

The theme of divine judgment continues in the epistle to the Hebrews. God's word is like a slicing sword that separates the good and bad. The author establishes Jesus as high-priest (transcending caste like Amos) in true solidarity with ordinary people because he faced the same tests. This functions as a backhanded critique of the elite leaders that did not experience the same situations as regular folks yet passed judgment on them in oppressive ways.

The Gospel lesson gives us another lesson about exploitation. A rich young man runs up to Jesus, strangely calls him "Good Teacher" and asks directly about eternal life. Keep in mind that since this guy is rich, we could conclude that

he is already "good" and favored by God as in Psalm 90 or automatically a thief as in Amos 5. Jesus immediately pivots from that seemingly benign compliment to point out that no one is good enough to get themselves into God's good graces. Perhaps it wasn't such a compliment after all, but another test. Jesus gives a recap of six commandments and things are looking up for the young man who eagerly reports that he's done all that. Jesus says he lacks one thing and instructs the rich man to sell everything and give the money to the poor and then to come and follow him. The young man who literally lacks nothing refuses to lack "nothing." We don't know what he ends up doing, but it seems like Jesus has instructed him to do something impossible.

Jesus subverts the common understanding that wealth and power derive from virtue and God's blessing. Instead he says rich people will have great difficulty in entering God's kingdom. Peter points out that THEY have left everything behind to follow him. (It doesn't seem like they had all that much to begin with.) Jesus points out that they gave up those things, and gained a community and new family beyond their wildest dreams. The inclusion of "with persecutions" seems out of place. The Greek word is a form of "to chase" and I wonder if it could be better interpreted as "fields with chasings" or "hunting fields." The final verse confirms Jesus' preference for the lowly and last.

Pastoral Reflections

There's a current throughout the Bible that supports God's providence for the wealthy, powerful, and successful, but there is a stronger current that shows God's preference for the downtrodden and rejected. The pericope readings for this week give us both options, but prefer the latter.

We are guilty of vilifying and simultaneously absolving rich people today. The wealth gap today is worse than in Ancient Rome. Today the wealthiest 1% control 40% of the wealth in the U.S.—more than twice the amount in Ancient Rome. (Scheidel, W., & Friesen, S., 2010) However, since so many people in our society are able to scrape by they are weary of criticizing the powerful people. As a colleague of mine once said, "I don't preach against wealthy folks because we need them." Do we though? I wonder what Amos would say?

This week's readings are an invitation to reflect on our relationship to wealth and our prophetic call to stand with the poor and vulnerable. As someone who receives compensation along synodical guidelines, I can see both sides. Compared to many people in the world I am incredibly wealthy, compared to some church members I make very little. If I'm honest, I'm like this guy who probably decides not to follow Jesus––I'm not going to sell all my possessions, renounce my family, abandon my job, and wander around—or is that exactly what I'm doing as a pastor?

I think this text's brilliance is that it speaks to people of every tax bracket. It is written as good news for the poorest of the poor who must rely on relationships for every basic need. It is written to challenge wealthy people to strive to use their wealth to help those less fortunate. It is written for the many people in between, those of us who find ourselves navigating deficit and surplus to call us to use our positions to bring truth to both ends. I do think we are called to address the wealth disparities in our world and the generational harm they cause. If not us, then who?

Caleb Crainer

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 17, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

The text from Isaiah this week is full of "he's": "he has borne our infirmities" (vs. 4), "he was wounded" (vs. 5), "he was oppressed" (vs. 7), etc. At first read, and trying not to immediately assume the Christian interpretation of the text—that the "he" referred to is Jesus—I wondered who *is* "he"? The trials "he" endured and the esteem "his" community had for "him" are impressive. "He" must have represented something great to "his" community. I wonder who it was who inflicted all this hardship on "him" and for what reason? Reading around the texts, we learn that the "he" to which this text refers is the "servant" introduced in the preceding verses of chapter 52 (Isa 52:13). Chapter 52 introduces this servant with the editorial heading "The Suffering Servant" which, upon reading the other texts in this pericope, seems to be the common theme/imagery: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:8-9), "'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'" (Mark 10:45).

Substitutionary atonement seems to be the message in our texts today and it is not unfamiliar to us preachers nor to our congregants: the imagery of substitutionary atonement permeates our liturgy, hymns, and prayers. An interpretation that follows such imagery is that we, too, as disciples of Christ are called to a suffering servitude for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of God's kingdom. Suffering for the sake of the gospel is deemed holy; indeed, suffering in general is deemed holy. That this week's pericope includes Ps 91:9-16 is pecu-

liar: "Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent." I must admit that I felt like the psalm conveyed the "good news" in this week's readings more than the other texts.

I bristle, a bit, at substitutionary atonement. Perhaps not so much the atonement theory itself—that Christ died "for you" as the words spoken when the eucharistic meal is shared around the table so clearly articulate—but rather the subsequent interpretations and imagery that accompany this theology, shaping the faith and lives of Christians throughout history. In particular, I struggle with the interpretation that I briefly mention above which claims that suffering is holy and must be endured for a holy purpose. As a queer person who has experienced and witnessed great suffering at the hands of institutions—including our church—I cannot claim the suffering I experience as holy; it is evil. As I continue to interrogate my white privilege and learn about the scourge of racism and how scripture and tradition have been used to perpetuate white supremacy in our churches and communities, I cannot claim the suffering my black siblings experience is holy; it is evil. Claiming that suffering is holy and must be endured seems to me a tool of oppression and not theology—it is something those with power, those who do not experience the oppression of the state, claim as a way to minimize their responsibility to those who are suffering to retain power and control. Rather, I take great comfort in the theology of the cross: that Jesus knows and is with those who suffer but does not condone their suffering.

I hold these feelings in tension with the knowledge that there have been those who were "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isa 53:5), those whose experience of suffering exposed truths about our communities that needed exposure. When I wondered who "he" is, I actually thought of someone other than Jesus. The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (October 17, 2021) falls just five days after the anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death (October 12, 1998). Matthew was a young, cis, white, gay student who was beaten, tortured, and left to die on a barbed-wire fence near Laramie, Wyoming. Matthew was murdered because he was gay; homophobia is evil. Matthew's murder ignited a nationwide conversation on homophobia and the suffering of queer folk in America. His murder has inspired books, movies, and plays with the explicit purpose of educating older and newer generations of the danger of queer-phobia and the importance of acceptance. Matthew's murder activated his mother and father to create the Matthew Shepard Foundation whose purpose, according to their website[2], is to "amplify the story of Matthew Shepard to inspire individuals, organizations and communities to embrace the dignity and equality of all people." Matthew didn't die *so that* the education, understanding, and community transformation could happen. But, Matthew was "wounded for *our* transgressions" of queer-phobia and "crushed for *our* iniquities" of silence and inaction in the face of oppression. Our communities have been transformed by Matthew's story.

Amanda Gerken-Nelson

2. https://www.matthewshepard.org/

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost October 24, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7–9
Psalm 126
Hebrews 7:23–28
Mark 10:46–52

Engaging the Texts

It appears once again this week, that there is an overarching theme to the appointed readings: the restoration of community. Jeremiah tells of how God saves the remnant of Israel, brings them back to a place of abundance and prosperity, and promises to be their God, their father. I perceive a word of great hope in this text: I feel as though I am part of "the remnant" of my faith community who have been distanced from each other due to the pandemic. While we are worshiping in-person, we are wearing masks to protect the vulnerable and I notice an emotional distance as much as a physical one even as we gather. The pandemic has forced a cautionary distance between us that has not yet been healed. As I heard Jeremiah prophesy that God is bringing back God's people, that they will "walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble" (Jer 31:9) I felt that I, too, was able to take refuge by that brook and slake my thirst with its cool water.

In this passage I am interested in the emphasis on the naming of "the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor" (Jer 31:8b) as those who are specifically brought back to community. It is not the mighty who are emphasized, the warriors and soldiers, nor is it the prestigious, the priests; rather, it is the disabled[3] members of the community and those who are, or recently were, pregnant, a vulnerable and tender time in the life of those who bear children. These are the ones who are the foundation of this recently reassembled community. The calling back into community that is depicted here does not appear to be a re-fortification of a nation, but rather something more akin to a community of shared need, shared care, and the assurance of a God who loves them as a

3. I am intentionally using identity-first language as members of the Disability Community have taught me to do.

parent loves their child. The imagery of Ps 126:1-2a mesmerized me: "we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy." There is euphoria to this imagery—clearly a dream and not a nightmare—that brings not necessarily the joy of contentment but a joy that stimulates laughter. What kind of restoration can do such a thing? Perhaps the Hebrews text answers that question: "he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever" (Heb 7:24). Perhaps the kind of joy that makes us laugh in delight is that of a high priest—the imagery preferred by the author of Hebrews—whose priesthood endures forever! We can delight in an everlasting relationship with our priest, our savior, our Christ. There is never a time when we are not reconciled to Christ. There *are* times when we are not reconciled or in relationship with our community. Bartimaeus is an example. Mark tells us that Bartimaeus was a "blind beggar" (vs. 46) giving us not only a description but a context: Bartimaeus' identity and job cause him to be ostracized by his community. We can hear how the community rejects him by their "orders" to be quiet. Bartimaeus knows that his social location and the perceptions of others do not prohibit him from relationship with Christ. He shouts out to Jesus even when the crowd tells him to shut up. Jesus invites Bartimaeus to join him and publicly proclaims "your faith has made you well" (vs. 52). The barrier to relationship in community is broken down by faith and a merciful, loving Jesus.

A word of caution to preachers: the ableist language and imagery that permeates this pericope should not be perpetuated in our sermons. Imagery that depicts blindness as something bad or as a metaphor for ignorance and depicts sight as something good and as a metaphor for knowing and understanding contributes to the societal lie that having a disability is a bad thing. Let us be aware of how we are using our words or imagery to illustrate our points and eradicate ableism from our theology and lexicon.

As I engaged the texts and reflected on what they revealed to me, I realized that my opening line, above, is wrong. The texts today do not have a common theme of restoration because the basic definition of the word "restore" is one that implies a returning to the way things were. Instead, as I engaged the texts again, I sensed a re-gathering, or a re-membering of community, but when that community is reunited it is certainly **not** the same that it used to be—it is "like those who dream" (Ps 126:1). After his encounter with Jesus, Bartimaeus does not return to his post and continue begging; rather, Mark tells us that Bartimaeus "followed him on the way" (Mark 10:52). My community has longed to return to in-person worship, to get back to the way things were—but we can't. Not just because we can't yet sing, or sit that close to people who are not in our family unit, but because we are not the same faith community we were before the pandemic. We encountered God differently when we worshiped together via Zoom and it changed us—it transformed our relationship to our worship and to each other. We have become "like those who dream" and we might not realize it yet, but I do believe that "our mouth[s will be filled] with laughter, and our tongue[s] with shouts of joy" (Ps 126:1-2).

Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Reformation Sunday
October 31, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

The Reformation Sunday texts seem to have been selected to maximize the number of theologically loaded (and contested) terms that can appear at once. Covenant, law, works, sin, righteousness, atonement, grace, faith, justified, truth, free—and all that on top of the pressure to address the concept of reformation in its historical and modern contexts! It's a big pill to swallow.

Yet many of us do try to swallow it all at once. We search for some umbrella for all the ideas to fit under, and we end up with sermons that are vaguer than we'd like, usually about change in the church and God's ongoing work of reformation.

There is nothing wrong with preaching about change, of course. But change is a multifaceted concept that tends to get flattened in our sermons. So rather than trying to make the texts fit together under a common theme of a fuzzily defined notion of change, why not let each text bring the concept of change to life? Why not let them walk us into the various and contradictory sides of change? Looking for what in each text is being reformed opens new possibilities for the preacher.

In **Jeremiah,** God reforms the terms of the divine/human relationship. God who was already close comes closer, and humans who already knew something of God now have that knowledge written in their hearts. No longer will people have to learn and obey—the knowledge of God and the will to walk in God's ways will come baked into human existence.

What change looks like here is deepening, where something blossoms into a fuller version of itself. It's the kind of change we see in youth whose capacity to feel and think and relate expand as they grow. It's the kind of change experienced by family caregivers as their fretting over how to properly measure medications or give sponge baths relaxes into the confident motions of muscle memory. It's the joy when our

congregations manage to live up to the mission statements they've crafted. This, too, is reformation.

In **Psalm 46** God is not the one doing the changing. Rather, God is the refuge for people who have change forced upon them. It's scary—the earth is shaking, wars are raging, political systems are cracking. Amid the upheaval, God doesn't stay in heaven, but joins the people where they are: in the midst of the city, to help until the day when God makes all wars to cease. The call to "be still" in this context is less about self-care and Sabbath-taking and more about how God's presence makes our fear-induced shuddering calm down.

What change looks like here is a falling away. We see this side of change whenever the systems that are in place fail to adequately hold the present moment and we watch the crumbling that ensues. When this kind of change comes, it becomes apparent how much is out of our control. It provokes fear in the near term and grief in the long term, whether it be individual (the onset of a disease) or worldwide (the climate crisis). What does it mean to have a God who doesn't rescue us from the besieged city, but dwells with us through the crumbling until we inhabit a new world?

Imagine you knew nothing of sixteenth century theological disputes. What would you say this **Romans** passage is about? To me, it looks like a plea against human divisiveness and our attempts to elevate ourselves above others. "There is no distinction" between us, Paul writes, and so boasting is excluded. But interestingly enough, the source of our similarity is also the source of much of our shame: our tendency to "fall short of the glory of God." Part of the great redemptive work that God does through Jesus is transforming our falling short into the basis for our solidarity with God and one another.

What change looks like here is a great levelling between us. This is the change that is so longed for by those denied dignity, power, and resources, and so feared by anyone with wealth, status, or privilege. Before God, however, this change has already happened. Any redistribution of wealth and power we make is just us catching up to where God already is.

In **John,** Jesus speaks the truth that we give too much of our hearts to things our hearts don't properly belong to (perhaps success, image, approval, etc.). We become bound and tangled up in them, looking for validation or healing that they can never give us. Part of Jesus' ministry is exposing this reality, then offering us a new way forward. God's gift to us is freedom—the assurance that there is indeed a place for us in God's household and that there's no need for our anxious striving.

What change looks like here is space-making. The energy we spent bound up and searching for validation is opened. Even our bodies instinctively make more space when we feel this freedom—think of how shallowly we breathe when under stress versus our big belly breaths when we feel confident and energized.

Change is not one thing, and chances are your congregation is going through many types at once, each with their own demands, possibilities, and challenges. Simply naming the reality of this complexity might help give better language to navigate the changes they're weathering, and point to where God is appearing beside them and setting them free.

Joel Bergeland

All Saints Sunday
November 7, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

There are images strung like pearls throughout these All Saints Day readings—an opportunity for the preacher to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Here are two possibilities running through the readings:

Weeping

There are plenty of tears in our texts. Twice we hear the promise that God will "wipe every tear" from every eye, first in Isaiah and again in Revelation. And in John, crying is contagious: first Martha weeps for her brother, then the crowd weeps with her, and then Jesus himself begins to weep.

These readings reveal both a God who stops our tears and a God who, in Jesus, joins our weeping. Which image does your congregation lean into more readily? Are you a congregation that understands God as the one who puts an end to our sorrow, or are you more likely to proclaim a long-suffering God who joins us in grief? Scripture gives us both images, and it might be helpful to explore the side less relied on in your context. Those of us who tend to rush to the drying of tears would do well to remember that sorrow doesn't mean separation from God, and those of us who are quick to point to God's presence within suffering need to remember that God does actually heal and bring joy now and again!

Whether God dries our tears or starts crying with us, what is consistent is that God responds to our weeping. Our pain, and our expression of it, moves God to action. Weeping is never in vain. It is not weak or pointless. It serves a purpose, opens up new possibilities, and moves things along. Within our bodies, scientists have theorized that tears help rid us of excess stress hormones. Within society, psychologists have

hypothesized that crying helps create solidarity, empathy, and support. And within our spiritual life, it is worth pondering that our tears are noticed by God, and bid God to act.

But there is something intimate and sacred about tears in themselves, too. When I studied abroad, we set aside an afternoon to present our final projects. One man confessed that he hadn't prepared his project, and began instead to weep, telling us how deeply changed he was from our semester together. Rather than chastise him, the nun who led our class held a long silence and then said, "Thank you for your tears. You've taken this afternoon and made it holy." And so he had. Tears speak a truth that words do not. They are living water gushing up within us. They are a time when we dare to let our bodies express the state of our soul.

Who do you let see you cry? Who will you allow to wipe your tears? For me the list is quite short. Yet God wants to be on that list. God chooses to enter our lives through the truth that tears tell. A God like this desires and saves every part of us, and this is certainly good news.

Seeing

Notice the noticing in our texts. The enthroned one instructs John to "See" and "Write this." A whole crowd gathers around Jesus as he processes to Lazarus' tomb, and Jesus makes it clear in his prayer that he wants them to watch and observe. Isaiah prophesies that people will notice God's works, saying, "Lo, this is our God."

We are being invited to look at God's salvation, but this salvation comes in places of woundedness and death. In order to see God's work, we must look into crying faces and tombs. This goes against the grain for us. Death is unpleasant. We have arranged society so that many of us do not have to look at death and suffering with any regularity. Instead, we ask certain people to bear it all on our behalf.

As I write this, the last American soldiers are leaving Afghanistan, and epidemiologists are projecting another 100,000 COVID-19 deaths in our nation before December. Interviews with health care providers and armed servicemembers sound the same—they are exhausted, demoralized, and feeling forgotten and misunderstood. They have been thrust into impossible situations while the rest of us have been able to avoid carrying the burden with them. We have asked too much of them, and the trauma they are weathering now will journey with them for years to come.

But it's All Saints Day, and perhaps there's an invitation here to lean into the word "All." Maybe it takes all of us looking at death together to prevent the traumatization of some of us. Death and suffering don't end simply because we look at them, but the monopoly of their power is broken. Perhaps God calls us to look because looking breaks the isolation and begins to redistribute the burden. Perhaps our collective witnessing of death is one of the ways that God begins opening space for new life to take root.

Many of us already do this in a small way on this day: we read aloud the names of the people in our congregations who have died over the past year. We take time to notice their absence with us even as we trust their continued life in God. This is a practice of seeing and noticing. We look into the tombs and crying faces in our own churches—these private journeys of grief and suffering—and assure them that they are seen and that they do not carry the burden alone. Perhaps through our noticing, God is already wiping the tears away.

Joel Bergeland

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 14, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

The long season after Pentecost is ending. The new church year is beginning shortly. We are closing out the last ordinary Sunday in the church year with a passage from the same chapter with which we had begun: Mark 13. On that first Sunday of Advent, we were in the last verses of Chapter 13, calling out "Keep Awake" for Christ's coming. We are now on the verge of Christ the King Sunday, anticipating Christ again. However, in our excitement for Christmas, perhaps the tone of that Advent lesson sounded a little different. On this Sunday we get the first lines of a litany of things to keep us awake at night: toppling institutions, persecution, people running in fear, confusion at how to navigate now that the usual signs are hidden. The assigned passage ends just as Jesus is getting started. The congregation won't get the full force of the chapter unless the lector keeps going, or the preacher brings the details into the sermon. In this pericope the threat is a little more distant, like global tragedy being reported on a TV news broadcast. It's also a familiar passage to many churchgoers, so that may dampen their experience of it. But if we keep going, the verses that follow ratchet up the pressure by presenting the threats to the listener as more immediate, more menacing, and more personal. In the story of Mark's Jesus, the threats are getting closer and more personal as well. The next chapter begins with the opponents plotting to kill Jesus.

Consider the historical context of the gospel. The writing likely took place in close proximity to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and during the Jewish revolt against Rome. The community of Mark was either experiencing

or anticipating persecution. As in all times of unrest and upheaval, there is confusion about which way to turn. There are leaders presenting themselves to the community, but which ones are to be trusted? Violent flare-ups are common. The people are on high alert. There is a sense of urgency for all actions, all decisions. But exhaustion and fatigue are taking a toll. Chapter 13 seeks to cut through all of the noise and catch the listener's attention. It has been an exhausting journey through Mark at a rapid clip. However, it is time to rally the community's energy for the last and most challenging leg of the journey. The scripture calls a community in crisis to focus on that which is most important: The coming Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

It feels like everything is falling apart.

I am writing these commentaries at the beginning of September in the midst of crisis. Right now my state is experiencing a dramatic increase in COVID-19 infections, due to the more contagious Delta variant. I am hearing reports from area hospitals that are overwhelmed by the virus. Patients seeking treatment for other ailments are waiting for hours or days in the emergency room for a bed. Health care workers and hospital leaders are begging the community to take greater precautions. Meanwhile, it is illegal for schools in my state to require masks. This prohibition was introduced and passed on the last day of the legislative session. It was signed into law at midnight by the governor surrounded by cheering people holding "masks are child abuse" signs. City council and school board elections are on the horizon, and several publicly anti-vaccine, anti-mask, COVID-isn't-real candidates are on the ballot. School just started. Our governor continues to say that she trusts Iowans to make good decisions. Our state public health department refuses to release COVID-19 data more than once a week.

This is a very personal crisis for me because my children are among those who cannot yet be vaccinated. I also know that many others are experiencing this moment as a crisis as well, each in their own personal ways.

Maybe it helps to know that we are not alone. Throughout this pandemic I have found the unsettling parts of our history oddly comforting: Things have always been terrible. Reading about the pandemics of the past, I know now that the anti-vaccine, anti-precaution crowd has always existed. January 6 was not the first violent attempt to overthrow our federal government. The rights of citizenship have expanded with great effort and then been clawed back at different times and in many ways. This is not to say that we should accept that this is just the way things are. There are lessons to be learned in how the people persevered. There are insights for today in the failures and successes of the past. There are important reminders for us to hold on to that which is most important. There is evidence of the creativity and resilience and humanity of people even when everything is falling apart. And there are glimpses of the not yet that we can savor right now in the already. Mark's gospel is for people in crisis. We are people in crisis. This is a word of good news for us. But rather than a word of comfort, it's the cold bucket of water, a slap in the face, the kick in the pants that we needed to get ourselves to focus on the coming Christ.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Christ the King Sunday/Reign of Christ November 21, 2021

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

What is Truth?

In the Gospel of John, the word *truth* (**ἀλήθεια**) appears twenty-five times. We also see *true* (**ἀληθινή**) frequently in the scripture. While not the same root word in Greek, Jesus uses *truly* (**ἀμὴν**) often to introduce a teaching. Without a doubt, truth is a significant theme in the Gospel of John. Jesus has repeatedly spoken about the truth and that which is true. The first words out of his mouth often underscored the truth of his teaching. Scan the chapters leading up to this moment, and you'll see it throughout: Jesus has been all about the truth. But now in contrast, the official who is tasked with discerning truth, shrugs his shoulders at the concept.

I do not believe that Pilate is seeking an answer from Jesus. We often make the mistake of hearing biblical characters speaking with a holy, earnest voice. A quick survey through the gospel of John should cure us of that. The woman at the well is at first sassy and combative. When Mary only comes to meet Jesus after she is called, her words are a biting accusation, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Thomas sarcastically labels this mission to Bethany a "death trip," and later gives a pretty rude response to news of the resurrection. The characters in John are human. They are not always on their best behavior, but they are often very honest about what they are feeling and thinking. When Pilate asks, "What is truth?" we must keep in mind the life that a Roman official leads. He has spent a whole career making strategic choices to keep moving up the ladder of authority. To keep climbing in a brutal regime, he would have to make moral compromises. He's jaded and cynical. His question amounts to asking, "Who even cares?" He clearly doesn't. Instead, he sees an opportunity to play off the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. If the writing of John is dated some-

time after the destruction of the Temple, the Roman Empire is trying to keep a handle on things. Stoking animosity and division between oppressed groups is an effective strategy to maintain power. Pilate will use any opportunities that present themselves. An apologetic take on Pilate's motivations is undone as he whips the crowd into a frenzy, a task that he appears to relish. Even if he had a moment of wavering, Pilate comforts himself with the functional truth of his world: the end always justify the means.

Two types of leadership are presented in contrast here. Jesus is the truth. After bending the truth for so long to suit his needs, Pilate wonders what truth even means.

Pastoral Reflections

In the conflict over COVID-19, we've heard opposing points of view on vaccinations, mitigation strategies, treatments, or even if the virus is real. In the days since our last presidential election, some have claimed that the election was stolen and that the results cannot be trusted. Others refuse to acknowledge the violent January 6 attack on our nation's capitol. The evacuation of 123,000 people from Afghanistan in two weeks is either a heroic victory or a disaster worthy of impeachment. State legislatures have passed laws to discourage the teaching about the history of American racism and the continuing impacts today. Survey data reveals that political affiliation predicts our perception of truth when it comes to these events. Americans disagree not only about the way forward, but what has actually happened and what is now taking place. The media's approach is often to get quotes from both sides and present them as if they have equal merit. Overwhelmed and exhausted, the people are left to wonder what is true, or if truth even exists.

In the gospel of John, Jesus makes it clear that truth does exist. He says without qualification, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Throughout this gospel, Jesus is showing and telling himself to be this truth. It's not an easy message to receive; even his followers struggle to understand. Some are offended. Many turn away. And by the time we reach the cross nearly all of them lose heart. But Jesus will not give up, even coming back from the dead and through locked doors to bring the truth. Our people need to be reminded that truth does exist. Our communities must practice seeking truth and living according to the things that are true. The truth of Jesus is not an easy way. His truth calls us to sacrifice for our neighbor, to care for the sick, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to forgive those who have done us wrong. This truth asks a lot of us and often gets in the way of earthly success and power. This is why Pilate had little interest in the truth.

On Christ the King Sunday, speak the truth of Jesus in unwavering terms. He stands in contrast to all earthy rulers, his kingdom is unlike any other. Jesus calls for our allegiance through the noise of everything else clamoring for our loyalty. Worship is an opportunity to practice the truth that we need to carry throughout the week. This Sunday, coach the congregation to replace every "amen" with "It is true." It is a way to help the congregation understand why they say "amen." In this exercise, both the presider and the parishioners may find a new truth in the familiar movements and words of worship.

Sarah Trone Garriott

First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

Advent is here, and we are greeted with the dramatic proclamations we have come to expect of the Advent texts. "The days are surely coming," the Lord says in Jeremiah 33. Those days will fulfill a promise of salvation and safety. Jeremiah also reports God's promise of a righteous branch of David, the One who will execute justice and righteousness. That promise might understandably make us nervous, given how often we have turned away from justice and righteousness.

What strikes me about this set of readings is how vividly they describe what God can do. We look to God to "make [us] increase and abound in love for one another and for all" and to "strengthen [our] hearts in holiness" so that we might be blameless when Jesus returns (1 Thess 3:11-13). It's easy to get lost in the fear and foreboding that Jesus paints so vividly in Luke 21, but all of that chaos means that redemption is drawing near. We trust in the fulfillment of God's promises of salvation, which ought to inspire freedom more than fear. We are free to love and serve the neighbor, to embody righteousness in the here and now.

The psalmist sings with an awareness of all that God can do: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth." God knows that we are "wantonly treacherous," and yet God's mercy can forget our transgressions and instruct sinners in the way of love.

Our call is to trust in that mercy. To wait. To watch for signs of God's power breaking through. To follow the path of steadfast love that God opens for us, knowing that we will stumble again and again. To lift up our souls to the God who does not fail us.

Pastoral Reflections

At the time of this writing, people are reeling from the destruction left by Hurricane Ida from the Gulf Coast to the Northeast. Divisions remain apparent in every realm of civic life, as the pandemic rages on and politicians find new ways to exploit each conflict to their own ends. I don't know what awaits us when Advent dawns, but I suspect it will be more of the same—new variants emerging, more devastating effects of climate change, all of the horrors that make the distress among nations and the roaring of the sea and waves in Luke 21 seem far too familiar.

I'm always stunned that in the midst of the drama of this gospel, Jesus tells us, "Be alert at all times." That's it, Jesus? Keep alert? Be on guard? Pay attention? It seems so inadequate. But that attention helps us trust in what is lasting rather than relying on what is temporary. "Heaven and earth will pass away," Jesus says, "but my words will not pass away." See those leaves sprouting on the fig tree? Nature's cycles of life and death are a foretaste of the life that will have no end in God's realm. See that person weighed down by the worries of this life (and yes, that person is often looking back at us from the mirror)? That person is trapped by the temporary, so fixated on present sufferings that it seems impossible to turn outward in compassion for others.

Perhaps this Advent we can invite people to bear witness to God's activity in the world. In his foreword to the new poetry collection *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope*, Ross Gay describes the power of bearing witness:

> "…I have been wondering about how we make the world in our witnessing of it. Or maybe I have come to understand, to believe, *how* we witness makes our world. This is why attending to what we love, what we are astonished by, what flummoxes us with beauty is such crucial work. Such rigorous work. Likewise, studying how we care, and are cared for, how we tend and are tended to, how we give and are given, is such necessary work. It makes the world. Witnessing how we are loved and how we love makes the world."[4]

We preachers get nervous when we hear language about people making the world. We know all too well our human failings, including the dissipation and drunkenness we use to numb ourselves rather than offer the love and care for which the world is crying out. We understand that only God can make and re-make the world in a cosmic sense. But when we keep alert to the needs of those around us, when we guard against the temptation to turn away from the suffering of others, we experience glimpses of that coming kin-dom.

In that same poetry collection James Crews includes his poem "Darkest Before Dawn," in which he describes the blooming of a white orchid. The poem concludes:

> …These blooms
> stir something too long asleep in me,
> proving with stillness and slow growth
> what I haven't been able to trust
> these past few months – that hope
> and grace still reign in certain sectors
> of the living world, that there are laws
> which can never be overturned
> by hateful words or the wishes
> of power-hungry men. Be patient,
> this orchid seems to say, and reveal
> your deepest self even in the middle
> of winter, even in the darkness
> before the coming dawn.[5]

I pray that we will find in this Advent season many opportunities to bear witness to the grace and hope that only God can give. To you, O Lord, we lift up our souls.

Christa Compton

Second Sunday of Advent
December 5, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

If I had to pick one word that runs like a thread through these readings, it would be *prepare*. In Malachi we hear the promise of a messenger who will *prepare* the way for a day of refining and purifying. Zechariah declares in Luke 1 that his child will be a prophet who will go before the Lord to *prepare* his ways. Many of the desired outcomes of that preparation are found in Philippians—sharing God's grace, letting love overflow, producing the harvest of righteousness. And of course in Luke 3, right on time on this Second Sunday of Advent, we find John proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins and imploring us all to *prepare* the way of the Lord.

4. Ross Gay, "Foreword," in *How to Love the World: Poems of Gratitude and Hope*, James Crews, ed., (North Adams, Massachusetts: Storey Publishing, 2021), xi.

5. Ibid., 145.

If you use Luke 1:68–79 as the psalm for the day, it would help to highlight the context. Zechariah's words are especially powerful because they come immediately after John is born when Zechariah is able to speak again. In our modern Zoom parlance, Gabriel had put Zechariah on mute back in verse 20 when Zechariah wondered how God would provide a son to Elizabeth and to him in their old age. Every time I consider the story of Zechariah, I wonder how I might spend more time in silence, listening for God's will rather than imposing my own. Preparation, in this season, might look less like the frenzy I make of it and more like sitting still and attending to God's voice.

That willingness to listen seems especially important when John is out there in the wilderness shouting, "Prepare the way of the Lord." We don't know with certainty what that preparation looks like in our time, but we can imagine some metaphorical paths that need to be straightened out and some figurative mountains that need to be leveled. The opening lines of today's gospel remind us that the Word of God can break through all the political and religious noise around us. John receives his prophetic word even with myriad powers and principalities surrounding him. No wonder he goes to the wilderness to proclaim repentance. John knows that this message won't go over well among those with plans and political agendas of their own, so he roams the region around the Jordan.

Maybe God's plans will ask us to dislodge ourselves from what is most familiar and do a bit of wandering. Maybe we need to prepare *not* to prepare as much on our own terms and do some wondering instead about what *God* is preparing in this new season.

Pastoral Reflections

"Prepare" has become a word that makes me flinch. I have made so many plans in the last two years. We all have. Almost every time I planned and prepared, I had to change those plans. Or toss them out altogether and start over. These days, to prepare is to take a leap of faith.

At this point in the Advent season, our listeners are doing plenty of preparing. They are preparing shopping lists and menus and travel plans and garlands aplenty. We don't escape it in church, of course. We prepare the costumes for whatever the Christmas program looks like this year. We prepare to decorate the sanctuary because people just aren't satisfied with those candles on the Advent wreath. We prepare bulletins and liturgies and sermons, and all of that does indeed matter. But are we really preparing the way of the Lord? Along comes John with his confident proclamation: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." We know the rest, thanks to Handel's *Messiah.* We know the rest, but do we believe it? Do we believe that God is preparing a way for all flesh to see salvation?

For reasons I can't quite explain, I read many post-apocalyptic novels during the last two years. Several of them, though published before 2020, seem eerily prescient. My favorite of this genre is Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Although she published the book in 1993, Butler paints a picture of the early 2020's that sounds all too familiar: violent tensions among economic classes, a pharmaceutical industry fueling epidemics of addiction, widespread water shortages, and even a presidential candidate who promises to make America great again. Early in the novel the protagonist, Lauren, decides she must leave her small community and set out for a new place. She has been preparing for the journey by assembling a small survival pack. She's included a hatchet, a couple of light metal pots for cooking, some money, matches, water, a change of clothing, non-perishable food, and many other necessities. She also packs seeds so that she can grow food when she arrives someplace safer.

It's the inclusion of the seeds in Lauren's go-pack that moves me the most. In a world that has become chaotic and violent, she has enough hope left to carry those seeds and envision future growth that could nourish others. She is preparing a way that is rooted in the possible.

What if this year we asked God to prepare us for something so much bigger than we have imagined before? What if we acted as though we truly believed that all flesh might see the salvation of God?

Maybe our notion of preparation is too small. Maybe it's time to prepare for something more—prepare to receive the Word of God breaking into our lives, so that we, like John, might carry the good news into a world that longs for the rough way to be made smooth.

Christa Compton

Third Sunday of Advent
December 12, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

Singing, shouting with joy, rejoicing, hoping expectantly—these are the actions of the people in the biblical narratives today. The singing, joy, and hope feel so right and good, especially when everything around us in these days leading up to Christmas is pointing to holiday cheer and festive lights. And these outcomes may very well be how we are being directed

in our response today—ultimately. It is important, however, to delve deeper into the realities surrounding the people and the texts we are encountering. Zephaniah, as prophet, has spoken harsh words of judgment and challenge against corrupt systems and a broken society. The first section of Isaiah, appointed as psalmody for today, is tied to destruction, exile, and loss of the familiar. Paul writes his letter to the Philippians from prison. John the Baptizer comes with exhortations of repentance and wrath. The backdrop for all these texts is one of longing, discomfort, turmoil, and despair.

In this Advent season in 2021, how are the people in our sanctuaries, in the malls, on the streets, or at the restaurant table next to you experiencing that uneasy backdrop in their lives? Is it a health issue or diagnosis, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the toll the last twenty-one months has taken? Is it the loss of a deeper sense of the common good and the body politic, racism, and our ill-attempts to address systemic issues? For many it is exhaustion, depression, and challenges in relationships. The list is long. This week we have the opportunity to invite—to encourage—people to come with all that they are and all they are carrying in this Advent season. The stories of faith lift up the hurts, longings, and individual and corporate brokenness. It is precisely there where God meets us, redeems us, and challenges us. People sing in Zephaniah because judgment has been transformative; the community in Isaiah claims joy as their gift in the face of tragedy; Paul extols the liberative presence of Christ even while in prison; and John the Baptizer speaks into the harsh realities of oppression and inequality, with the hope that the gospel will be embodied among them. Naming the realities allows transformation to take hold, for a new song to be lifted up, and shouts of joy to rumble up from all that we are and know is yet possible.

Pastoral Reflections

I was an overly positive, smiley, energetic 20-something who had just traveled across the country to begin a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. One of the primary hospital units I would be working in that summer was Medical Psychology (Med Psych). Significant time would be spent walking with people experiencing severe depression, anxiety, or mental health crises. It was in this unit that I learned a great deal about "meeting people where they are at." While a smile and can-do attitude may work in many places…it would not work here. Encountering a woman in her 70s who had attempted suicide, the hospital staff knew she was a religious person and wanted me to "help her feel better." I spent hours talking with her, but I didn't seem to be connecting. My supervisor suggested another avenue, that was to enter into the pain. I needed to touch the deepest pains I knew—remembering what it meant to be the picked-on gay kid, the grief I felt at the death of my grandfather or a friend, how lonely it is when you feel there is no one to talk to. Entering in this way I found our conversations moved from superficial to real, and strength seemed to arise not from "making her feel better" but by acknowledging the grief and hurt.

That same summer I met a young 20-year-old woman struggling with eating disorders and depression. What I came to learn is that she believed God and her family would abandon her if she were honest about her sexuality. One day I saw a mirror in the room and asked if she would be able to look in the mirror and tell the person she saw in the mirror that she loved her. She couldn't. It would take time for her to say that she loved herself, or to see that God could love her.

In the texts for this week, we have the opportunity to touch the pain and grief of those who have gone before us and give permission to express our own pain, even—and maybe especially—during this season when we are all expected to be happy. We experience Paul and John the Baptizer holding up mirrors to help us move through what the world throws at us and to see—that is, really see—a God who is for us and stands in solidarity with us. It is when we know that God meets us in the entirety of who we are, in the messiness of our lives and the messiness of the world that we can really sing and shout of an embodied hope.

Brad Froslee

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021

Micah 5:2–5a
Psalmody: Luke 1:46b–55
Hebrews 10:5–10
Luke 1:39–45 [46–55]

Engaging the Texts

A friend and colleague of mine traveled to Taizé, France, as part of a church and student group. She wanted to bring back something for friends, but knew that traveling with anything too big or bulky would be a challenge so, as a gift, many of us received beautiful postcards with images reflecting various stories from the Bible. The postcard I received is of Mary being welcomed by Elizabeth. If you look closely you can see slight sketches of the infants in their wombs greeting one another. The title of this artwork is "Magnificat," and I have often kept it on a shelf facing my desk in the office as a helpful reminder. Certainly, it is a reminder to welcome those in need, those filled with fear, and those who bear God's holy presence, but it is also a reminder of "what" is to be born. Yes, I know that generally during the Advent season we are focused on the "who." Jesus—Yeshua,the "one who saves"—is

proclaimed as God's holy presence among us. Yet, before her child is even given a name, Mary tells us "what" God's presence is to be about. Mary lets us know that the presence of God will be made known in mercy from generation to generation; strength among the people; the scattering of the proud and haughty; the lifting up of the poor and downtrodden; the filling up of those who go without; there will be a remembering of the promises made across history. Just as the prophet Micah points us to a "where," it is again the "what" that takes center stage with the gathering of those who are far off, a feeding and care for the people, a sense of security, and an everlasting peace. Today is a day to refocus our attention on not just the "who" of God coming among us, but on the "what" that will redefine and reshape us as we are met by the promise and presence of God.

Pastoral Reflections

A friend of mine calls it the "Oh-shit-moment." It isn't necessarily a bad thing (though sometimes it might be). It is that time when it all becomes real. I see it every time I look at a picture of my husband and me holding our newborn son in the hospital with the look of love, sheer delight, and complete and utter fear. I see it in the faces of couples as they prepare for their wedding days, college students and young adults as they leave to begin the next chapter of their lives away from home, and little ones as they move from crawling to toddling and letting go of the sofa or coffee table and then trying to figure out what is next. In the psalmody and gospel for today, a good portion of the "Oh-shit-moment" has been left out—the one where the God of hosts has just informed a young peasant girl that she is going to be a teenage mother. Yet, we know this is part of the story. Scripture goes on to paint a picture of a girl who is alarmed at the news, fearful (seeking refuge with an older relative), loving, and then a young girl who will act. It is the time when it all becomes real. In the same vein, the prophet Micah points to the promise that will come out of tiny, insignificant Bethlehem—of radical hope and radical change—bringing God's security and shalom. In the words of a beloved Christmas hymn, "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." The words of Scripture today should flood our hearts with love, engage our minds with wonder—and strike us with sheer terror, as we look to what is next. The presence of God in the womb of a teenager, the presence of God coming out of Bethlehem, the presence of God shattering the strata and structures of this world, will mean that our lives and the world will never be the same. Today an ancient prophetic text serves as midwife, and two women (old and young) speak and labor for a radical reign of God to be birthed among us. Today is an opportunity to wonder aloud how the words of Mary take shape in our place and time. There is a chance to see with Mary how God's presence among us will simultaneously bring great joy and have us shaking at our very core in fear and expectation.

Brad Froslee

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

The writing teacher admonishes her students, "Show; don't tell." How does the preacher *show* the mystery of the incarnation without explaining it away? How does the preacher capture the holy uncontainable joy of the angels, the trees of the forest, the roaring sea? The appointed texts show a new way, a new vision, a new reality. There will be endless peace, justice, and righteousness; there is no need to fear. How is this even believable in light of an unrelenting global pandemic, vitriolic ideological warfare, the earth screaming for help and care as countless suffer from extreme weather conditions? Is there room in the listener to imagine, along with the biblical witness, this new vision, this divine declaration of a new reality, of God incarnate and in the world with us? The preacher's task is to create room in our often dulled and unexpectant inns, so the Spirit can alight in us.

Many will come to church, or on-line worship, breathless, exhausted, juggling many things, worried, sad, hopeful, angry, feeling alone and hopeless, seeking, desperate, indifferent, bored. Christmas Eve offers worshippers time set apart, to come together and witness what is unbelievable. Hymnody, texts, candle lighting, prayers, the smell of trees, all "show" what cannot be fully said. This is the gift of Christmas Eve worship with a shorter sermon that works with clear, simple imagery and story.

The texts themselves are the light shining amongst what is cold, weary, grieving, lonely, and discontented. They show us God's illuminating ways and preference. The preacher could dwell with the notion of wonder and awe and invite the hearers to wonder along. I wonder, if we were to listen to angels and "not be afraid," what would that mean for our lives? How is creation singing a new song, and are we listening? I wonder, as I wander through these texts, where is Christ being birthed among us?

The theologian C.S. Song writes, "Love is essentially gravity-bound. When it becomes gravity-free, it is no longer love. It turns into a force that repels. It is hate, rejection, alienation, condemnation, and death. But God is drawn to the

world through a gravity-bound love." The thrill and gift of preaching on this holy night, is showing how God comes low to the ground, pulled by gravity, toward creation, toward us.

Pastoral Reflections

When our oldest child was four, an adult bent down to her level and exclaimed, "Oh, you have your father's eyes!" She burst into tears, "These aren't my daddy eyes; they're my eyes."

Let's bend down and look at this baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, what do we see?

Hey, he has his father's eyes. Eyes that notice a seeking Zaccheus in a tree, eyes that see the hungry and lame, that well up with tears at the death of his dear friend Lazarus, eyes that fill with compassion for the widow. Look, he has his father's eyes.

Let's get closer; he has his mother's touch, as he takes hold of the arms of the woman bent over for eighteen years, lifting her up as she is seen eye-to-eye. He has his mother's touch as he gathers children close to him and tells them stories, as he touches the blind man's eyes and they open to the sunlight, as he allows Mary to pour expensive perfume on his feet, and receives her love. He has his mother's touch.

Can you believe it? He has his father's ears, as he listens to the Samaritan woman at the well tell her story, as he sits down at supper in the homes of his friends and he hears the tales of their lives, as he listens to the pleading of the criminal hanging next to him on the cross, "Will you remember me when you come into your kingdom," as he listens to the mocking crowds and responds with compassion, as he hears the cries for justice and wholeness. He has his father's ears.

Take a look; he has his mother's tongue, as he teaches the ways of God's reign, where the rich will be made low, the poor lifted up, the hungry fed, and the full sent empty away. He has his mother's tongue as he speaks the prophet's searing truth and advocates for those of low degree.

Would you look at this? He has his parents' heart, a heart that yearns for healing, reconciliation, peace, kindness, for love to endure and be the common language we share, a heart reflecting a gracious God who so wants to love and be in relationship with what God creates.

Hey, have *you* ever noticed? *You* have Christ's eyes, you see me for who I am.

You have Christ's ears, thank you for listening to my story.

You have Christ's tongue, thank you for your words of kindness.

You have God's very heart as your own, a heart beating with compassion.

God bends down, sees us, and makes a home in us. The Word made flesh.

Be near us, Lord Jesus; we ask you to stay close by forever and love us—the whole broken, hurting, and waiting world.

Mary Halvorson

Christmas Day
December 25, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

Decades ago when I studied Greek the summer before seminary, our teacher, a lovely and long-retired professor, required the entire class to memorize John's prologue in Greek. I can still draw from these Greek phrases, although they are in fragments. At first this exercise seemed a waste of time. But over time, in practicing the text aloud and repeatedly, I discovered its poetry. There was beauty and cadence, imagery and lyricism. I once heard a poet say, "The purpose of poetry is to slow us down." I really like this. John's poetry slows readers down, so they can take in—fragment by fragment—cosmic, earthshattering truth. By what other mode could John have written this creation story, this mystery of the Word made flesh, grace upon grace, the light shining in the darkness?

It would make sense for the congregation, on Christmas Day, to recite John's prologue together, so that all worshippers feel the words on their tongues, the weight of the mystery on their lips. The texts appointed for this day have echoes of music. "How beautiful are the feet," is sung by the soprano in Handel's *Messiah*. The psalm and Hebrews text find their voice in our sung liturgy. John's gospel can be beautifully chanted. There is a reason these texts have been put to music. Poetry and music combine to offer something transcendent, beyond human reach.

John's gospel presents a conundrum for the preacher. What can one add, what more can one say in light of this poetry? How does one proclaim a text that proclaims itself? The Word became flesh, and we, especially professional church folk, are prone to suffocating the Word with more and more words.

Pastoral Reflections

Years ago a college choir sang an anthem that none of the singers would ever forget. The text was from the prologue to John's gospel. The choral piece ended with the phrase, "and the Word became Flesh. Gloria, Gloria." The 80-voice choir

sang the first three words, "and the word," in unison. Then the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses divided into powerful and commanding four-part harmony as they sang, "became flesh," taking care to enunciate clearly the consonants b, c, fle- sh. My guess is those sitting in the front pews felt the spray of the singers' spit. The next word, "Gloria," was sung twice. The first time, the harmonies were soothing to the ear. But the second "Gloria" stretched slowly over three syllables, "Glo-ri-a," creating a shocking sound that was disruptive and honestly, horribly ugly. I describe it this way because all 80 voices chose their own pitches to sing, and then strayed off into choral chaos. "Glo-ri-a" became a horrible blast, a corrosive and dissonant wall of shattering sound.

I'm sure some in the audience were not at all pleased that we didn't end with a pleasant, resolving chord. Instead they felt assaulted by the music.

But that's the word I want to somehow preach; that's the sound I want to give you: a blast that shatters and hits us with the far-reaching implications of God becoming flesh. That blast of splintering "Gloria's" that followed the five words that change everything, "and the word became flesh," should bring to our imaginations the depth, intensity, and the pursuit of God's love for the world. It should frighten and startle us in our comfortable pews.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words help the preacher: "We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us. We are indifferent to the message, taking only the pleasant and agreeable out of it and forgetting the serious aspect that the God of the world draws near to the people of our little earth and lays claim to us. The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience. Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. We are no longer alone, God is with us. We are no longer homeless; a bit of the eternal home itself has moved into us."

I imagine sounds of ugliness, aching, groaning—screaming chords crying for help. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Word enters into all these experiences; divinity comes close, intimately close to the realities of humanity and creation. The Word became flesh not only into what is beautiful and joyful, but into the full weight of creation's longing, hoping, struggling, searching, dying.

Christmas is the in-breaking of God into all creation. God who created the Word out of nothing—who mingled heaven and earth, divine and human by becoming flesh for our sake—brings us to the edge of mystery, awe, unknowing. How else can we respond, but with sheer silence and wonder, like the heavy silence of a forest weighed down by a beautiful snowfall. One can only behold.

Mary Halvorson

First Sunday of Christmas
December 26, 2021

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

Engaging the Texts

At the beginning of this Gospel, Luke set out to give an "orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us…" (1:1) Perhaps this story is part of his orderly account, filling in the gap between Jesus' presentation in the temple and his baptism. This is the only story in the New Testament about Jesus as a young boy. While some non-canonical gospels include stories of the boy Jesus performing miracles and doing magic, Luke's account is quite ordinary by comparison. Some scholars see this episode as Jesus' *bar mitzvah.*[6] That rather popular interpretation is challenged by *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* which claims "thirteen as the age of adult responsibility;"[7] thus, the appropriate age for a *bar* or *bat mitzvah.* It seems quite clear that Jesus' parents didn't go to Jerusalem for any special rite of passage for their son; rather, the family went to Jerusalem because it was Passover. Luke emphasizes Jesus' place within Judaism and the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. This story follows another story in the temple: the rite of purification, "according to the law of Moses," and the presentation of the infant Jesus "as it is written in the law of the Lord" (2:22).

This connection between the testaments is affirmed by pairing this gospel text with the Old Testament reading about the boy Samuel. There has already been an earlier connection in Luke: Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46–55) echoes Hannah's song of praise (1 Sam 2:1–10), both women thanking God for surprising pregnancies. Luke's interest isn't primarily to prove that the New Testament fulfills the Old, but that there is continuity between Jesus and his Jewish ancestors. The boy Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (1 Sam 2:26). A similar description frames the story of Jesus in the temple: "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (2:40), then at the end: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (2:52).

Between these brackets the story is surprisingly ordinary: Jesus goes to Jerusalem with "his parents" (no hint of virgin

6. e.g., Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 41.
7. See: Amy-Jill Livine, ed., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 103.

birth) for the festival of Passover. When Jesus stays behind his parents assume he's with friends or relatives—a common twelve-year-old choice! But his parents grow anxious and when they find him in the temple, his mother is angry: "Child, why have you treated us like this?" Why didn't she say his name? Is she reminding Jesus that he's too young to be on his own? She goes on, "Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." Again, there's no hint that Jesus has anything but normal parents. Jesus reminds them that he's where he's supposed to be: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Up to this point others have said who Jesus is—the angels, Elizabeth, Mary, shepherds, Simeon. Now Jesus is beginning to sense his identity as God's child, an identity that will be confirmed in his baptism in the next chapter (3:21-22).

The Colossians reading is a beautiful blessing that could be used as the Benediction instead of as the Second Reading. Perhaps it could be read antiphonally, one side of the assembly saying the words of blessing to the other side. (Some slight adaptations in the text may be helpful.) Or you may choose to keep it as the Second Reading but still read it as a congregational dialogue. Let the power of the words touch people in a personal way.

Pastoral Reflections

Whenever I read today's gospel this Sunday school song always comes to mind:

In the temple, in the temple,
Stood a little boy one day,
And the doctors wondered greatly
At the words they heard him say.
It was Jesus. It was Jesus.
He was but a little child,
But the light of heav'n was shining
In his face so pure and mild.
(text by Flora Kirkland)

I have no idea why I remember this song from so many years ago. Did I have any idea who the doctors were who wondered greatly? Perhaps I thought they were medical doctors since I didn't know any other kind. I wonder if I remembered the song and the story because it was great to think of Jesus as a kid, and we didn't have other stories like that.

Today would be a good day to ask a middle school student to read the Gospel. As you prepare to preach on Luke's story, read the text with some middle schoolers—sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Start with their questions about the text, then ask some of your own. Did Jesus' parents make him go with them to Jerusalem because it was Passover? Would you go to church if your parents didn't make you? The teachers in this story seem amazed that Jesus knew so much. Do you ever feel like you know more than your teachers? Is Jesus just making a good excuse for himself when he says, "Don't you know I must be in my Father's house?"

You can also write about yourself at age twelve. Or write as though you are twelve. This won't be a sermon but it can help you get in touch with the middle school boy standing in the temple.

Barbara Lundblad