

Preaching Helps

**January 2–April 3, 2022:
Second Sunday of Christmas through
Fifth Sunday in Lent**

So Many Things I Didn't Know about Race

My great-grandfather, John Hemborg, had a very difficult childhood in Sweden. His father died when he was only a year old. When he was seven, his mother sent him to live in the school master's home. At ten he went to live with his uncle. In April 1871, he and his brother took a steamer to Liverpool to begin a journey to America. He was 17 years old and left behind all that was familiar. He wrote about the end of that journey in his diary:

We went to Liverpool and from that city we started for New York. We were on the Atlantic Ocean for 18 days and had to battle great waves night and day. It was a beautiful May morning when our ship passed through the "Narrows" into New York harbor. It was a snowstorm when we left home on the 25th of April, and here nature stood adorned in her beautiful spring vestment!

Great Grandpa Hemborg arrived in America six years after the Civil War ended. I don't know what he had heard about slavery or the American war in Sweden. I'm quite sure he didn't know that New York City was built on slave labor.

There are so many things I didn't know either. I learned a great deal from an essay by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *The Atlantic* titled, "The Case for Reparations" (June 2014). [Indented portions below are from his essay.]

In the seven cotton states, one-third of all white income was derived from slavery. By 1840, cotton produced by slave labor constituted 59 percent of the country's exports. The web of this slave society extended north to the looms of New England.

I didn't know. But I used to shop in clothing stores on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. That area had long been the garment district, importing cotton shipped north from Memphis, Tennessee, cotton picked by slave labor even after the Civil War ended.

Slavery was big business. Yale historian David W. Blight said investing in slaves was very lucrative: "In 1860, slaves as an asset were worth more than all of

America's manufacturing, all of the railroads, all of the productive capacity of the United States put together...Slaves were by far the single largest financial asset of property in the entire American economy.

I didn't know. What I did know was that my alma mater, Augustana College, was founded in 1860. We celebrated the centennial when I was in college, but nobody talked about slaves as "the single largest financial asset of property" in America when our school was founded.

In 1934, Congress created the Federal Housing Administration. The FHA insured home mortgages with lower down payments and a drop in interest rates. But an insured mortgage was not possible for most African Americans. The FHA had adopted a system of maps that rated neighborhoods according to their perceived stability. Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated "D," usually ineligible for FHA backing. This excluded black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage.

I didn't know. I thought those loans were for anyone who worked hard enough to make mortgage payments. When I retired to Minneapolis, I didn't know that "racial covenants" had been part of many homeowners' deeds from 1910 to 1968. Those covenants banned homeowners from selling their property to people of certain races; usually that meant Black people.

The American real-estate industry believed segregation to be a moral principle. As late as 1950, the National Association of Real Estate Boards' code of ethics warned that "a realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood ... any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values."

I didn't know. I was in grade school in 1950. I don't know if realtors tried to keep Black people out of our Iowa town, but the town was all White. I knew our family could never afford to buy the farm we lived on, but I didn't know about real estate boards' "code of ethics."

In 2005, Wells Fargo promoted a series of Wealth Building Strategies seminars. But those seminars were a front for wealth theft, shunting blacks into predatory loans... "We just went right after them," Beth Jacobson, a former Wells Fargo loan officer, told *The New York Times*. "Wells Fargo mortgage had an emerging-markets unit that specifically targeted black churches because it figured church leaders had a lot of influence and could convince congregants to take out subprime loans."

I didn't know. I was old enough to know and I lived in New York City in 2005. Maybe I even read that quote in *The New*

York Times. But I didn't have a subprime loan and I wasn't Black, so I didn't pay attention.

In 2009, half the properties in Baltimore whose owners had been granted loans by Wells Fargo were vacant; 71 percent of these properties were in predominantly black neighborhoods.

I didn't know *that* about Baltimore. I only saw the photo of Freddie Gray, a Black man shot by the police, and the CVS store burning. Imagine yourself as a young Black child watching your elders play by all the rules only to have their possessions tossed out in the street and to have their most sacred possession—their home—taken from them.

So many things I didn't know or refused to see. We never owned the farm where I grew up. It was owned by a woman in California who inherited it from relatives who passed it down through generations. She had never seen the farm or worked the land, but she was good to our family. When she found out that we didn't have an indoor bathroom she was shocked and paid the bill for us to have a tub and a toilet installed. If anybody had talked to me about "white privilege" I would have been outraged.

Great Grandpa Hemborg left New York and traveled to Red Wing, Minnesota. He had lots of support along the way, primarily from other Swedish immigrants. By the grace of God and the help of many, he graduated from Augustana College and Seminary. He was pastor to congregations in the Midwest and in Riverside, California. Along the way, he married Anna Peterson and they had seven children—four girls and three boys. Their family photo hangs on the "Wall of Ancestors" in our apartment. Parents and children look so serious. Only one of them has a faint smile—the daughter on the far right, my grandmother Lily.

What do I do now that I know what I didn't know about race in this country? Knowing is only a beginning, but an important one. Hopefully, writings like those of Ta-Nehesi Coates won't be banned from classrooms in our country. No doubt, this issue of *Currents* will teach us many things we didn't know. Our challenge and calling in this Whitest of all churches in America is to discern what to do after we know what we didn't know before.

Thanks to our writers for this issue: **Amy Lindeman Allen** is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. An ordained Lutheran pastor, she received her MDiv from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and PhD from Vanderbilt University. **Kelly Chatman** became the first director for the new nonprofit Center for Leadership and Neighborhood Engagement in 2020. CLNE provides programs, coaching and training to connect and support congregations and nonprofits and their neighborhoods. From 2001 to 2020, he was senior pastor of

Redeemer Lutheran Church and the non-profit Redeemer Center for Life. He has served as advisor to the bishop of the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod since 2010. Kelly holds a Master of Divinity degree from Gettysburg Seminary and a bachelor's degree from Concordia Senior College, Ft. Wayne. He is married to the amazing Dr. Cheryl Chatman who was the Executive Vice President and Dean at Concordia University in St. Paul from 2000 to 2020. **Lenny Duncan** (they/he) is on leave from call as a Rostered Minister in the ELCA after the uprisings of 2020. He is the best-selling author of *Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US* and *United States of Grace: A Memoir of Homelessness, Addiction, Incarceration and Hope*. He is co-host of the BlackBerry Jams podcast presented by Ben and Jerry's and produced by PRX and is currently a PhD candidate at the Graduate Theological Union. **R. Guy Erwin** serves as president of United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg and Philadelphia; he is a scholar of Luther and the Reformation and served previously as bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA. He is gay, married, and a member of the Osage Nation of Oklahoma.

Gladys Moore is a child of God, ordained in 1984, and recently retired as senior pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Summit, New Jersey. Prior to St. John's, she served for six years as Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Mount Holyoke College, was an assistant to the bishop of the New Jersey Synod of the ELCA for sixteen years and served three urban congregations in New Jersey. In 2020 she received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from United Lutheran Seminary. **Jan Schnell Rippentrop** is a liturgical theologian and religious ethicist. Trained as a Lutheran pastor, she is Assistant Professor of Liturgics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. She also teaches in the DMin in Preaching Program of the Association of Chicago Theological Schools. She has studied how women community organizers use anger to bring about positive social transformation. Much of her academic writing works against oppression and toward liberation. In her teaching and research, she is committed to interdisciplinarity, theories that have street cred, and pedagogies or 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. Schnell and her family live on an acreage that depends on solar energy, where they restore a natural Iowa prairie. They share interest in music, reading, theater, and playing outdoors. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John's book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C* is now

available, along with Years A and B. (Editor's note: these three books are wonderful resources for preachers.) John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church.

As we enter this new year and move through the season of Epiphany into Lent, I pray that God will bless our preaching with humility and courage. May the Word become flesh in the midst of the congregations we serve.

Barbara K. Lundblad
 Editor, *Preaching Helps*

Second Sunday of Christmas January 2, 2022

Jeremiah 31:7–14
 Psalm 147:12–20
 Ephesians 1:3–14
 John 1:[1-9] 10–18

Engaging the Texts

Happy New Year! Yes, this is the Second Sunday of Christmas, but it is also the *first* Sunday of the new year. How blessed we are to be proclaimers of God's good news. Today's lessons are replete with rejoicing. The celebration is much more festive in Jeremiah, but the gospel sound still rings clear in Ephesians and John.

The text from Jeremiah is part of what scholars often refer to as the "book of comfort/ consolation."¹ Addressed to those who are still exiles in Babylon, the prophet's words of hope—that God is going to gather all the scattered Israelites, the remnant from both the northern and southern kingdoms, and bring them home—is a cause for the most splendid rejoicing. From radiant faces to dancing women and merry men their mourning will be turned into joy!

The poetry and description of God as shepherd, in v.9b has echoes of Psalm 23. And salvation for these exiles is *real*; it occurs in time and space. God promises to bring them home, back to the promised land. This is not "pie in the sky" deliverance, for God's salvation has to do with here and now, "with place and the possibilities of life there."²

It's important to note that the returning group is comprised not only of the strong and healthy ones, but also the weaker or more vulnerable members of the community: the people who are blind and lame, women with children and those in labor. God's care for those at risk or who are margin-

alized is clear throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the early verses of the Ephesians text, the writer reminds readers that God chose us in Christ and adopted us as children so that we might declare God's praise. Time and again, we hear of God's plan and purpose for our salvation. That is, God sends Jesus the Christ into the world so that we might be redeemed, forgiven, and receive the inheritance of eternal life. As a response to God's great gift, we are called to live *for the praise of God's glory*; we are *made* to praise and worship God. What does such praise and worship look like in these not-yet-post-COVID-pandemic days of "virch" (virtual church) and a diminished experience of the assembly gathered for worship?

The Prologue to the Gospel of John is generally read on Christmas Day. But if there is no worship on Christmas morn, it is good that we hear this passage during the Christmas season. It makes sense as well, to read verses 1-18, rather than doing the partial reading suggested.

Shepherds, angels, a pregnant woman and a worried father are all so real—so fleshly. Thank goodness that by the end of John's prologue, the Word that created all, that was in the beginning, has now moved to being part of the creation. The eternal Word come down from heaven is also made flesh and is very real! Gail O'Day notes that "the eternal Word has moved from place to place, from time to time, seeking unsuccessfully to find a home, a dwelling place with God's people",³ until finally in v.14, the Word makes his home, or as the Greek more powerfully says, "pitches his tent" (*eskēnōsen*) with humankind.

John's Gospel, perhaps more than the synoptics, has often been wrongly used as the source of both hatred of Jews and of white supremacy. Therefore, caution is required in the interpretation of this passage, particularly the verses about light and darkness, and verse 11 which speaks of Jesus' rejection as Messiah by the Jewish people. While some did not receive him, others certainly did, otherwise there would be no Christian church. So, too, it's important that we wrestle with images of light and darkness lest we continue to perpetuate the notion that light is good and darkness is evil. Are there other ways to speak of light and darkness?

Pastoral Reflections

Many years ago, I went to South Africa and Zimbabwe with a group of beloved colleagues who were part of CIBL, the Conference of International Black Lutherans. While there I realized how much I longed for a place where I, as a Black person, as a woman of the African diaspora, could and did belong—a longing for the place that feels **most** like home. For, in spite of my cherished citizenship as one born in the

1. Patrick D. Miller, *Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections on the Book of Jeremiah*, New Interpreters Bible, pp. 804-810.

2. Miller, *Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*.

3. Gail R. O'Day, *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Volume 1. p.19.

U.S.A., there are often times when I feel like a “motherless child,” without a home country that views me as an equally desired and valued part of its national fabric.

Much to my delight, on one afternoon during our stay, our African brothers and sisters hosted a “homecoming ceremony” for us African-Americans at one of the universities in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. In a powerful, yet simple way, they acknowledged our mutual reality. They recalled that our foreparents had been stolen from the African continent more than 370 years ago and forcibly brought to the shores of a strange land that would eventually become the United States of America. They acknowledged that our roots were indeed African, and that Africa was our rightful home. They planted three indigenous trees that symbolized us Africans who were scattered throughout the world. Through prayers and songs of thanksgiving, they welcomed us back home. And they pledged that they would nurture and water the trees until we could return. I have never wept so deeply for joy as I did on that sunny Wednesday afternoon under the African sky. Finally, for the very first time in my life, I felt like I was truly home!!!

There were undoubtedly many joyous homecomings during the Christmas season. But what about those who are far from home or living as exiles or refugees today: Palestinians in Israel, our deported Haitian kinfolk, our Afghani siblings, and so many others, including families experiencing homelessness right here in the United States? How can God lead them and all of us to the places where we truly belong, to the places that feel most like home?

Perhaps the answer lies in our gospel lesson for today. For John tells us that when we cannot come home to God, God chooses to come home to us, to pitch God’s tent among us and make our flesh God’s own habitation. “The Word became flesh and lived among us...”

Imagine--God choosing to make God’s home with us in the person of Jesus Christ. Imagine *God with us in the flesh* in our times of celebration and our times of sorrow, in our brokenness as well as in our moments of saving peace. This is what the Christ-mass is truly all about--for us and for our salvation, for our homecoming here and in the hereafter.

Gladys Moore

Epiphany of Our Lord Thursday, January 6, 2022

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

Engaging the Texts

Today the Christmas season comes to an end with the feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of God’s glory manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. Some congregations still hold worship services on this day; others may have transferred the festival to the previous Sunday, January 2. Regardless of when it’s celebrated, on Epiphany we give thanks for the dawning of God’s reign, chiefly in the light and life of Christ.

A little more than two weeks ago, we experienced the winter solstice, the darkest and shortest day of the year. Now, as the earth is turning toward the light, so too are we in the Church turning toward the light of Christ, as the meaning of the incarnation is revealed in greater fashion.

Our text from Isaiah (or Third Isaiah) speaks to a post-exilic community, reminding them that in spite of their current gloomy situation, they need to arise and shine, for God’s light has come. For these former exiles who are still in the throes of Jerusalem’s restoration, this is gospel for sure. What’s more, the prophet declares that God’s light shining on them is so brilliant that other people will be drawn to its brightness. The description of this light reminds me of one of the traditions of 12-Step Programs. The first part of Tradition 11 says, “Our public relations policy is based on *attraction* rather than promotion...” Indeed, the “public relations policy” of the sovereign God of Israel is light and love, extended to and attracting all people.

Similarly, in the letter to Ephesians, the writer, whether Paul or someone of the Pauline school, enlightens the readers by revealing the mystery of God that was shown to Paul. That is, “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” No longer is the good news of salvation just for the Jewish followers of Jesus; it now encompasses the Gentiles too, echoing Isaiah’s message of other nations being drawn to God’s glorious light.

Rounding out the theme that God is a God for all people is our gospel text from the second chapter of Matthew. It recounts the story of the magi from the East who followed the star to Bethlehem to bring gifts to the Christ child. The camels and gifts of gold and frankincense, spoken of in Isaiah 60, show up in this passage. This is quite likely why the magi became “kings” who brought the above-mentioned gifts. Tra-

dition, and the beloved hymn on which it was based, “We Three Kings,” describes them as such. Two of the gifts are mentioned in Matthew. The third, myrrh, which was used as a burial spice, (cf. John 19:39) was probably added as a way of signaling that the newborn king who would “save the people from their sins” (Matt 1:21) would do so by dying upon a cross.

Pastoral Reflections

A few ideas emerge from our texts that could be explored homiletically. Chief among them is God’s radical inclusivity, that God is a God for all people everywhere. Whether former exiles hearing that God’s light is dawning on them so brightly that *nations* will be drawn to their light; or Paul evangelizing the Gentiles; or the magi, Gentile foreigners following the brilliance of a star to the infant Jesus—the Epiphany celebration makes clear that God is a God of the nations. In God there is a welcome for all. The universality of God’s reach and reign are important to remember, especially in these days of continued and increased polarization in our country.

Long before organizations and institutions, including the church, created various “diversity” positions and offices, or had DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility) initiatives, God had a vision that the whole human family would come to know the one, sovereign God of love and be drawn to God’s light and peace. In the congregation I served before I retired, St. John’s Lutheran in Summit, New Jersey, we had magnets made for the city’s Gay Pride celebration. The magnet, which is still on my refrigerator says, “Diversity--It was God’s Idea First!” Indeed, it was, and continues to be.

Another theme to reflect on is the light/darkness motif. For centuries, the words “white” and “black” have been racialized. Positive and pure characteristics have been assigned to whiteness and subsequently to White people, while negative and evil characteristics have been used to describe darkness and hence, as descriptive of Black and Brown peoples.

I will never forget the day when I was serving St. John’s in Newark, New Jersey, and a little 7-year-old boy came up to me and asked, “Pastor, why does God hate Black people?” Tragically, he had learned at an early age, the power of such racialization of our language. We dare not perpetuate it. So, if you are preaching on the light/dark theme, consider carefully ways to address it so you eliminate any such notions as light being “good” and darkness “bad.” Reflecting on how we live out our baptismal calling to “let our lights shine before others” in the same way that the light of Christ shines on us would be one possible way to approach this theme.

In Spanish-speaking cultures, Epiphany is known as Three Kings Day, *Día de los Reyes*. It is a day filled with joy and edible delights. This is yet another possible theme to consider. The Israelites’ *faces are radiant, and their hearts rejoice* when

they hear the good news of what God is doing for them. The magi are *overwhelmed with joy* when they see that the star they were following has stopped over the place where the Christ child is lying. Joy is a hallmark of the Christian faith, so be sure to encourage some joy on this feast day, and at the least, remind your people to smile and be glad as they hear the good news. Or, better yet, have them sing (masked of course) one of my favorite hymns, “Joy to the World.”

Gladys Moore

Baptism of Our Lord January 9, 2022

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29 (3)

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism is the introduction to Beloved Community which in many ways is a not-yet reality.

The occasion in today’s gospel is the baptism of Jesus. Jesus’ baptism is where new reality breaks in. That reality is the power of belonging. In baptism, the promise of belonging transcends every boundary, every wall. Baptism is an invitation into community, God’s community, where everybody belongs. Everybody is God’s beloved.

Baptism is how God chooses to reveal God’s self and we are all called to view the world as God’s beloved.

All people are not treated as God’s beloved in our nation and in the world. Our text reminds us that each and every person is created in the design of God’s love. Baptism informs us not only who we are; baptism reminds us “whose” we are. We are redeemed. We are beloved. God has called us by name. The flames of life cannot consume us.

Next week we will remember the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. We will remember how people were dedicated to the vision that all people are valued in the eyes of God. The church was in the forefront of the civil rights movement. The vision was rooted in the reality of baptism.

I will be reading again Martin Luther King’s *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. King wrote this letter when he was first jailed and his White clergy friends produced all kinds of excuses for not taking a stand against racism. They thought Dr. King was going too fast. “Wait!” was their cry. This might be a great Sunday to have a dialogue with the congregation, asking the question, “What does baptism say about belonging?” Who belongs?

When Jesus came out of the water after his baptism, the

clouds opened and the voice of God announced, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:21).

Beloved Community has helped me not to despair or surrender to the many divisions I experience daily. Beloved Community provides a vision of the world I aspire to live in. Beloved Community provides a picture of the church I am excited to serve. When hosting block parties, providing affordable housing, or organizing after-school programs for children, I see a glimpse of Beloved Community.

I hope you will consider incorporating “Beloved Community,” reminding ourselves how God sees us and invites us to be God’s people in the world.

Kelly Chatman

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 16, 2022

Isaiah 62:1-5

Psalms 36:5-10

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

Wedding at Cana

I recall the first time I heard someone state the maxim, “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” In preparing for a sermon, I often look for where there might be a crisis in the text. In Luke’s gospel Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are guests at a wedding in Cana and there is a crisis. The wedding celebration is running low of wine. We are not told why Jesus’ mother is on the ready to respond, but she does. She calls on Jesus and the crisis turns into a testimony; a miracle reveals what Jesus can do.

The attention moves from the crisis to God. How is this true in our world today? From the crisis of a pandemic, racial injustice, immigration, voting rights, separate and unequal judicial system, how might we turn our attention from the crisis to God?

Today’s miracle in John 2 is the first of many miracles Jesus will perform during his ministry, but it won’t be his last. It is interesting to note that this crisis/miracle story is not the result of Jesus’ motivation. His mother is the one who invites Jesus (God) into the crisis. Jesus’ response is, “What concern is this crisis to you and me?”

After I graduated from college, I enrolled in seminary. I was disillusioned that my first year in seminary was filled with learning about things that seemed far removed from the action and crisis in the Black community of my origin. I was a Black man in a predominantly White denomination, and I was in crisis.

Jesus’ mother turned to Jesus with the concern that the wedding was running short on wine and would soon run out. Jesus’ response was, “What concern is that to you and me?” I think of Jesus’ question, “What concern is this to you and me?” as a missional question. What concern is it to you, me, and the church if a teenager carries an AR-15 rifle and kills a couple protesters? What concern is it to you, me, and the church if Roe vs Wade is abolished? What concern is it to you, me, and the church if racism and white supremacy continues?

What concern is it to you and me that surrounding our church buildings is a world in crisis? This is the missional challenge to the church. Perhaps there is a missional understanding and strategy in Jesus’ mother—a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. The crisis is our mission and we dare not waste it.

So, you might be reading this and asking, “What does this have to do with me?” My friend, you are asking the right question. You are living in the text and the crisis is not far from you. Have a glass of wine.

Kelly Chatman

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalms 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Engaging the Texts

In the First Lesson, the priest Ezra reads the Law to the people assembled in a Jerusalem rebuilt after their long exile, and their response is to weep—but they are told by their leader, Nehemiah, not to do so, as God wants them to rejoice in God’s favor and to do good to those in need. In Psalm 19, the very “heavens are declaring the glory of God”—in words borrowed by poets again and again. Even the created order preaches a sermon of God’s glory. In the Epistle lesson, Paul tells the church in Corinth that it needs to strive for greater unity of purpose, and compares it to the human body, which has members with different functions, yet a basic indivisible and necessary unity. Finally, in Luke 4:14-21, we have the wonderful and familiar story of Jesus opening the scroll of Isaiah and reading in the synagogue in Nazareth, and the people hearing the (again, very familiar) words are astounded at his teaching, as though they are hearing them for the very first time.

The challenge to the preacher this week is that each of these texts is rich and hard choices will need to be made about one’s focus. The second challenge is that while the First Lesson

and the Gospel are literally and specifically about reading and hearing Scripture, the Psalm and Epistle are metaphorical and present a clear contrast in approach. This will be difficult to bring together into one sermon; choose wisely!

Pastoral Reflections

As often happens, this week the First Lesson and the Gospel are closely coordinated and the Psalm and Epistle less so—but this time Psalm and Epistle sing in counterpoint to the lessons that frame them. Their emphasis is organic: the Psalm draws us out of ourselves to see the whole of Creation as reflecting God; the Epistle pulls us back down to the individual's perception of their own corporeal reality. For those who wish to emphasize the beauty of diversity, these two lessons provide rich material for a nature-affirming, body-affirming rhetorical stance. For those for whom antiracism is a focus, the leap from the Psalm's Creation-centeredness to the body-theology of Paul takes us from the universal to the individual without stopping in the human-created structures of social or economic division. God is in all that is beyond us; God is within each one—but God is not a God of human structures or systems.

It is in the frame provided by the parallel stories from Nehemiah and Luke that the God who is present in all and in each is made present also in the mediation of words and language. In each story, the scriptures are read by a teacher and interpreted. It might be helpful to step back from the obvious parallel that every preacher does the same thing every week, to say instead that it is the unleashing of the power of the message that moves the hearts of the listeners, not the skill of the interpreters. At least that is what these lessons suggest to this writer: that this is not about Ezra or even about Jesus, but the way that, in their reading, the words themselves speak with the power of God. This is always what we hope will happen when we preach; but can we ever get out of the way and just let the words speak for us and for God?

R. Guy Erwin

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 30, 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Engaging the Texts

In the Jeremiah text, God commissions Jeremiah as a prophet, telling him his whole life was leading to this

moment, and giving him the authority to speak God's message with power. In Psalm 71, the intimate connection between God and each person is emphasized, and God is described as a refuge and a protector. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes in beautiful and very familiar language the connection between God's gifts and their purpose—love. (Try to put all those wedding sermons you've preached or heard out of your mind for a bit.) Then, in the Gospel lesson from Luke 4, we hear what happens when Jesus finishes reading from the scroll in the synagogue, his interpretation of Isaiah's words is now too radical—too personal—for the people, and in their reactive anger they threaten Jesus' life.

Pastoral Reflections

In a way that will be familiar to preachers, the First Lesson and Gospel today frame both the duty and the price of preaching an unwelcome truth. Perhaps the more consoling nature of the Psalm and the Epistle reading will help mitigate what otherwise seems like a dangerous business—speaking truth to those who do not want to be changed by what they hear. We will naturally be inclined to point away from ourselves and make these stories more abstractly about “what can happen” when God's truth is given rein to work among proud and stubborn people. But we know it's personal, too—we who preach *are* prophets and teachers, and sometimes prophecy and truth are hard to swallow and may even anger our listeners. So, approach these texts with courage but also care—remember that your gift of proclamation is a gift given by God not just for power, but ultimately for love. The Epistle can help you wrestle with that paradox—that your prophetic words should be powerful, and loving, and fleeting, all at the same time. May God bless you in your preaching.

R. Guy Erwin

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 6, 2022

Isaiah 6:1-8[9-13]

Psalm 138

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Luke 5:1-11

I Want to Queer a Few Things Up about Peter

What does it mean to abandon all you have known, to turn, to truly repent? To look at the course of your life and realize that not only are you headed the wrong way, but time is short. *Incredibly short*. To realize you have wasted your life, that your level of respectability, hard work, learnings, are

useless when revelation comes sauntering up to you. Everything you thought you knew about the way you were doing things may have gotten you to this point, but it's nothing compared to what's right on the other side of the veil.

That's where we find Peter this week. It's strange, to say the least, the Protestant church's current rendering of Peter. We tend to assign things that we find desirable to Western culture to Paul, but hardly ever to Peter. Peter is my hero, you should know, maybe Simon Magus is a tie, but Peter is by far the biblical character, or *corpus* of stories, I find most affirmative. We tend to talk about Peter like a sort of poor, unlettered, completely unworldly dolt who, although faithful, just didn't get it. We treat Peter like a guy who was in the right place at the right time, who only found Jesus because Jesus found him in Nazareth. We treat Peter, his story, and all his accumulated cultural knowledge in the text as *indigenous*; thus, to be ignored until he meets Jesus.

Paul is the convert, the one who learned, changed, *oppressor turned liberator*, monster turned prophet. Even this week all he talks about is resurrection! A missionary's missionary. A pastor's pastor. Hard working, industrious, and tent maker. A pastor so faithful he barely took pay. He's the citizen of the Empire who used the client/patron system of Rome and his own privilege to leverage freedom for many. The man who, although he came from Babylon/Empire, has overcome all that through Christ—even though he never met Christ in person, by his own admission. It's funny to me that the narrative or *corpus* of stories the Protestant church relates to the most is the only other major person in the story to never meet Jesus. Maybe because in Paul we see how he treats Christ, like how we treat all spirituality in Western and White churches. Something we found that has no meaning until we get our hands on it. We treat Paul like he is American. We treat Paul in the text like a reformed *colonizer*.

This manufactured framework to relate to our current reality isn't true. The mainline church needs it to be, but it just isn't. What if we started treating Peter like an accomplished, worldly businessman, an indigenous leader, and most likely from a very important Nazarene family? He is all of this and so much more when he meets Jesus. Could this destabilize this mythos around Paul? One can only pray; I am sure Paul does.

Make no mistake, the worst of who we are comes from this Pauline framework that one can work within the Empire. One that starts with the presupposition that God uses the worst parts of human history to build their Kin-dom. What if that is just untrue?

What if post May 25th, 2020, the day George Floyd died, we are called to walk Peter's arc? To abandon everything we think we know, where we have laid our nets, to bear witness to Love made flesh. To just shut up and follow. To actually bear witness to the trauma, the pain, the real body count piling up

outside our sanctuaries. To divest and refuse to be a part of empire, despite prison, despite the message being given to the enemy at times, liberating even the murder of your teacher, and perhaps to die in a way so ignoble it isn't even recorded?

Not literally to oppress the victims of that trauma, to "get woke," then claim to know more than the original people who brought that teaching into the world. Because you can. Your privilege allows you to move in the world in a way they can't. Always in their name, and for them, of course. The people. You, in your wisdom, and your deep love for the people, decide to make sure you do whatever is necessary to secure a nascent institution's place in the world. I have records older than my denomination, so to pretend to not see the parallels in Paul and modern Christianity is kind of silly, but I digress. That's Paul's arc for better or for worse.

What if bearing witness to the sacrifice of others on the road to your own sacrifice is all that's left of Mother Church? Would that be such a terrible ending to the endowments, coffers, and medical plans?

I know on which side of the boat I will cast my net. I know what I want my net bursting with. I know which way of life I want to abandon and the one I want to pick up. I know the cup I want to drink from. Do you? Whichever you desire, I pray your nets are full of whatever catch you truly seek in the name of the Parent, the Rebel, and the Spirit. +

Lenny Duncan

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany February 13, 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

Shoulder to Shoulder

This text is perhaps the reason why the Gospel of Luke is my favorite Gospel Narrative, this and the depiction of the ubiquitous "beatitudes." All because of the setting. I believe it is one of the most compelling messages the Gospel writers ever gave us.

I'm a theatre kid at heart, and I love a good set.

But first, can we just celebrate being in Year C for a second? Truly the better of the ragged and uber white system we call the RCL. The Revised Common Lectionary, a system that endeavors to answer the question: how many thorny theological issues can you help White moderates avoid in three years of reading the Bible? The answer is a lot. Like A LOT. Like basically every ugly piece of scripture that would actually

make us wrestle with the stories of genocide, the occult in the Bible, oppression, sexual assault, total lack of heteronormative marriage as we know it today, and a host of other fun stuff that apparently my esteemed elders felt wasn't as fun to preach on as I do.

But the authors of Luke ruined that for you, and apparently Constantine couldn't starve Luke-Acts out of the bishops.

If you don't get this joke, then I have some bad news for you about inerrancy.

Which brings us to the "Sermon on the Plain." Not a mount. Not a lawgiver like Moses for a broken people meant to wander. Not the story of the enslaved of Africa being freed. No this is the beginning of the defining theological, political, and sociological narrative for those who would enslave Africans 1500 years later. Teaching these very words to those in bondage, in slavery. Not the false paradigm of law from on high and grace from below.

A sermon on the plain. Not a boat, not words from an unknowable and untouchable power wrapped in a man. Not words dropping from the fount of healing, words known to have wrought miracles that have fed thousands. That may have become brief hushed words of power shared by the early followers of the way, probably memorized in an oral corpus first. Perhaps in times of trouble whispered in hopes of lending you the same strength and heavenly power you saw the teacher display, or heard before he was struck down. Not limiting miracles with the fear that even the Kin-dom can't stop Rome.

A sermon on the plain because you have to let the Patrons who are recording this story through you be taught that Christ was all of those things, and none of those things. The teacher stood shoulder to shoulder with you. Eye to eye. The greatest sermon of the age happened in a way where it was delivered, heard, and received on equal ground. That no one is, or ever will be, more right than that sermon, that moment, that teaching. This almost perfect narrative high point, middle point in the Luke narrative, one-fourth of the Luke-Acts narrative itself, in terms of setting and narratives within the overall story arc. It screams equality. It screams all the things that many of us froth at the mouth about and get progressives all lathered up about.

Equality is the easy take-away.

A harder one is that even if God offered us the power, the teaching, the ability to tap into the Kin-dom of God as equals, we would still murder God for that act. *Specifically, through state-sanctioned, and clergy-ordained, lynching.* At our core we see Love incarnate and it fills us with murderous rage, no matter how much we learn from Love or bear witness to Love Incarnate's power.

It reveals a God come down in the muck and mire with us, on the same level, and sheds all pretense of safety.

It also reveals us, humanity. What we are at our core. We would rip Christ to shreds if he came back. Deicide is our crime against the universe, and we shouldn't forget it.

For clergy, it reveals the danger of standing on the plain, eye to eye with the God of Elijah, the God of Habakkuk, the God of Isaiah, made flesh and clothed in the same vulnerability as ourselves. To see all the cracks, shortcomings, sweat, and shortness of breath in Jesus and the Jesus narrative. It breeds arrogance. The kind of arrogance the other teachers or clergy of Jesus' time display. That's the entire premise for this sermon. Jesus is correcting clergy.

We are the faith leaders in this story, friends, and for that reason alone I weep for us. We are more driven by our fear in this narrative, as embodied by the teachers, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees. It's trite and easy to just think of it as ELCA vs LCMS. Or Episcopalian vs Anglican. **But it works.** Sadducee or Pharisee. Scribe or Essene. I'm sure that for the average poor person trying to approach the temple, radical evil and corrupt clergy all look the same. My point is to the widow bringing her mite, they are in the same basket of deplorables. Doctrinal nuances don't help that. While we should fight with every fiber of our being against the assimilation of the empire, marrying ourselves to the State, the way Caiaphas, the Council of Elders, the Sadducees and the Pharisees did, we should remember that a lot of this stuff is beyond us. That's what Jesus is making so plain to us on the plain. Step off the Mount, pastors, come walk on the plain with your people. They have had leaders and martyrs galore lately. They could just use you. Their neighbor. We are all looking God in the eyes lately right alongside you. *We need you more than ever as we prepare for the world beyond what we have called church.* Come hold our hands. Come stand shoulder to shoulder on the Plain with us.

Lenny Duncan

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany February 20, 2022

Genesis 45:3–11, 15

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Luke 6:27-38

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

While all of these lectionary texts are in the Bible, that isn't sufficient reason to force connections among the three! The preacher's context will determine which text will shape the sermon. Give yourself permission to read only that text in worship, the practice of the Narrative Lectionary.

Genesis 45:3-11, 15. The lectionary intends readers to connect Joseph's mercy to his brothers with Jesus' call not to take revenge in the gospel text. But Joseph's mercy won't make much sense if people don't know at least the contours of the larger story. This is a very dramatic story of family jealousy, parental favoritism, an egocentric young Joseph, cruel older brothers, and a surprise ending. You can't tell this whole story, but tell enough to remind listeners that Joseph has every right to take revenge against his brothers: *How can I get back at them for what they did to me?* But Joseph doesn't retaliate or take revenge; instead, he sees a larger purpose: "...for God sent me before you to preserve life." (45:5)

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50. This pivotal chapter in Paul's letter is a powerful affirmation of Christ's resurrection and ours. But what will our resurrection be like? "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" (v. 35). That isn't only the Corinthians' question; it's our question, too.

I affirming a bodily resurrection, Paul is not advocating a zombie apocalypse. The good news is not the resuscitation of decayed corpses. It is the transformation of the body into a body that has not been corrupted by the powers of sin and death. (Carla Works, *Working Preacher*)

This "transformation of the body" is hard to imagine. While we might argue with Paul about a seed being "dead" when it is planted, the seed imagery can open our imaginations. Picture an acorn. If you plan ahead, you might even give every person an acorn when they come to worship. What does this look like? *A nut that you could eat or a tiny face with a cap.* Does it look like a giant oak tree? *No! It's completely different!* (If there are screens in the sanctuary, an oak tree could appear!) The tree looks nothing like the acorn planted in the ground. There are no leaves on an acorn, no branches you can climb. An acorn can't provide shade on a hot day. That seed has been *transformed* into something completely different. "So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable...It is sown a physical body. It is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (vv. 42, 44). How can this be? Paul explains it this way: "Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living being;' the last Adam became a life-giving spirit...Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (vv. 45, 49).

Luke 6: 27 – 38. These verses are part of Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain." In Luke, mountains are places for prayer (6:12) not for teaching as in Matthew 5 – 7. Jesus begins with a provocative command: "Love your enemies"—not "Love one another" or "Love your neighbor as yourself." That command is repeated in 6:35. Between those brackets, Jesus describes what "Love your enemies" means. None of it is easy. Jesus quotes the "Golden Rule" (also cited by Horace, Seneca,

Tobit, Philo, et al.)⁴—but seems to argue against that familiar rule! What he says is closer to, "Do good to others even if they don't do good to you." Jesus' emphasis here is simple, but seems impossible: Don't retaliate. Don't take revenge. Don't be guided by your enemies' behavior or the behavior of your friends! If you love your friends, that's easy because they'll love you in return. Jesus expects his followers to act like God who is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (6:35b). That is a very big assignment!

Not surprisingly, there was resistance to Jesus' message then, and there is resistance now. This resistance needs to be acknowledged. How does a woman abused by her husband or partner hear Jesus' call to "pray for those who abuse you"? Or more globally, should the U.S. allow Russia to interfere in our elections without any retaliation? Answers are elusive, but the sermon needs to struggle with such questions. In our own time we have seen bold evidence of what Jesus demands: the Civil Rights Movement in our country, especially the non-violent movement championed by Martin Luther King Jr. Today is a good day to include some of Dr. King's words.⁵ In the face of harsh, demeaning treatment and violence, Black students refused to fight back when pulled from lunch counters. Women and men knelt in prayer on the Edmund Pettis Bridge when attacked by dogs and police on horseback. Some people actually followed Jesus' command: "Love your enemies." We've seen it with our own eyes.

Barbara Lundblad

Transfiguration of Our Lord February 27, 2022

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2

Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a]

Engaging the Texts

Many communities, including ancient Israelites, believed that God resides above us in the heavens. For this reason, today's texts look *up*. In the Psalm, God is enthroned above the cherubim, divine beings who occupy the lower realms of the heavens (Ps 99:1). In the narratives, both Moses and Jesus hear the divine voice from their respective moun-

4. Fred Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 90.

5. James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). See especially Part 1 on non-violence, including King's own "pilgrimage to non-violence."

taintops (Exod 34:32; Luke 9:35). Such mountains represent a liminal space—space between the human and divine—described as God’s “footstool” (Ps 99:5, 9). The implication is that God, while exalted, is not absent. God retains a hold and a presence among God’s people here on earth.

Although Moses, Jesus, and his disciples go up their mountains to speak to God, God’s work is done only when they have come back down (Exod 34:29; Luke 9:37). The entire passage from Exodus speaks not directly about Moses’ mountaintop experience, but rather about the gift of the covenant that the people receive after Moses has descended from the mountain. The encounter at the top of the mountain is a means to an end—bearing God’s promise to God’s people.

As soon as Jesus and his disciples descend their mountain, Luke contrasts the disciples’ silence about their mountaintop experience (Luke 9:36) with public acknowledgment of God’s greatness as it is displayed by Jesus in the healing of a child (Luke 9:37-43a). At first glance, this optional addition may appear unrelated, but when read together with Moses’ delivery of the covenant, it reenforces the continuity of God’s promise to God’s people. By healing the child, Jesus demonstrates the authority bestowed upon him on the mountain (Luke 9:35).

Paul also describes appropriate response to the revelation of God’s glory as engaging in ministry (2 Cor 4:1) and commending oneself “to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God” (2 Cor 4:2). Simply put, God does not wait idly on mountaintops retaining all glory and justice for God’s self. God sends servants to bring that glory to all the earth. This is the promise of the covenant, and it is the good news of the gospel that Jesus embodies. However, as Paul alludes, it is not always so easily received.

The silence that Jesus and his disciples keep following their encounter on Mount Tabor may be compared to the veil that Moses wears after he descends from Mount Sinai. In each case the divine revelation is delivered, but with some distance retained, although such distancing is not commanded by God (contrast Mark 9:9; Matt 17:9). Without the veil, the people are afraid to approach Moses (Exod 34:30). On the mountain, Jesus’ disciples react with confusion and fear (Luke 9:33, 35). At root in both instances is a struggle to overcome the liminal space that divides the human from the divine.

Paul interprets this struggle, at least in the case of Exodus, as a hardening of minds (2 Cor 3:14). In the exodus, the veil was used by Moses as a tool toward relaying God’s covenant most effectively. However, in Corinth, Paul observes a continued struggle with receiving God’s message. Since his last visit, new teachers have come, causing confusion and fear over how to understand God’s covenant and Jesus’ role within it. Therefore, using a Jewish form of interpretation known as midrash, Paul reinterprets the story of the giving of the

covenant. Midrashic interpretation does not refute original meanings of texts, but rather adds new layers of meanings for new contexts. Paul thus reappropriates the image of the veil in the original story to represent the obstacles the Corinthians were presently experiencing (2 Cor 3:14), proclaiming that in Christ this veil is set aside (2 Cor 3:14). In this way, Christ becomes the bridge through confusion for the Corinthians, just as the veil had been the bridge through fear for the Israelites.

The important message is not about who is confused or afraid or why—Jesus’ disciples model both emotions quite heartily and yet continue to strive toward the gospel ministry. Therefore, Christians must be cautious in reading Paul’s words as some sort of suggestion that Jews, whether today or in Paul’s time, are in anyway uniquely separated from God or God’s covenant. To the extent that this is true, it is true of all people. Rather, the message is that God works to bridge the distance between God’s self and God’s people—whatever separates us. In Psalm 99, mountains bridge worship; in Exodus, a veil alleviates fears; in Luke, Jesus heals; and for Paul, Christ brings freedom.

Pastoral Reflections

Mountaintop experiences are often equated with moments of clarity, beauty, or exhilaration. As a college student, I vividly remember climbing to the top of Victoria Falls, walking across cascading waters, and feeling just a little bit closer to heaven. The words to Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” formed the soundtrack of my mind as the beauty of God’s creation overtook me.

Over twenty years later, the beauty and serenity of that moment remain, but what stands out to me now is that Louis Armstrong wasn’t singing about mountain peaks, or at least, not *only* about them. He was singing about all the moments in between: days *and* nights, the rose *after* it blooms, babies who grow *and* learn, and the ordinary moments of friends and strangers passing on the streets.

Mountaintop experiences can offer revelation. They can filter the divine. They can give us, for just a moment, hope or clarity for the journey. But the *wonder* of the world, the unerring promise that God gives to the world, is in the journey itself. The disciples may not have voiced what they experienced on that mountaintop right away, but it shaped them. It sustained them to do the ministry Jesus gave them to do, just as Moses’ veil strengthened the Israelites to receive and keep the covenant that God gave to them. In the high moments, in the low moments, and in every moment in between, God is present, God is with us, God is meeting us where and how we need God to be.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Ash Wednesday March 2, 2022

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Engaging the Texts (That Say Nothing about Ashes)

None of the Ash Wednesday texts talk about ashes. In fact, Jesus' words in Matthew seem to argue *against* the public display of ashes. Alms giving, praying, and fasting are to be done in secret where only God sees them. "But when you fast put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others, but by your Father, who is in secret..." (Matt 6:17-18a).

Joel 2 offers themes that connect more closely to the beginning of the Lenten journey. "Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." These words replace "Alleluia" as prelude to the gospel in many congregations on the Sundays in Lent. We may have sung them so often we no longer think much about them. "Return to the Lord your God for..." For what and why? The prophet could have followed that word *for* with many different endings...

...for you haven't been to church in a long time

...for you might die tonight

...for if you don't, you'll be sorry

But what the prophet chose was very different: "Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." (See "Preaching Helps" in *Currents*, January 2020 for more on the Joel text.)

Isaiah 58 is a favorite passage for many pastors. What does it mean to repent and return to God? According to Isaiah such a return is not passive. In a tongue-twister question, God asks, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?" (Isa 58:6) Questions also frame the next verse: "Is it not to share your bread...to cover the naked and not hide from your own kin?" God knows the answer to these questions and suggests we should know them, too. God doesn't expect this active repentance to be done in secret! Isaiah 58 offers tangible pictures of the repentance we plead for in Psalm 51.

A key verse of 2 Corinthians can be lifted up as a repeated refrain: "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor 6:2b) That verse could be part of a litany naming broken places in our own communities and our own lives with the response: "Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!"

Pastoral Reflection on the Ashes

Rather than preaching directly on any of the appointed texts, consider preaching on what the ashes mean to those who receive them. Here are a few stories; you will have more from your own setting.

In Brooklyn after 9/11, pastors carefully gathered ashes that covered church steps and fire escapes. Their churches were across the East River from the World Trade Center towers. They had seen the great cloud of ash and smoke when the towers collapsed. The ashes were carried across the river. Paper turned to ash along with desks, telephones, conference tables, art work, everything turned to ash. People, too. The pastors carefully scooped up the ashes and put them in jars or boxes. "We can use them in February."

The two young boys poked each other in the pew. "You go first." "No, you go first." They were certain the ashes were remains (even though they didn't know that word). They thought the ashes came from people and they were afraid to get in the line. One of them remembered that time at the cemetery when the minister sprinkled dirt on the casket and said something about "ashes to ashes." The line was winding down. They finally got up. They felt the smudge on their foreheads. "Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return." They ran down to the men's bathroom and scrubbed their faces. "That's what Jesus said we should do!" one of them said laughing. The other boy looked confused and kept rubbing his head until the cross was gone.

Advent Lutheran is on 93rd and Broadway in Manhattan. I was part of the pastoral team while teaching at Union and on Ash Wednesday all the clergy signed up to help from 9:00 in the morning until after the evening service. People lined up all day, sometimes just a couple, more at lunch time. Most of those who came during the day were not members at Advent. Some appeared to be homeless. Some wore suits and ties. I sensed that some of those in line were surprised to see two women priests. No matter. It was the ashes they wanted. Tangible. Touchable. Visible on the #1 train. Protection, maybe, or assurance of forgiveness. They stayed in line.

In November 2021 a wonderful man from our congregation was killed in a terrible car crash, killed by a driver without a license going 103 miles an hour. Dan was on his way to work as a pediatric physician, beloved by patients and medical staff. And especially beloved by his wife, Rachel, and their three children under the age of ten. Rachel and our pastors planned Dan's funeral service. Psalm 90 was one of the readings: "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations... You turn us back to dust and say, 'Turn back, mortals.' For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past..." Rachel wrote short introductions to all the readings including these words before we heard Psalm 90: "I want the kids to hear about Dan becoming dust again... to remember how

small we are in the universe and establishing the work of our hands! That has Dan written all over it.”

This is a day or night when stories and images may be more meaningful than explanations. You are the best curator of those stories. Blessed Ash Wednesday to you.

Barbara Lundblad

First Sunday in Lent March 6, 2022

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Liturgically, Christians stand today on a precipice overlooking the season of Lent, hearing its steady cadence calling us into a winding journey of lament and uplift, misery and mercy, birth and baptism, restraint and redemption. In reality, we’ve visited these pathways before, *AND* this lap around is different, having experienced new delta and micron variants, new deaths and verdicts, an unexpected wallop setting us down, and an unforeseen love liberating us. The texts on this First Sunday in Lent bring into focus the identity and actions of “the Lord your God.”

In *Luke*, as he is plunged into the wilderness and temptation, Jesus answers the question, “Who is the Lord your God?” In the first, brick-to-bread temptation, the Lord is cast as the new Moses as Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8, which more fully says, “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” The Lord, then, is the one who makes people alive—people live by the word of the Lord. Temptation two: for the honor of having Jesus worship him, the devil would give Jesus dominion over all depths and heights and expanses of the world. But Jesus declines, for who is the Lord your God but the only one worthy of worship and a life of service. Now atop his own precipice—the pinnacle of the temple—Jesus resists the third temptation, knowing God to be the one in whom we place trust upon trust. Then the temptations are in recess “until an opportune time.” What defines an *opportune* time? It is that time when Jesus may be less fit, focused, and clear about the question at hand: who is the Lord your God? Rooted in Moses’ tradition and quoting Deuteronomy, Jesus seems unlikely to waver on remembering the *Shema* and knowing God when he lies down and when he rises.

In *Romans*, Paul offers a distinctly Christian answer to “Who is the Lord your God?” “Jesus is Lord,” he professes.

And who is this Lord Jesus but the one to defy death and the grave, alone worthy to receive confessions of faith. Jesus inspires belief from the heart and acts to redeem a world in need. Your congregation also makes professions in many ways about who the Lord is. What has your building, or community engagement, or hospitality said? In the future what will your bulletins, or relationships, or members reveal about who the Lord your God is?

The voice of *Deuteronomy*, coming across the ages from the sixth century BCE, declares who the Lord your God is: God, whom we worship and adore, is the faithful one. God keeps promises, attends to human plight, and provides home and safety for those who have known what it is to be outsiders. At least this is the story from the perspective of the ones who got the land.

It is important, though, to listen to conquest texts like this one and to follow the lead of indigenous people who know how to tell the story from the perspective of those from whom land was stolen. This listening is especially important because churches have been complicit in oppression of indigenous people in North America for more than half a millennium.

Robert Allen Warrior, in his excellent and oft-quoted article, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today,” writes “The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the promised land. ...And, it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation” (22). Can you stand with Warrior and dare to look at conquest narratives, asking questions from the perspectives of Canaanite people? Religious historian Pekka Pitkänen details patterns of “Settler Colonialism in Ancient Israel” and describes it as a particular colonial form where settlers come to stay and set up dominant, enduring political systems. Settler Colonialism is not limited to Ancient Israel, rather it has been historic practice in the North American lands on which we worship. In 2021, the ELCA made confession in a “Declaration to American Indian and Alaska Native People:” “We confess that we, as a church with European and immigrant roots, have benefited from and perpetrated settler colonialism.” It also acknowledges that “the Doctrine of Discovery created a theological framework that supported racism, colonialism, and the annihilation of Indigenous people. Today it continues to support those evils and injustices found in our church, U.S. law, and legal interpretation.” On this day our pericopes bring forth a conquest narrative to join Robert Warrior who invites a reading of conquest stories as narratives that compel “Christian involvement in Native American activism” (Warrior, 24).

But how?

Can your assembly commit to beginning to know your congregation’s or your denomination’s history in relation

to Indigenous people and lands? Might you begin building authentic, mutual relationships with Indigenous people in your area? Could you begin researching how to think about and write a land acknowledgement?

How might preachers be able to center Canaanites in hermeneutics and current Indigenous populations in ministry today? How do annihilated or assimilated people or lands come to have voice in your preaching? How can you participate alongside and follow the lead of those whose struggle has been exploited, diminished, silenced, killed, or impoverished?

Jan Schnell Rippentrop

Second Sunday in Lent March 13, 2022

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17--4:1

Luke 13:31-35

The Lord is my light and my salvation,
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life,
of whom shall I be afraid?

—Psalm 27:1

Chicken-Hearted

“**N**o prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown” (Luke 4:24). We heard Jesus make this announcement just a few weeks ago in his inaugural sermon to the people in his hometown, Nazareth, synagogue. It infuriated them sufficiently to want to kill him then and there. Today Jesus reminds us of the opposition that God’s prophets have always and will always face. Israel of old and God’s people of all times and places have always insisted on hearing words of comfort and reassurance from their prophets. The people agreed with the prophets’ job description as “comforting the afflicted,” but “afflicting the comfortable”? Not so much. They hearkened to what Paul calls for in our second reading “the god of their bellies,” the god of their appetites and perceived “needs”—“setting their minds on earthly things,” as Paul put it. (v. 19).

Jesus must have had his prophetic forbears in mind that day as a group of Pharisees came to warn him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you!” What is Jesus’ response? It’s a perhaps foolhardy pronouncement with more than an edge of defiance as he begins, “Go and tell that fox for me...” In Greek literature, as in Aesop’s famous fables, the fox was a legendarily sly and cunning animal that head-lined stories like the one we may know best, “The Fox and the Grapes.” But for

Jews of Jesus’ day the fox was simply a mangy, sneaky varmint that attacked defenseless barnyard animals.

In other words, Jesus is using no term of endearment here to compliment Herod on his cleverness. Rather he meant something like “Go and tell your puny puppet-king, your mangy, sneaky, tin-pot despot, that I have a much larger purpose to perform than his veiled threats of violence can ever hope to deter. “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’” In other words, my kingdom-agenda is too full of what my *abba* has given me to do than to worry about political fall-out, although, he adds ominously, I know that the earthly horizon of my ministry is looming ever closer.

And so, with a portentous nod to Israel’s prophets of old, Jesus adds: “Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem” (vv. 32-33).

Immediately follows what I find to be among the most hauntingly pathetic words of lament in all of scripture, as Jesus expresses his frustration-tinged grief: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!”—words as true today as in Jesus’ day. Then, picking up on his allusion to Herod as a fox, Jesus utters these most poignantly evocative words, cast in the optative mood of wistful, might-have-beens, of oh-if-only possibilities: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (v. 34). Or as the old RSV translation puts it in stark simplicity, “But you would not!”

Sheltering under the wings of God is a favorite image in Israel’s psalmody as in next week’s Psalm 63:7 where the psalmist sings, “in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.” This is one of the richest (as well as gender-bending) images of God in all of scripture in which Jesus reveals to us the very heart of God, the pulsating source of the kingdom’s ethic. And please notice that Jesus is not using the image of a lion’s heart or that of an eagle or a warrior. Instead, he chooses to flout convention and invokes that far softer and gentler feminine image of a mother hen defending her chicks by gathering them under her wings defensively against the invasion of the marauding fox, defending to the death, with her own life, her loved ones. Chicken-hearted indeed!

This is at the very heart of who our God is, a vulnerable mother-hen God become incarnate in Jesus, willing and able to give his life for the sake of his little ones, including his tormentors and executioners. Our Gospel reading ends with these all too prophetic words of Jesus, “And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord’” (v. 35). We know when that will be, don’t we? It will be on Palm/Passion Sun-

day when, beginning at the very entrances of our churches, we will play the part of Jesus' disciples and the crowd who will welcome Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, waving our palm branches and shouting our hosannas.

We're fortunate that a newer Filipino hymn is available to us using the image of the mother hen that sings: "When twilight comes and the sun sets,/mother hen prepares for night's rest./ As her brood shelters under her wings,/ she gives the love of God to her nest./ Oh! What joy to feel her warm heartbeat/ and be near her all night long;/ so the young can find repose,/ then renew tomorrow's song." (ELW #566).

John Rollefson

Third Sunday in Lent March 20, 2022

Isaiah 55:1–9

Psalm 63:1–8

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

Luke 13:1–9

Because your steadfast love is better than life
my lips will praise you.
—Psalm 63:3

An Incommensurable God

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). These words from Isaiah 55 were among those I chose to have read at my ordination going on fifty years ago, sensing that they were words that I and the congregation I was called to serve in inner city San Francisco needed to hear. This is the good news of God's “incommensurability,” to use a big, fifty-dollar word which my dictionary defines as “the state of not being able to be measured or compared by the same standard or measure.”

We humans, as our Gospel reading illustrates, simply cannot stand in judgment of God and God's ways by the “measure of our minds,” as the old hymn sings. It's just as J.B. Phillips provocatively titled his little book of half a century ago, *Your God is Too Small*, meaning that any human effort to define or describe God, including the work of the brightest and best of our theologians, always runs the danger of making God merely a projection onto the screen of the universe of our human desires and aspirations, creating a God in our own image as Nietzsche and Feuerbach and Freud all claimed we do. For our human proclivity since Adam and Eve, and especially under the tutelage of the ancient Greeks, is to make

humanity the measure of all things.

And so, we find Jesus in today's Gospel turning aside the speculations of those seeking an opinion from him regarding the age-old question of theodicy: how are we to reconcile God's goodness with the evil we experience in the world while maintaining that God is somehow just? Two cases in point are brought to Jesus' attention. The first involved what God's intentions may have been in allowing the massacre of “the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices.” Jesus preempts their question by posing the issue for them: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Then he offers a second example: what about “those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Both seem to have been current events that might have been reported on the Capernaum Evening News. “No, I tell you,” Jesus declares definitively, adding the seeming non-sequitur, “But unless you repent, you will perish just as they did” (vv. 1–5).

Jesus here utterly repudiates our human penchant for standing in judgment of God by creating some kind of clever theodicy that explains how God's justice is supposed to work. Instead of playing God, Jesus, in effect, is recommending that we take these troubling catastrophes as opportunities to repent, to undergo life-change while we still can. To know good and evil as God knows them, Adam and Eve learned in the garden, is not possible for human beings.

But if the incommensurability of God and humanity is the truly good news of Isaiah 55 which we find Jesus endorsing in our Gospel reading, it's the following words extending beyond today's reading that really give us hope in the face of our chronic human failure and grant us the God-given patience to wait upon the working out of God's will in our world. It's the assurance of God's promise, “so shall my Word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (vv. 10–11).

This was just the sort of reassurance that I as a fledgling pastor, all too aware of my own disabilities, needed to hear so long ago—and be reminded of daily ever since: that God's Word is to be depended upon to accomplish what God has in mind. Not my bright ideas, not our church members' commitment, not appealing programs—not even finally our own faith, a peculiarly Lutheran heresy. None of these, I've come to think, are guarantees to our success as “church.” Our task is to stay healthily rooted in God's Word, as the Spirit gives us the power and humility to get ourselves and our priorities out of the way, allowing God's Word to have its way with us.

As Paul promised the Corinthian church, “God is faithful and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with

the testing will provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (v. 13). Enduring our own persistent tendencies to play God is certainly one of those trials! “As Rain from the Clouds” (ELW #508) begins with a tuneful paraphrasing of Isaiah 55 and then moves on to reference the parable of the sower. Or contact me to obtain a copy of my own hymn inspired by this text, sung to the tune of King’s Weston.

John Rollefson

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 27, 2022

Joshua 5:9–12

Psalms 32

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32

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

—Psalm 31:1

Prodigal Graciousness

Today’s Gospel reading is not the story of a warm and fuzzy God we so often take it to be. It’s a story that rubs our religious noses in the offense of God’s extravagant, prodigal (and yes, incommensurable!) graciousness that trespasses against our human sense of justice.

This is the third of three parables Luke narrates in his fifteenth chapter, following his odd stories of the “lost sheep” and the “lost coin” that both end on the note of sheer delight of the lost being found. But this third story is both the longest and most detailed parable found in the New Testament. Superficially it may seem to simply repeat Jesus’ point about the joy of welcoming repentant sinners back into the fold for it, too, ends with the central figure throwing a party and rejoicing at finding the lost. But oh, how subversive a tale this really turns out to be. For Jesus has set his hearers up to undermine our understanding of true repentance by laying bare just what it is that makes the welcoming of sinners so difficult for us good religious folk—especially the “offense of grace,” the seeming unfairness of God’s extravagantly amazing welcome to sinners. Germans have coined a combination noun, “*schadenfreude*,” to describe the “malicious glee” we sometimes feel over another’s misfortune—especially someone close to us—as if we think they have it coming, and then, in turn, the resentment we feel if such a person is forgiven (or even rewarded!) without paying the price for their restoration.

We’re used to calling this story “The Prodigal Son,” but maybe you noticed that Jesus carefully begins his story, “There was a man who had two sons . . . (v. 11). This is a

story, we’re meant to see, about two sons, not just the younger who seems to get all the attention both on the part of the story-teller and the father. The over-the-top prodigal welcome of the indulgent father to his wayward son—who in effect had treated his father as already dead in demanding his share of his inheritance while his father was still living—is often treated as the parable’s main plot emphasizing the father’s long-suffering and forgiving welcome home to the sorry but not clearly repentant, wayward son. The genius of the story, however, is the way in which the stay-at-home son is depicted at the story’s denouement, hearing the music and dancing of the prodigal’s party as he returns from work in the fields. Only then he learns from one of the slaves what was going on. Apparently, his father had not even bothered to inform him of his brother’s return and invite him to the party. Well might he have become “angry and refused to go in,” even when his father “began to plead with him,” (v 28) finally remembering that he was the father of two sons after all. The father’s failure to anticipate the elder, second son’s jealous sensitivities is astounding, even “prodigal” perhaps.

And that’s the point I want to emphasize in this reading of the story, perhaps made even more poignant when one considers the likelihood of Luke’s redactor’s role in re-telling Jesus’ story of the two sons in communities in which the continuing resistance to much of the “elder brother” community of Jews to the message of the Gospel of Jesus was an on-going reality for the followers of the Way. Hear the father’s final plea to the older son in this light: “Child, (a better translation than the NRSV’s “son”) you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice—we just “had to” —because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (vv. 25–32). End of story.

But, of course, it remains an open-ended story. Will the older son repent of his self-righteousness and resentment, however “justified”? Will the younger son really turn around and clean up his act and genuinely “repent”? Will they all be “reconciled” with one another, as Paul speaks of in our second reading? We don’t know. But we do know that the prodigal father won’t give up on either of them. As Jesus once said, what is impossible for us is possible for God. And we know too that, as Paul put it to the Corinthians, we are called to be “ambassadors” (v. 20) of this very same “reconciling” and “prodigal” love of God. “Amazing Grace” (ELW #779) is, of course, a great and obvious choice for hymn of the day. But even better is the oldie but goodie “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling” (ELW #608) with its plaintive refrain, “You who are weary, come home . . . O sinner, come home!” extending the prodigal father’s invitation to all of us in our jealousy, *schadenfreude*, and pious resentment of God’s taking us for granted.

John Rollefson

Fifth Sunday in Lent

April 3, 2022

Isaiah 43:16–21

Psalm 126

Philippians 3:4b–14

John 12:1–8

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

–Psalm 126:4

Always the Poor

Today we find Jesus at table with his friends in Bethany, celebrating with a meal—perhaps celebrating Lazarus’ astonishing return to life at Jesus’ hands. While Martha was serving the meal, her sister Mary begins to act in a rather bizarre manner. Suddenly she starts pouring an inordinate amount of costly perfume over Jesus’ feet and then begins to wipe them with her hair. I’ve been a guest at some pretty strange dinner parties in my day, but I’ve never seen anything approaching this. More to the point, I don’t think Jesus’ table companions had either. Had Mary become unhinged at her brother’s death and suddenly loopy at his surprising resuscitation by Jesus? Try to imagine the emotional roller-coaster Mary had been on.

It’s striking that this story is a piece of the traditions about Jesus that apparently stuck in the craw of the early church, for all four evangelists tried their hand at retelling the story, each in his own way. The details differ (which we haven’t space to discuss here) but three of the four, including John, preserve not only the story of the woman’s anointing but also the memory of the angry reprimand she received for performing this strange act. Today’s reading puts the rebuke in the mouth of Judas (whom John calls a “thief,” suggesting we think of him as the original church treasurer gone bad) who asks testily: “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” (v 5).

But to Judas Jesus responds: “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial” (v 7). Which doesn’t quite explain why Mary “jumped the gun,” so to speak, in anointing Jesus but certainly does serve to send a shiver of recognition up our collective spines. For as the other accounts make a bit clearer, this is an act anticipating Jesus’ impending death and burial where other women disciples will come to the tomb, some of the traditions say, intending to anoint his dead body, but instead become the first witnesses to the news of his resurrection including Mary of Magdala who tradition sometimes identifies as the Mary of this pre-crucifixion anointing. John Adams’ stunning oratorio “The Other Mary” offers an imaginative merging of these stories.

But that’s not all Jesus has to say in his rebuke of Judas’

criticism of Mary’s lavish anointing. For he also responds to Judas’ caviling at Mary’s wasting money that could have been given to the poor by adding the resonant words found also in similar form in two other accounts, “You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (v 8). We can be excused for finding this part of Jesus’ retort a bit chilly, Jesus being a person who time and again we know in the Gospels to have taken the part of the poor and outcast. Could he really be so uncharacteristically callous here as to be saying, as I’m afraid people have too often taken him to mean, “The poor? Oh, there will always be the poor—you can’t do anything about that—don’t worry about the poor!”

That doesn’t sound at all like Jesus’ voice to me. Rather here, I think it’s Mark’s version of the story that comes to the rescue of John’s unusual terseness. For Mark’s Jesus says, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me” (Mark 14:7). You’ll never lack opportunity to show care for the poor, Jesus is saying, for in your kind of world there will always be poor folks needing your help and advocacy. Your criticizing her for her lavish act of worship and thanksgiving in anointing me is bad faith. For you can and should show kindness to the poor whenever you can—and God knows there are more opportunities than you will ever respond to. She’s done what she could and, as Mark’s Jesus goes on to say portentously, “Truly I tell you, whenever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (14:9). For the Gospel is, after all, “good news for the poor” as we remember from Jesus’ inaugural sermon and his mother Mary’s “Magnificat.”

It’s a false dichotomy that we in the church too often assume between worship and service, between spirituality and social justice, between the vertical and the horizontal calls to discipleship, as we will soon find Jesus reminding his disciples when he takes up a basin of water and a towel and begins to wash his disciples’ feet. This is the “new thing” of which Isaiah prophesies in our Hebrew scripture reading for today, where Israel is reminded by *YHWH* that they are “the people for whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise” (vv. 19, 21), that “new thing” Paul speaks of in our second reading that God has done, that act of “cosmic novelty” we know as Jesus’ resurrection that gives us all a stake in God’s promised future.

A hymn that sings well of this message is “When the Poor Ones” (ELW #725).

John Rollefson