Preaching Helps

New Year's Day through
the Season of Lent, 2023
January 1, 2023 — March 26, 2023
First Sunday of Christmas to
the Fifth Sunday of Lent

Is Preaching Part of Liturgy?

This issue of *Currents* focuses on worship, especially how worship has adapted to Covid-Time when congregations gathered on computer screen rather than in the church building. Some pastors preached in the church sanctuary, vested and trying to see the invisible people beyond the empty pews. Others preached from home, perhaps seated at a table in their dining room. The sermon was closer to a fireside chat, from one home to another. Preachers had an easier time than choir directors or other music leaders. Choir members couldn't be together to sing, neither could the congregation. Would congregants sing from home, muted so there wouldn't be a cacophony of sound? The trickiest job was technical: Will worship be on Zoom or YouTube? Will the service be streamed live or recorded ahead of time? Can we afford to update our technology? Who will operate the camera and check the sound? There were thousands of technical difficulties. Perhaps preaching was the easiest job of all.

But preaching isn't a "job" separate from liturgy, is it? We know the parts of the communion service, no matter which musical setting: *Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending.* (At least that's how Lutherans talk in our latest worship book.) Preaching is part of *Word* which also includes the reading of scripture, hymn of the day, creed, prayers of intercession and the peace—with variations from one congregation to another.

When I taught at Union Theological Seminary, we were stubbornly insistent that MDiv students see preaching and worship as an organic whole, rather than separate entities. Students were required to take a course titled, "Introduction to Worship and Preaching." Perhaps it should have simply been called "Introduction to Worship" (including preaching)! We hoped the congregation would go out singing the sermon. We wanted the Confession and Forgiveness to echo themes of the scripture texts. Did it work? Sometimes the services students planned were woven together to form an organic whole; other services unraveled into disconnected pieces. Hopefully, some memories of the class continue to guide students who are now parish pastors.

One Union alum who graduated before this required course was offered shared a particular worship experience on Facebook. He was unabashedly honest in describing what happened one Sunday when he preached. Near the end of his sermon, he told a very moving story about a tragic farm accident: his grandfather's sleeve got caught in the corn picker. He managed to free his arm, but lost his hand. (Growing up on a farm, I knew such accidents were far too common.) Following the sermon, after hearing that sad story about the preacher's grandfather, the congregation stood up to sing, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Are you laughing? Or groaning? I must admit that I laughed when I read his post on Facebook years ago. But it's no laughing matter when a chosen hymn contradicts the sermon. I know that many preachers sit down with musicians and other worship leaders to plan the whole service, sometimes looking ahead to a whole season. Those of us who preach may feel that the sermon is the center piece of worship. You may remember worshipping in a congregation where the lights dimmed and an overhead spot illumined the pulpit and the preacher. Hopefully, preachers will not be waiting for the spotlight, but will get up to preach believing their words are woven with other words and music, all woven together in praise of God. *Soli deo gloria.*

I am grateful to each writer for this issue of Preaching Helps. Some are first-timers while others are familiar names on these pages. **Ali Ferin** serves as one of the pastors for the good people at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Ali is a graduate of Iowa State University and Luther Seminary. When she's not at church causing a holy ruckus, she can be found clutching her coffee cup and soaking up the beautiful (and brutal) long days of parenting little ones with her spouse. **Brad Froslee** also serves as a pastor at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Brad grew up on a farm near Vining, Minnesota, and studied at St. Olaf College and Harvard Divinity School. He is passionate about preaching, worship, and prophetic witness. He enjoys spending time with his husband and son, traveling, and working on genealogy and poetry projects. **Samantha Gilmore** is the Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. She holds a PhD in Practical Theology (Homiletics) focusing on Speech Communication in Ministry from Princeton Theological Seminary. On April 28, 2010, Samantha was baptized at Trinity Lutheran College after hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed. She is overjoyed to be a part of this foolish means through which God freely gives people the gospel and transforms lives. **Mark S. Hanson**, ELCA presiding bishop emeritus (2001-2013), also served as President of the Lutheran World Federation (2003-2010). Previously he served as bishop of the Saint Paul Area Synod and was pastor at three different Minneapolis congregations. He currently serves as Senior Fellow with the Interfaith Insti-

tute at Augsburg University. His primary calling is to support Ione who resides in memory care. They have six children and six grandchildren. **Melanie Heuiser Hill** lives and writes and occasionally preaches in the Minneapolis area. In addition to being an ELCA pastor, she is an author of children's books: the novel *Giant Pumpkin Suite* and the picture book *Around The Table That Grandad Built*, both published by Candlewick Press. You can see more of what she's up to on her website: MelanieHeuiserHill.com. A native of Decatur, Georgia, **Ron Luckey** received degrees from Lenoir-Rhyne University, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and Lexington Theological Seminary. After forty years in pastoral ministry in congregations and on a university campus, he retired at the end of 2012. For decades, he has been deeply involved in faith-based justice ministry both locally and nationally with a special emphasis on assisting clergy to read and preach scripture through the lens of the marginalized in society. He and his wife, Pacita, a retired public-school teacher, live in Lexington, Kentucky, and have four grown children and seven grandchildren. **Heidi Neumark** is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan and executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth and young adults. Her previous experiences in congregational and community ministry shaped her first book, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx.* Her book *Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory and Faith* is about her discovery of Jewish roots and her grandfather's death in a concentration camp. You're invited to read more of Heidi's wonderful insights on her blog at hneumark.com. **Jackson Reynolds** is a Master of Divinity student at Princeton Theological Seminary, seeking ordination in Word and Sacrament through the Northeastern Iowa Synod of the ELCA. Graduating from Wartburg College and spending a year studying at Wartburg Theological Seminary, he came to feel very much at home in the Lutheran tradition. He currently works and is doing his field education at Abiding Presence Lutheran Church in Ewing, New Jersey. **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. **Blake Scalet** is currently in his tenth year serving as pastor of Saint John's Lutheran Church in Summit, New Jersey. A native of rural Illinois, he is a graduate of Valparaiso University, Yale Divinity School, and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. He has been a contributor to the annual worship resource *Sundays and Seasons.*

Thanks to all these writers who wrote during the last days of Ordinary Time looking ahead to Epiphany and Lent.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, Preaching Helps

[***Note to readers:*** ELCA worship resources lift up January 1 as "Name of Jesus" Sunday. Once in seven years, January 1 falls on a Sunday. This means there are two other options for texts this year: New Year's Day and First Sunday of Christmas. We have included all three options for this Sunday.]

Name of Jesus
January 1, 2023

Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 8
Galatians 4:4-7
Luke 2:15-21

Engaging the Texts

No doubt you have noticed that the Gospel for this Sunday repeats six verses you probably preached on for Christmas—so you may choose one of the other options instead. But it's a shame to miss the one verse that is the particular focus for this Sunday: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Luke 2:21).

While Jesus' birth was framed by Roman rulers Augustus and Quirinius (Luke 2:1-2), Jesus' life after birth was framed not by Rome, but by Jewish texts and traditions. The rite of circumcision goes back to the Torah, a physical mark to set God's people apart from the nations (Gen 17:11-12, Lev 12:3).[1] Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day—a new creation marking him as part of the Jewish people. He was named Jesus, a form of *Yehoshua (*Joshua) meaning "the Lord saves." This was not only the name given to Mary by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1: 31), but a well-known name in Jewish history: Joshua, successor to Moses, who led the people of Israel into the promised land. This one verse makes it clear: this eight-day-old baby named Jesus is a Jewish child. Jesus was circumcised as a Jew, raised by Jewish parents and remained a Jew throughout his life.

The First Reading for this Sunday is from Numbers 6. This chapter describes the requirements for a nazarite. Was

1. Jewish feminists have protested that this rite excludes women and have sought alternative or additional rites that are gender inclusive.

Jesus a nazarite? Matthew claims that the holy family's return to Nazareth after exile in Egypt was to fulfill the prophecy: "He will be called a Nazorean." But that seems different from the description of nazarites in Numbers 6. For one thing, the vow stipulates that "…[a nazarite] shall not go near a corpse" (Num 6:6). But Jesus not only went near corpses; he touched corpses and brought some back to life. The intriguing thing about this pericope is the inclusion of the last verses of Numbers 6, words most Christians hear at the close of worship:

> The Lord bless you and keep you;
>
> The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
>
> The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. (6:24-26)

Christians did not create this blessing; we inherited it from our Jewish siblings. To use Paul's image, we Gentiles have been "grafted" into the living tree of God's people (Rom 11: 17-24). What then happens to the Jews? They remain God's people, as Paul says: "…as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:28b-29). Those of us who follow the one named Jesus dare not revoke God's irrevocable gifts and calling to the Jewish people.

Pastoral Reflections

Luther's essay *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* sounds like it could be part of a sermon on Luke 2: 21:

> When we are inclined to boast of our position we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord. Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood, the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are, as St. Paul says in Romans 9[:5].[2]

It's too bad Luther didn't stop there. Though he honors the Jewish people in this passage, his main goal was to convert Jews to Christianity. Twenty years later, Luther's anger when Jews didn't convert, led him to write a deadly essay, *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543).

In those pages Luther urged terrible acts of condemnation against the Jews: set fire to their synagogues or schools, destroy their houses, take away their prayer books and Talmudic writings, forbid their rabbis to teach, and the list goes on. This treatise was used by the Nazis to support their murderous oppression of the Jews.

Since World War II and the *Shoah,* Lutherans have felt a particular responsibility and burden to condemn the hateful writings of Luther:

> In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear [Luther's] name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews…In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation in our day of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred and incitement to violence toward Judaism and the Jewish people.[3]

New Year's Day is a good time to lift up this important statement. It's only a single page and could be inserted in the bulletin. Anti-Semitism remains a dangerous demonic force in our country and across the world. White supremacists chanted "Jews will not replace us!" in Charlottesville in 2017. In 2018 there were anti-Semitic incidents in all but four states in the U.S. What's happening in the state where you preach? The ELCA website includes wonderful resources on Jewish-Lutheran relations. One resource especially helpful to preachers is, *Preaching and Teaching "With Love and Respect for the Jewish People" (*ELCA Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations). People in our congregations hear demeaning stories about Jewish people on television and on social media. This Sunday is a good time to remind people that Jesus was a faithful Jew. He devoted his life to drawing people closer to the heart of God.

> There is no future in Christians trying to be more Christocentric than Jesus was. And Jesus was not Christocentric at all. His whole life, his words, actions, disposition, and final act were radially theocentric.[4]

Barbara Lundblad

2. Martin Luther, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, 1523.

3. *"A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community,"* first adopted by the Church Council of the ELCA in 1994 and revised by the Church Council in 2021 as a reaffirmation.

4. Joseph Sittler, *Gravity & Grace: Reflections and Provocations,* 106.

New Year's Day
January 1, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
Psalm 8
Revelation 21:1-6a
Matthew 25:31-46

Engaging the Gospel Text for Preaching

This set of texts is a mixed bag. Eccl 3:1-13 is a classic text many people have likely heard preached on many times. There is a time and season for everything. At the beginning of this new year, what season are we in, and where is God working? Psalm 8 is a lovely song of praise for the majesty of God and God's creation. We begin our year off right with a reminder that God created us and cares so deeply for us. Rev 21:1-6a is just dripping with hope and good news. No matter where we are at, good places or bad, amid this year's start, Christ is with us, and we have a hope of newness and life from God. Many might see these texts as "slam dunk" sermons.

However, what do we get when we turn to the gospel reading? Sheep, Goats, and… works righteousness? Oh my! Matt 25:31-46 can be a tricky text to preach on, especially for Lutherans. Really, the entire gospel can be tough to interpret and preach. There are most definitely some of us who love Year A and others who would rather stick to Year B or C. On the surface, this text seems to promote a sort of works righteousness. Perhaps the author intended this. Perhaps the author did not. Either way, how will we interpret and preach this in a way that keeps true to the Gospel of Christ? We can certainly do more than preach another moralistic sermon where we simply warn the congregation not to be goats and compel them to be sheep.

The congregation might hear this text as law. Some might have done or are doing a few of the commands in the text, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, or caring for the sick, but I doubt they have done all six all the time. Many will likely feel accused by this story because they are not doing enough. Should this be the case, you could go the route of Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*. It is from our salvation, by no works of our own, that we are enabled and empowered by God's grace to serve our neighbor and, in doing so, Christ. What a great way to begin a new year.

However, your congregation may be the people about which the text is concerned. Should this be the case, perhaps a theology of the cross route is a better choice. God is with us in our suffering, whether it be hunger, thirst, nakedness, illness, homelessness, or imprisonment. This is one of the most explicit examples of theology of the cross. We hear these words from Jesus, "'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Matt 25:40). God here is found in the least expected place. God is found in the lowly and suffering. God is in and with the people society doesn't want to associate with.

Much more challenging is to preach this in a way that emphasizes justification by grace through faith. It really does seem like the opposite. The goats are cast away because of the things they did not do, and the sheep are welcomed in for the things they did do. To me, this seems pretty cut and dry "do this and be saved." Here we might have to bring in the idea of canon within the canon. The truth of the law is always secondary compared to the truth of the gospel.[5] We must interpret this text illuminated by the truth of the gospel that God's grace saves humans, not works. Looking back at the text from the cross, perhaps these are not examples of what one does to be saved but instead what one does as a result of being saved.

Here are some additional reflections. First, the sheep and goats have no clue what is going on. They do not know that these deeds will be grounds for eternity. They do not know that the people they are or are not serving are Christ. They did not know which they were when asking the Son of Man these questions. Second, perhaps we are all, somehow, the people in need. There are no qualifications for those receiving food, water, clothes, care, welcoming, or visits. These needs are taken care of without any qualifications. This is salvation by grace. This salvation looks like food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, clothing for the sick, welcome for the stranger, care for the sick, and visitation for the imprisoned, just as it looks like being forgiven of sins and declared righteous by God.

Jackson Reynolds

First Sunday of Christmas
January 1, 2023

Isaiah 63:7-9
Psalm 148
Hebrews 2:10-18
Matthew 2:13-23

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

This Sunday's gospel turns our attention to Matthew where Jesus' birth takes place in the middle of a sentence because the real story here is in the reaction to the birth. In moving from Luke to Matthew, we go from heavenly music

5. Craig Nessan, "Interpreting the Bible Lutheranly: Between the Undertow and a Tsunami," in *Lutheran Perspectives on Biblical Interpretation*, Laurie Jungling, ed., Hearing the Word Series (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2010), 23.

to screams of terror and wails of grief. Like the last Sunday in Advent, Joseph is a key player. He receives a second angelic wake-up call where he is told to get up in the middle of the night, take Jesus and Mary, and flee to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous rage.

Before Herod began his assault on the babies of Bethlehem, victims of his deadly paranoia included his sixteen-year-old brother-in-law, whom he drowned, his uncle, aunt, mother-in-law, two sons and 300 palace officials deemed untrustworthy. Herod's campaign against boys two years old and under is called the "slaughter of the holy innocents."

The Bible offers some profound psychological insights when it introduces Herod's reaction to the birth of Jesus in these few words: "He was frightened." Where did Herod's fear come from? We don't know, but I always return to Martin Luther King's marvelous essay on fear where he writes: "Normal fear motivates us to improve our individual and collective welfare. Abnormal fear constantly poisons and distorts." Herod's fear was clearly the latter.

This gruesome story often gets skipped as we celebrate the twelve days of Christmas, but I am grateful we have it here to remind us that Jesus was born into this world, not a better one, not a more child-friendly one. Matthew asks us to join him in pausing to weep with Rachel: "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'"

Rachel went into labor with her second child when her family was on the road and tragically, she died giving birth. With her final breath, she pronounced her infant's name: *Benoni,* meaning, son of my sorrow. Jacob could not bear this ongoing reminder of Rachel's grief and changed his son's name to Ben-jamin, "son of my right hand." Thus, Rachel's dying voice was silenced in her makeshift grave alongside the road near Bethlehem (Gen 35:16-20).

Her voice remained silenced for 1000 years until one day when Jeremiah watched as Babylonian soldiers marched Rachel's offspring, children of Israel, along that same road toward their distant exile. The prophet, unable to bear this grief alone, called mother Rachel from her tomb and gave voice again to her cries (Jer 31:15).

Later Jewish mystics took this a step further. They taught that when the Messiah comes, it would not be to some high place like Mt. Sinai or Zion, but to the lonely place on the road where Rachel lies in the dust. The mystics wrote: "To mother Rachel he will bring glad tidings. And he will comfort her. And now she will let herself be comforted. And she will rise up and kiss him" (Zohar 2.7a-9a).

In the meantime, it is all too easy for a preacher to name contemporary examples that continue Herod's reign of terror creating new refugee families, parents weeping over the victims of mass shootings, wars, misplaced fears and policies that violate human rights and steal lives. Martin Luther preached on this gospel text and noted: "The slaughter by Herod of all the children of Bethlehem and the region about was a piece of sheer barbarism, but doubt not that Herod would find a plausible defense so that people would regard it, not as tyranny but as necessary severity. Thus Herod and his men took the sword and became frightful murderers even though they put out such a persuasive defense that everyone thought they were keeping the peace."

Matthew shows that fear can lead us down a different road, following a different star. In King's words, it might *motivate us to improve our individual and collective welfare,* to change direction like Joseph even when it is inconvenient, to make those changes in 2023 that will indeed serve our collective welfare, to support refugees, to protect the vulnerable, to side with children and all threatened species, to follow an alternate route away from violence, fear, and hatred. What will the next twelve months bring? What will come of our hopes, dreams, and fears? We don't know, but like Joseph and Mary before us, we do not travel alone.

The wisdom of taking this week to focus on Matthew's Christmas aftermath is bolstered by the words of Anglican priest, Joy Carrole Wallis: "We Christians like to talk about putting Christ back into Christmas, but let's not forget to put Herod back into Christmas… He reminds us that Jesus didn't enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression. Jesus was born an outcast, a homeless person, a refugee, and finally he becomes a victim to the powers that be. Jesus is the perfect savior for outcasts, refugees, and nobodies. That's how the church is described in scripture time and time again—not as the best and the brightest—but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God."

May we be counted among them.·

Heidi Neumark

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2023

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

> *May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute*
>
> *may the kings of Sheba and Saba bring gifts.*
>
> *May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.*
>
> Psalm 72:10-11

Birth or Death?

One of the visitors from the East to Jesus' birthplace in T.S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi" asks the haunting question of whether they had been led all that way for birth or death. Musing over the evidence of the birth, he yet somehow experienced the aura of death. He admits that he had thought they were contrary realities yet couldn't help but conclude that this baby's death was peculiarly agonizing, "like Death, our death."[6] Here in the very gifts brought by the magi— and soon to follow in the slaughter of the Bethlehem boys—the cross intrudes into the church's joyous celebration of the good news that came to birth in Bethlehem.

The answer to the question, "Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" is clearly "both," for myrrh, the third gift, was used for the embalming of corpses. A strange present for a newborn king. But it is a gift that casts its shadow forward from the near–ending of Jesus' story, eerily presaged by his anointing for burial by the unnamed woman at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany (Matt 26:6 ff.). As an ancient now neglected hymn of the church sings: "The golden tribute owns him king, /But frankincense to God they bring, /And last, prophetic sign, with myrrh /They shadow forth his sepulcher."[7] "Myrrh" and "sepulcher" constitute not only an ingenious and chilling rhyme but serve to alert and promise us that Good Friday—and Easter—are on their way.

An Epiphany service of Lessons & Carols like its Advent or Christmas counterpart, is often a good choice for this day, providing opportunity to sing Christmas carols perhaps for a final time in this joyous season, as well as Epiphany carols, new and old. I've sometimes used the sermon time to reflect on a particular hymn appropriate to the season.

A physician once shared with a pastor how he had fought against the idea of a personal God who intervened in human life. The doctor instead sought refuge in music. Bach particularly appealed to him because of the mathematical precision of his fugues. Meanwhile the doctor's life was falling apart. His wife had left him; he had started drinking too much. One day, while driving, he pounded the steering wheel and cried out, "God, if you're really there, you're going to have to say something! You know what kind of person I am. No screwing around now—no lousy signs. You're going to have to talk my language!"

Just then, so the story goes, Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" began to play on the car radio. The doctor began to sob and laugh simultaneously as he marveled at what an idiotic but wonderful word this was for him. And, just in case he might try to explain away the moment rationally—that Bach, after all, was played on the radio now and then (although this was not a classical station)—the next song to come on was the Brazilian *bossa nova* classic, "The Girl From Ipanema."

As much as I personally appreciate Bach (as well as *bossa nova),* I know that Bach does not communicate God universally, as much as he may have dedicated himself to doing so. But isn't it interesting that Bach would end up using the tune of the great Epiphany hymn "O Morning Star" (*ELW* 308) written by Philipp Nicolai no less than six times in his church cantatas? So taken was Bach with this tune.

But it's the words of Nicolai's hymn that the melody expresses so poignantly that deserve our attention on this day when the prophet announces: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.... Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice...." (Isa 60:1, 3, 5a) In the first verse of "O Morning Star" we hear the luminescent words: "star," "fair and bright," "shine," "light," "aglow," and "glorious." Verse two continues with: "diamond," "light divine," "shine," "light," and "flame undying," all bearing the message of John's words we heard at Christmas, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Verse three goes on to sing of God's gifts of the sacraments which affirm and feed us while verse four exults in how God has loved us since before "this old earth's foundations." But verse five is my favorite. It begins: "Oh, let the harps break forth in sound! /Our joy be all with beauty crowned, / Our voices gaily blending!" and goes on to include invitations to music–making that include ten—count them, **ten**—exclamation marks, more than I've ever seen in a single verse of a Lutheran hymn!

While five's my favorite, there's yet a sixth concluding verse that reminds us that Nicolai wrote this joyous hymn in the midst of a great plague that took the lives of many of his

6. *Harper Book of Christian Poetry* (New York, 1993), 236.
7. "O Chief of Cities, Bethlehem," *LBW 81.*

parishioners including members of his own family. I'd never paid much attention to this sixth verse until we sang it at my father-in-law's funeral for which I served as preacher. Even with no harps in evidence but only the wheezy, old electronic organ played by one of my wife's cousins, the words of this final stanza hit me with the force of an epiphany. For we grievers had been handed a script to express our mourning in the context of the joy of Christian hope. The words we sang were these:

> What joy to know, when life is past,
> the Lord we love is first and last,
> the end and the beginning!
> He will one day, oh, glorious grace,
> transport us to that happy place
> beyond all tears and sinning!
> Amen! Amen!
> Come Lord Jesus! Crown of gladness!
> We are yearning
> for the day of your returning.

Here this old warhorse of an Epiphany hymn had become a transfiguring funeral hymn brimming over with Advent hope. What an Epiphany. Birth or Death? Yes both—life out of death.

John Rollefson

Baptism of Our Lord/ First Sunday after Epiphany January 8, 2023

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

> *The voice of the Lord is over the waters;*
> *the God of glory thunders,*
> *the Lord over mighty waters.*
> *the voice of the Lord is powerful;*
> *the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.*
>
> Psalm 29:3–4

God's Delight

A novel of some years ago by Ann Beattie titled *Picturing Will* tells the story of a young boy told first from the perspective of his mother, then his father, and finally a brief epilogue from Will's point of view. A passage in the "mother's section" nicely caricatures our human tendency to want to control our children's destiny:

> Do everything right, all the time, and the child will prosper. Agreed? It's as simple as that, except for fate, luck, heredity chance, the astrological sign under which the child is born, his order of birth, his first encounter with evil, the girl who jilts him in spite of his excellent qualities, the war that is being fought when he's a young man, the drugs he may try once or too many times, the friends he makes, how he scores on tests, how well he endures kidding about his shortcomings, how ambitious he becomes, how far he falls behind, circumstantial evidence, ironic perspective, danger when it is least expected, difficulty in triumphing over circumstances, people with hidden agendas, and animals with rabies.[8]

Ours, it seems, is a radically open and yet contingent universe of possibilities in which it is utterly impossible to safeguard our offspring from what the future hold in store for them.

Is it too much to wonder what God, the Divine Parent, was thinking as s(he) saw her Son Jesus heading off for the River Jordan, falling into line with the rag–tag rabble sprinkled even with a few Pharisees and Sadducees who had come out into the hinter–land to see what this Elijah–come–lately named John was up to in his preaching of repentance and ritual dunking of willing folks in the river? "John would have prevented him," Matthew reports, claiming "I need to be baptized by you," but Jesus insisted that it was "proper" and the "way to fulfill all righteousness," Matthew's special way of describing doing God's will. And so, John "consented" and as Jesus was coming up out of the waters "suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" and heard a "voice from heaven" declaring, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" *(*vss. 14–17).

As a parent myself I can't help but imagine God smiling with divine approval while mouthing the words "Attaboy!" and giving Jesus a congratulatory pat on the back—much better than that silly bird stuff, don't you think? For Jesus' baptism was his ritualized stepping out into the deep waters of life. To run the risk of further anthropomorphizing God, as any good parent knows, it couldn't have been easy for God to let Jesus go where he needed to go, where the Spirit would lead—which was where? Well, Matthew tells us in the very next episode, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (4:1).

Here the freshly Spirit–possessed Jesus would have good reason to rely on God's voice of affirmation he heard thundering over the waters, as the psalmist had put it, as well as God's Word in the scriptures of his people which Jesus would need to deflect a scripture–spouting tempter.

8. Ann Beattie, *Picturing Will* (New York, 1991), 52.

Baptism is the beginning of the road for us, too—a ritual cutting loose from all those other worldly strings that try to make us dance to the tune of their tugging. It's a setting free to be who the Spirit within us and out ahead of us is calling us to be, knowing that God has spoken an affirming "Yes" over us. God has declared "delight" in us his "chosen," promising that we have been "called. . . in righteousness" (Isa 42:6).

There are many fine hymns putting to melody today's Gospel reading but Fred Pratt Green's "When Jesus Came to Jordan" (*ELW* #305) is especially recommended as is Brian Wren's "Welcome the Wild One" (#31) in *Bring Many Names* (Carol Stream, Illinois, 1989).

John Rollefson

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 15, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Today's first reading from Isaiah combines with the gospel text to provide the possibility for a robust proclamation of the church's mission to bring light to an often-dark world. In the Isaiah reading the "servant" (identified in Isaiah both as a messianic figure and the nation of Israel as a community) appears for the second time in Isaiah as the one chosen "to bring forth justice to the nations."

It is important to notice that the servant is called to establish justice, not to individuals who are acting unjustly but "to the nations." That is, to the nations' unjust economic, cultural, religious, and political systems. On this day, preaching that is faithful to both the Isaiah reading and to John's gospel should focus on the faith community's call to directly address systemic injustice and not just to exhort individuals to behave more justly. As we celebrate Dr. King's life and ministry, we do well to remember that when King addressed individuals' racism at all it was always in the larger context of society's racism because as he said in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," quoting Reinhold Niebuhr: "groups tend to be more immoral than individuals..."

In this text it is also significant that the servant admits a lack of success in carrying out the mission received. The lament, "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing…" voices this despair. This verse invites homiletical candor that failure, weariness, and near-despair are inevitable for individuals and faith communities committed to justice but that though human strength is finite, God's strength is not.

The Isaiah text helps bring "light" to the message of the gospel reading from St. John. Like Isaiah's servant, John the Baptizer is portrayed as a witness to the light, one who points "to the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," the one who later in John's gospel will self-identify as "the light of the world."

The texts assigned for this day along with the day's proximity to Martin Luther King Jr. Day beg for a strong proclamation of encouragement and hope as the church confronts with the light of Christ the darkness of injustice. Just as Dr. King did not act alone as a light-bearer but was surrounded, supported, and counseled by a community of men and women, in the same way, individual faith communities do not and cannot effect societal change when they act alone. To have the power to transform unjust systems locally or nationally, congregations must "find each other" and act together to build power, joining Jesus who is even now bringing light to local and national darkness: the lack of affordable housing, catastrophic climate change, predatory lending, racial profiling by police, hyper-partisan politics, the rise of antisemitism, the lack of physical and mental access. "It is dark out there," but as the psalmist sings to God: "Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Ps 139:12).

Ron Luckey

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 22, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

On first reading, one might assume that when Jesus heard that John the Baptizer had been murdered, he "withdrew to Galilee" out of fear for his own safety. In fact, his withdrawing to Galilee was not to escape danger but to intentionally run toward danger. Jesus is going into a region where poverty and Roman intimidation and violence prevail. He makes his home, not among the political and economic elites but among the poor, the exploited, and the marginalized in the fishing and agricultural village of Capernaum. As Warren Carter says in *Matthew and the Margins*: Jesus "continues the gospel's preference for the apparently small and insignificant places and people who, nevertheless, are central for God's

purposes (2:5-6, 22-23; 3:1)."[9] Preachers have the opportunity on this Sunday to remind worshippers that Jesus is found not only in Word and Sacrament but in Wounds and Suffering and to make this truth relevant by pointing to the places in their communities where Jesus and his followers are present and busy.

Matthew links Jesus' settlement in Capernaum with Isaiah's ancient announcement (today's first reading) that light has come to a land where people sit in darkness. Into a land burdened and terrorized by the darkness of Rome's rule, the light is dawning with Jesus' declaration that God's reign is at hand, a reign that will be embodied in the creation of a community of followers and animated by Jesus' teaching, preaching, the working of miracles of mercy, and ultimately and most importantly in his dying and rising that serves to vindicate his judgment against the empire's ways of death. Again, the preacher's task is to point to where this reality is locally present and invite the congregation's participation in that reality.

All this is to say that the preacher's task is to make clear that Jesus' announcement that the "kingdom of heaven has come near" was heard by Jesus' original audience as an earthly political statement and only by extension as the promise of life eternal. "The kingdom (or reign) of heaven" was for them and should be for us a declaration that in Jesus God has repudiated and challenged the status quo of political lies, military might, economic exploitation, the cult of money and worldly success. It is into an entirely new way of life that rejects imperial values that Jesus begins to call disciples, a call that extends to this day in our baptism. As Melinda Quivik says in her essay in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year A*: "This means that those who are called to follow Jesus may find themselves in a minority, advocating for unpopular movements, asking disquieting questions, objecting to the abuse of others, standing in the way of the bombastic and proud."[10] In that vein, Jesus' use of the word "repent" is not so much a renunciation of personal sin as it is a reorientation of one's life to a community that claims a new set of values, behaviors, and hopes. These first four disciples Jesus calls become a model on this Sunday for all who are baptized into a community that lives out an alternative lifestyle of light and hope in the midst of an empire of darkness and death.

Ron Luckey

9. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005), 114,

10. Dale Andrews et al, eds. *Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 77.

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 29, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

A pivotal moment has arrived in Matthew's Gospel. John the Baptist prepared the way. Jesus was baptized, underwent a period of temptation, and called his disciples. He has begun teaching in the synagogues in Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and "curing every disease and every sickness among the people" (4:23b). This is the beginning of his ministry. Still, news has spread rapidly that Jesus, "the son of David" (1:1), is not your average teacher-healer. Crowds from all around the region have started following him and bringing their sick loved ones. Surrounded by these crowds looking to him with hope, the moment has come for Jesus' first public sermon, functioning as an inaugural address. He is speaking primarily to his newly called disciples; however, the placement on the mountain makes Jesus visible for the crowds to see him as they also overhear.

This preaching event begins before Jesus says a word. Matthew uses highly symbolic language in 5:1 to prepare his audience to listen to Jesus from a particular vantage point. Jesus "went up the mountain," echoing the God-given authority of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jesus "sat down" as a king would do on a throne. "His disciples came to him," approaching him to listen intently to his teaching. This symbolism adds considerable weight to what follows. Jesus is God's Messiah. He is the King of the Kingdom he is proclaiming.

The preacher may wish to spend time exploring this setup and its implications. Some may be uncomfortable with this monarchical positioning due to the countless ways patriarchy and power imbalances have caused harm in a sinful world with a penchant for breaking the first commandment. More emphasis is often placed on the softer characteristics (labeled "feminine" in a patriarchal world) of Jesus as Savior, Jesus as the compassionate giver of comfort, peace, grace, and forgiveness. Jesus is also, however, the ultimate authority over us. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [Jesus]" (28:18b). Jesus is Lord, and we are not. Hallelujah! We would have little reason to care about the words that follow any more than we care about any other teacher for whom we have some regard if Jesus were not Lord.

What follows is the eschatological good news of an inbreaking upside-down kingdom. The Beatitudes are promises about the future ("will" repeated in vv. 4-9) enveloped in the transformation of the present ("for theirs *is* the kingdom

of heaven" in vv. 3, 10 [emphasis added]). A glance at this passage reveals that those named are the least of these, those who are not blessed in the kingdoms of the world. The promise that God's coming kingdom is theirs, however, can alter their experience of the present. They may live with the assurance of their value in God's eyes, despite their current circumstances, as they wait eagerly and with hope for the future. Jesus' choice of disciples (lowly fishermen), the way he has chosen to begin his ministry (healing the least of these), and this Sermon on the Mount serve as a foretaste of the fullness to come.

There is a sense in which the Beatitudes declare the blessedness of all people. Who has not mourned a loss? Who has not stared in the face of sorrow and been moved to mercy? Who has not yearned for righteousness after experiencing the sting of injustice? At these times in our lives, there is a vulnerable space, a fragile emptyhandedness that allows us to receive God's blessings more easily than when we have filled our own hands with the things of this world. Still, those who are not currently mourning and not sure they "hunger and thirst for righteousness" enough to be included in these Beatitudes can participate in this upside-down kingdom. This vision, which is foolishness to "the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor. 1:20b), is God's will for the world. Rather than aligning ourselves with passing kingdoms that would label the pure of heart "naïve" and the meek "pathetic," rather than supporting the status quo and opposing those pursuing righteousness as "disrespectful rabble-rousers," we can pledge our allegiance to God's kingdom of heaven, name these precious ones "blessed," and treat them accordingly. Preachers may weave in the psalmist's meditation on fitting characteristics for God's people as well as today's beloved passage from Micah as they envisage with their listeners what is possible for them as they "walk humbly" as citizens of God's inbreaking kingdom even now.

I offer preachers a few cautions as they move forward. First, beware of suggesting that your listeners should embody the Beatitudes rather than honor those who do. These are promises, not commandments. Treating them as commandments implies that one should always be mourning and may lead one to pursue persecution as if it were synonymous with God's blessing. Second, beware of any whiff of works righteousness. The merciful and the peacemakers are blessed, but their works of mercy and peacemaking do not make them righteous before God. They are justified not by these good works but by grace through faith, just like every other human being. Related to this, beware of portraying these blessed ones as less sinful than others. None are entirely merciful; none are entirely pure in heart, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). We are all equal at the foot of the cross. Jesus is Lord, and we are not.

Samantha Gilmore

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 5, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

"You are the salt of the earth" (5:13a). "You are the light of the world" (5:14a). These are not commandments that you can choose to obey or disobey. These are promises in the present tense. They are not eschatological visions to be hoped for in the future but statements about who you are now. The question is never whether you are salt or light. The question is whether you are allowing the world to see your distinctive life-giving flavor and natural ability to show the light of the world to others. These things are not primarily witnessed in the individual. "You" is plural. The whole church is salt and light.

If we take this seriously as a promise from Jesus, then creative freedom and new life are just waiting to be tasted and seen. The preacher can explore with the congregation how to allow their zest to be palpable in worship, perhaps with some participatory experimentation within the sermon or another part of the service. (Some explicit permission-giving might need to happen in places where worship tends to be equated with solemn seriousness.) How can their saltiness be shaken out throughout the community's life so that the experience is not piles of concentrated salt, which is unpleasing to taste, but a satisfying, even spread?

Similar brainstorming can be done with light. How can their light be set up so that it is not a fire hazard, causing a few to squint and overheat in a confined space? What curtains might be drawn open that allow not so much for the sun to shine through the windows inside the church but for the light of the congregation to shine outside the windows in a way that offers inviting warmth and transformed vision to those outside? How can the congregation be who they are and offer their true light-bearing nature to reveal the gospel of Jesus Christ to a dark world that, on some days, may appear to have overcome the light?

The preacher can interweave this conversation with all of the other assigned passages. The Hebrew Bible texts shed light on how those who "fear the Lord" "rise in the darkness as a light for the upright" (Ps 112:4a) and teach us how our light may "break forth like the dawn" (Isa 58:8a). 1 Corinthians can offer hope to those congregations who have difficulty believing that the promise of salt and light is for them. The Apostle Paul testifies to proclaiming among the Corinthians "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3).

In a world full of bright billboards, stage lights, spotlights, and fireworks displays, we can feel like mere tea lights in comparison. This need not concern us. Our light is not an end in itself; it shines that the faith of those who see "might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor 2:5). Our light shines not on ourselves but on "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2b).

One may be tempted to ignore the complicated latter half of our Gospel text, but I offer a few reasons to lift it up. First, at the beginning of this Gospel, Matthew takes great pains in his genealogy to make clear that Jesus is "the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1). Jesus is shown throughout this Gospel to be the fulfillment of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible as a way not to distance but to positively reinforce Jesus' connection to his Jewish faith. This passage reinforces this connection not only by the location in which it takes place (on a mountain, echoing Moses on Mt. Sinai) but by its clear statement that Jesus has not come to disregard or replace the law and the prophets. The law and the prophets are a gift from God to guide us in faithful living in a sinful world. Christianity's relationship to the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish faith as a whole are worth naming from the pulpit at this time of increasing anti-Semitism in the United States.

Second, Jesus names the scribes and Pharisees as positive examples in this passage. He calls us to let our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees, which would have been heard as impossible. These religious leaders were recognized and highly regarded for their meticulous pursuit of righteousness. Some in our pews, however, may view these groups in a purely negative light. Scribes and Pharisees frequently get pinned as judgmental hypocrites, and congregations may not hear from the Hebrew Bible enough to understand the righteousness they were pursuing. Spending time with this passage is an opportunity to expand and complexify our understanding, allowing the scribes and Pharisees to be fully human religious leaders trying to glorify God in their context. This may positively influence your congregation's view of the Jewish faith.

Finally, this passage exposes our sinfulness, as we all "break the least of these commandments" (5:19) every day of our lives. Even as we do our best to follow the law as a good gift from God, even as we may strive to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, we fail again and again. Those who preach this passage, however, need not leave us in our guilt and shame. Instead, they can lead us to Christ. Jesus states clearly in this passage that he is the one who fulfills the law. Not us. Thus, we are free! This passage lends itself to the explicit proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving us the One who has done for us what we could never do. Thanks be to God.

Samantha Gilmore

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts

Context is everything in these readings: as literary compositions, hearing the parts within the larger whole; as historical documents, seeing the incident within the larger narrative; as theological messages, locating the specific directives within the larger message of God's faithfulness.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

God's faithfulness to God's promise to Abraham is the theological context. As Israel is about to enter the Promised Land, God reminds them, "See, I have set before you today…the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors." When God says, "Choose life," God is saying, "This promise I made to your ancestors I now am fulfilling for you—live into it. Don't discard it as if it is nothing, or comes from another god. Live lovingly, generously, faithfully, responsibly for that is the very nature of what is being given to you. This gift of life is yours to live and to give to your descendants." The commandments, decrees, and ordinances are for the sake of the life God gives as we live it in relationships and as we walk with God. Thus, the indicators of disobedience are relational not moral abstractions.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

My mother, a high school English and Latin teacher, gave me an appreciation for grammar. In the theological context of this passage God is the subject and the predicate, the doer and the deed, the actor and the action. "God gave the growth." God's action produces God's coworkers, God's "field," God's building. The reading challenges our preoccupation with loyalties and distinctive identities as churches and the jealousies, quarreling, and divisions that can result. Paul says they demonstrate our immaturity as infants in Christ.

My former colleague Jonathan Strandjord frequently reminded us, God's people have a dynamic vocation more than a static identity. We are (identity) what God is doing with us (vocation) as God's co-workers with a common purpose.

Pastoral Reflections

A word about the context in which I have been reflecting on these readings:

- a Zoom conversation with three friends who in their global context described a palpable increase in anger turning into open expressions of toxic hate and violence;
- receiving the Southern Poverty Law Center disturbing investigative report "Hate and Extremism in 2022";
- listening to an NPR report on actions being taken in some states to deny gender-affirming care to youth;
- another week of horrific gun violence, migrants moved North as pawns in a political chess match, Russian missiles leaving Ukrainians without heat and electricity.

Given such anger, hatred, and deep divisions, what is Jesus saying to us? The theological context for Jesus' sermon is set at Jesus' baptism. Jesus says to John, "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). At the beginning of his sermon Jesus says, "I have come not to abolish (the law and prophets) but to fulfill (them)" (5:17). Thus Jesus' sermon is about righteousness the way God does it, about life the way God gives it—"perfect" (*teleios*), finished, complete, fulfilled, whole (Matt 5:48).

Therefore, we cannot explain away these words as Jesus expecting some impossible level of spiritual perfection we can never achieve. Nor is Jesus giving us an even more treacherous road map to heaven, one that involves being judged not only by our external actions—killing, stealing, committing adultery—but also our internal attitudes—lust, anger, hatred. That would reinforce the pervasive belief that Christianity is an outcome-based religion—the outcome of my salvation depends upon me.

Jesus does righteousness not by himself or for himself but for you, for me, for the whole creation. Jesus makes things right with others through words and deeds of love, forgiveness, mercy, truth-telling, and promise. God does righteousness not by demanding an impossible life of holiness but by giving it in Jesus Christ with incredible generosity. Here Jesus describes this righteousness, this life, God gives and the work (vocation) to which God calls us. The words can seem hard, even harsh.

Why do Jesus' words trouble us so? Because they convict us of our sinfulness within and in our relationships. Jesus' sermon should not be a shock. We believe that God in Christ has reconciled the whole creation to Godself. Why wouldn't we expect Jesus to tell us to stop our worship and go, be reconciled to the one from whom you are alienated? God is faithful to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah and to us in Baptism. Why wouldn't we expect Jesus to want us to be faithful to the promises we make to one another? Could it be that what disturbs me most about Jesus' words is that they reveal that God takes my relationships, my attitudes, and actions, more seriously than I do?

When Jesus looks upon our toxic hate, our greed, our violence, our denial of the full dignity every person deserves, our destruction of God's creation, Jesus says "***Cut it out***!" Freed by Christ's righteousness we have work to do. It is the work of repentance, reparations, restorative justice, healing, and reconciliation. It is both deeply personal and boldly public, communal work (vocation) for which God will give the growth.

Mark S. Hanson

(Note: My thanks to my former colleague, the Rev. Dr. Marcus Kunz for his significant, insightful contributions to these reflections.)

Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 19, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The challenge and invitation that spoken word artist and racial justice educator Joe Davis makes is for us to ***"Show up!"*** (YouTube) ***"Show up!"*** is the theme woven throughout the readings for Transfiguration Sunday.

What happens when God shows up? It may be tempting to ignore Psalm 2. For the psalmist is clear God will show up in wrath and judgment on those who plot against God and God's anointed one. There can be fear and trembling when God shows up or we can take refuge in God.

When God shows up there is often mystery and majesty leaving us with a sense of awe and wonder. "The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire" (Exod 24:17). "And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him" (Matt 17:2-3). God showed up and there was a visual spectacle.

When God shows up is it only to fill our desire to be wowed by a visual spectacle? If so, then it is important to heed Christopher Hedges words of caution. In *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of the Spectacle* Hedges contends "pseudo-events, dramatic productions orchestrated by publicists, political machines, television, Hollywood… have the capacity to appear real even though we know they are staged. They can evoke a powerful emotional response of overwhelming reality replacing it with a fictional narrative

that often becomes acceptable truth."[11] Hedges continues. "A public that can no longer distinguish between truth and fiction is left to interpret reality through illusion. Blind faith in illusions is our culture's secular version of being born again."[12]

In the allure of a culture of illusion and deception, be emboldened by Paul's words. "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty." Moved by the Holy Spirit, may we be prophets who show up and speak the truth of our brokenness and of God's righteousness and restorative justice (2 Pet 1:16-21).

Yes, God showing up to Moses and in Jesus' transfiguration were visual spectacles. However, not just visual but more significantly, aural. For everything changed when God spoke. Seeing a spectacle is not believing. Hearing and trusting God's word of promise is. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

God spoke to Moses promising to give "the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandments, which I have written for their instruction." In the infancy of their liberation God shows up with the gift of the law so that God's people will continue to worship only God and live responsibly with their neighbors.

God spoke to Peter, James, and John confirming Jesus' identity, mission, vision, and mandate. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" God is saying, "This is how I am choosing to show up — in Jesus. It is not for my sake but for yours. So pay attention to Jesus. Listen to Jesus. Watch what Jesus does. Take note of where and to whom Jesus shows up. Follow Jesus on the way of the cross."

When God showed up on the mountain Jesus was transfigured. When Jesus shows up in our lives we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. In his sermon at Felix Malpica's installation as bishop of the ELCA LaCrosse Area Synod, the Rev. Rafael Malpica said, "We need radical transformation in the way of Jesus which necessitates displacement. It means leaving behind the familiar, being displaced from positions of privilege and opening up to the adventures the Holy Spirit will bring before us…Those who are marginalized, oppressed, discarded by dehumanizing and excluding systems become the center, the locus for God's mission where the church is incarnated (shows up) as God's instrument for liberation and the restoration of creation"(unpublished, quoted with permission).

In our culture of illusion and deception we show up to speak the truth of our brokenness and of God's righteousness and restorative justice. Prophets show up as truth tellers among multiple competing idolatries and cleverly devised myths. Moved by the Holy Spirit prophets show up and speak what comes from God (2 Pet 1:16-21).

On the mountain Jesus touched Peter, James, and John saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." When we live in fear, we turn inward giving God very little space in which to show up in our lives and through our ministries.

Hear the Good News — you are forgiven and freed in Christ, transformed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to show up. Listen to Joe Davis, "We are each called to this time and season…Show up to answer the call to justice…to transform the soul and the world the soul inhabits…Show up with your full self, with all your awkwardness, with your wounds and scars and baggage and we can all unpack it…There is no grace period. Only grace. Period. ***"Show up!"*** (YouTube video)

Mark S. Hanson

Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023

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 Psalm for Preaching

Lent is the liturgical season, more than others, with practices. It's an important season of preparation and many use some variation of the church's historic practice of reflection and repentance, fasting and abstinence, prayer and almsgiving during Lent. (Ever mindful that Jesus disdains show-off piety and recommends secret practice that we can't be lauded for, lest that undo the goodness the practice might bestow on us, of course.)

Psalm 51, the assigned psalm for Ash Wednesday, is helpful in setting the tone for reflection and repentance, and it has quite a backstory, which can make for an interesting sermon. It's actually an unusual psalm. Only seven of the 150 psalms are penitential in nature and only two of those—Psalm 51 and Psalm 38—focus explicitly on confessing sin. Both of these confessing psalms are called "Psalms of David"—songs, prayers, ascribed to King David.

An ancient editor alludes to Psalm 51's backstory in the heading that comes before the first verse: *A Psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*

11. Christopher Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of the Spectacle,* 50.
12. Hedges, *Empire of Illusion*, 53.

Yes, this is the sordid story of David and Bathsheba and Uriah. If it were a movie, it would be rated R for sex, violence, and gut-wrenching betrayal. And here it sits in our Bible ready to shock and awe God's people! It's the spring of the year in 2 Samuel Chapter 11—the time when kings go forth into battle. King David is sitting this one out; he's not getting any younger and he's risen in power enough to send others to fight his battles.

You might remember how the story goes, but those you're preaching to might not. The bones are these: David has sex with Bathsheba (likely not consensual). When she gets pregnant, he tries to hide what he's done by inviting her husband, Uriah, home for a little R&R. Which Uriah, being so loyal to his king, does not take, and thereby does not provide a (dishonest) screen for the pregnancy. Increasingly panicked, David sends word to the front that Uriah should be sent to the front lines of battle (where he will most certainly be killed). This happens (many others are killed, as well) and then David does what will be viewed as the magnanimous act and marries Bathsheba.

It's hard to know exactly how to cast David's sin—or how many ways it could be cast. Usually when we talk about King David we talk about him as a hero, as chosen and favored by God. But the bridge to the next chapter in 2 Samuel is clear with regard to what God thinks of David at this point. "The thing that the king had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David."

In Chapter 12, God's prophet Nathan comes to the king with a parable that pretty obviously parallels David's greed, selfishness, lust, and abominable behavior, albeit couched in the story of a lamb wrongfully taken.

On hearing Nathan's parable, King David is shocked! Appalled! Angered in the extreme—though it's obvious he doesn't see the parallels to his own situation. When Nathan stares the king down and delivers the message from God that indicts the king on so many levels, David is devastated. "I have sinned against the Lord," David confesses to Nathan. (And Bathsheba! And Uriah!)

This is the backstory of Psalm 51, the Ash Wednesday Psalm, which begins with "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy…." David asks God to blot, to wash, to cleanse him of his sin.

In verse three David confesses—*but not with details*—that's what makes the psalm work so well for us to pray. Any number of sins will fit in this psalm.

And then the refrain (vs. 10-12) asking God for a clean heart and right spirit, asking for restoration and sustaining divine presence.

For many of us, this is a treasured part of our regular liturgy and hymnody—a plea with God to cleanse our heart, to right our spirit, and restore us in all the ways only God can offer redemption. But on Ash Wednesday this plea has special import, and perhaps preaching the story behind the psalm is helpful to get our arms around what we're saying when we pray it.

Few of us have a personal prophet. Ash Wednesday can be our Nathan, however. The day calls us to shed the superficialities of life for a season and examine ourselves and our lives. Our days are limited and if we are honest we've made a lot of messes—individually, most of us; and collectively, certainly. Some we know. Many we'd rather not admit.

The purple of the Lenten season has a richness, a deepness in its hue, that acknowledges the depth of sin in our world. Yet the brightness of Lent's purple calls us to journey in and toward renewal and change. The Lenten season—these forty days journeying to the cross and then on to the resurrection, can be a time to reset, reconsider, repent. There is grace aplenty along the way—God's mercy and steadfast love meets each of us—just as God met King David—just right where we are.

Melanie Heuiser Hill

First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Jesus' Temptation is the Gospel lesson every year for the first Sunday in Lent. When Matthew's telling of it is up, the story is paired with the story of The Man and The Woman (later named Adam and Eve) and The Serpent. Another "temptation" it would seem. What do these texts have in common? What is different about them?

The "Wilderness Temptations" of Jesus appear in all three synoptic gospels. The Gospel of Mark outlines it in just two verses. "And the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:12-13a) There are no details. By verse fourteen of Mark's first chapter, Jesus commences with his ministry. This is the model for Luke and Matthew, but those gospels add more details as to the nature of the temptations.

Some say that the point of the mysterious temptation scene (that no one witnessed in any of the gospels!) is that Jesus was fully human and fully tempted. Others say we are to glean, as any first-century Jew would, that Jesus was a model

Jew ~ there are the quotes from Deuteronomy, the parallels of the wilderness wanderings, the forty days and forty years non-coincidence, the bread and manna theme, the testing God and idolatry temptations, etc. Still others maintain that this scene shows upfront the conflict between God's reign and the reign of Satan ~ setting up the thematic undercurrent that all of Jesus' ministry is an attack on Satan's work. There's something to all of these interpretations and a few more besides, of course. Whatever the interpretation, it is clear that the Gospel writers found this story to be important for the early church.

It is interesting that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the temptation scene comes toward the beginning of Jesus' story and in some fashion inaugurates his ministry. He is baptized, refutes Satan's temptations, and then he goes out to do the work. In Mark, Jesus' birth story isn't even included—but Jesus' temptation is. And it is the impetus for all that comes after, as it is in the other two synoptic gospels.

In the Genesis Chapter 3 text it is harder to identify the "temptation." Certainly many have expounded with confidence that The Woman is faced with the temptation to "be like God" and so wantonly eats the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as she succumbs—indeed seeks—this power, this temptation.

However, a closer reading, less encumbered by how we've "always heard it," doesn't really support this. For starters, nothing is labeled a "sin" in this story. If we just read it straight (read it aloud to a child!) we see that everything in the story is presented as quite normal. There's a woman. There's a man somewhere. There's a serpent, one of God's good creatures—not Satan, which has a long history of allegorical interpretation, but again is not part of our straight up reading. Oh, and the serpent talks. The Serpent is described as "crafty," an ambiguous word in English, and even more so in Hebrew. Our only other real knowledge of The Serpent is what the serpent says.

Although The Woman was not the one to receive the instruction in 2:16-17 (that would be The Man) she seems to know about the parameters. They can eat the fruit of all the trees in the garden except the one in the middle. Is this where the soundtrack changes to more ominous music? Perhaps, but again, a straight-up reading reveals only a conversation between God's creatures, The Serpent and The Woman. Read carefully, does it seem that The Serpent coerces The Woman—our usual reading—or does The Serpent present options, and then leave it to her to make the choice?

Because she has a choice. The Woman knows what is good—she can see the tree is good for food and beautiful besides. She chooses to eat the fruit. And she gives some to The Man. She doesn't play the role of The Temptress, she just hands him the fruit and he eats it. No theological arguments are made, no objections are included in the story. There are consequences, of course. All choices have consequences. But perhaps this part of the story is more about *human response* than a snake tempting a naked woman who then tempts a naked man with a shiny apple.

Could this simply be a story about the first two humans making a choice? God did not set up a world in which they could *not* make the choice to eat from the tree—nothing is pre-programmed about this divine-human relationship except that God has called all that God created good. Not perfect. But very good. The Man and The Woman chose to eat of the tree. There's no coercion or inevitability in this story…so is there temptation? (Discuss!)

It is interesting that The Woman and The Man are propelled out into the world as a result of the choice they made, and everything that happens afterwards happens because they left the garden. Similarly, Jesus was propelled out into his ministry. What propels *us* out to do our work in the world?

Melanie Heuiser Hill

Second Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts

The gospel reading for the Second Sunday in Lent contains what is perhaps the most familiar piece of scripture, John 3:16. This verse has been memorized by generations of Christians. For many it is the summary of the Christian faith in one verse, the Gospel in a nutshell. This familiarity can make preaching on this text all the more difficult.

Like Nicodemus, we may come to Jesus full of more questions than answers. The passage opens with reference to Jesus' signs as proof that he is from God. The signs and miracles were proof enough for Nicodemus; but Jesus seeks believers who have not seen. Just before this passage we read: "…many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them…" (John 2:23-24). This theme will come back again at the resurrection "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). Seeing is believing, the saying goes; yet, for Jesus signs are transitory, whereas belief is rooted in something beyond mere facts and tangible evidence.

Nicodemus finds this teaching of Jesus hard to comprehend—he is probably not alone. What does it mean to be

born from above, to be born again, or put yet another way to be born anew? What does it mean for us seekers of Jesus to be "born of water and the Spirit"?

Born of water may well have been an ancient euphemism for matters pertaining to reproduction and birthing.[13] Born of water points both to paternity and maternity as each involves liquidity. Is born of Spirit meant to be this second birth vis a vie our human birth? What if instead we are meant to see our humanity caught up in God's divinity through Christ Jesus? God our Mother-Father birthing us, renewing us, and bringing us to life.

A final word about the end of the passage. We return to the theme of belief—verse 15 "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" and verse 16 "everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Some may hear these last verses as a condition of salvation—a word of assurance to the faithful believer and a threat to unrepentant sinners. A child believes their parent loves them because the parent loves them first. Their belief is caught up in their identity of belonging to a loving parent. We believe in God's mercy because God so loved us and the whole world—in this trust we are born anew.

Pastoral Reflections

Baptismal renewal is a central theme of Lent and of the Lenten lectionary. We are renewed in our baptismal identity as ones born of water and the Spirit. There are several places to weave this theme through both the John and Genesis readings.

One might reflect on "born of water and the Spirit" as connection through baptism to God's birthing. In baptism, we are born in the waters of God's womb and filled with God's Spirit. In baptism, we take on our heavenly Parent's name, and become joint-heirs with Jesus the only begotten one. There is room to explore the often neglected feminine or motherly aspects of God.

Turning to the Genesis reading, we encounter God's call of Abram, the unlikely patriarch of a family that become a people and nation. This is the beginning of the story of Abraham—the starting place for the story of the Abrahamic religions. It is especially worthwhile to draw connections to this reading if you gave sermonic attention to the First Reading from Genesis 2 on the previous Sunday. During Lent in Year A, the First Readings form a story arch of God's people from our primordial parent's fall into sin down through the ages highlighting several key figures and events in the story of the Jewish people, and by faith of Christians, too. We Christians have sometimes called this salvation history. It makes a wonderful compliment to another string of scripture lessons telling the so-called salvation history we will hear at the Easter Vigil—the day for baptisms and baptismal renewal.

Origins. The beginning of the Jewish people. The rebirth by water and the spirit. There is ample room to reflect on what is our rootedness and our genesis as people of faith.

Journey. Abraham leaves his homeland and goes to a new place. In the journey he takes on a new identity, a new purpose, a new life. Nicodemus has to have his theological worldview turned upside down—making the spiritual journey from believing by seeing to belief as faith in the promises of God. In baptism we are born into a community, receive a new identity, and are born anew. The journey of faith starts at the font but our sojourn leads us down roads we never imagined, causing our thinking to be upended, and our sense of God's grace to be ever widened by a love for each of us personally and yet inclusive of every aspect of the universe—"for God so loved the world."

Baptism as our ending and beginning. It is where our death meets its death, and where our Christian life begins. It is in the waters of baptism that we are grafted into God's holy, chosen people—born not of the flesh but by the Spirit of God.

Blake Scalet

Third Sunday in Lent
March 12, 2023

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

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

There is a thirst in this week's readings. A thirst for water in the desert as the Hebrews travel through the wilderness. A thirst for living water from a woman with a past talking to a stranger. A thirst for the cool refreshment of a word of grace to hurting, broken people who know their need for God.

The Exodus reading continues for a third week the recounting of some of the major events of the Jewish people—a greatest hits of the Hebrew Bible. We began in the garden. Last week we met the patriarch of several faiths, Abraham. Now this week we are with Moses following the exodus from slavery in Egypt and on the journey to the promised land.

The people have no sooner been set free from their Egyptian captors, crossed the Red Sea on dry land, and been provided with manna in the wilderness when they find a new reason to complain to Moses—surely God is going to allow us to die of thirst! What a comfort to know things have changed and the faithful in our day are no longer as fickle as these

13. Mary L. Coloe, PBVM. *Wisdom Commentary Volume 44A John 1-10,* 84-96.

wandering Hebrews! Sadly no. God's people in every age seem to have a penchant for too quickly forgetting all that God has provided and instead find something new to complain and quarrel about.

Turning to the Gospel reading, we meet Jesus' interaction with a Samaritan woman at the well. This interaction in John's gospel seems to serve almost as a foil to Nicodemus from the previous chapter, whom we met in last week's gospel reading. Nicodemus is the epitome of Jewish religious insider, the woman at the well his opposite. She is a woman, a sworn enemy as a Samaritan, who we will learn later in the passage is not without some amount of relational/marital intrigue. Even the setting is reversed—rather than Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, Jesus meets this woman in the middle of the noonday heat.

This meeting between Jesus and the woman is scandalous. A rabbi should not be in this situation, full stop. What's more, they are meeting at Jacob's well—is this an allusion to all of the prior biblical accounts of meeting women at wells: Rebekah, Rachel, and Zipporah? This woman, who has had for undisclosed reasons a history of failed relationships, six and counting, is here talking with Jesus in a setting that has hints of romance and archetypal marriages.

Jesus knows her past. He does not condemn her but invites her through this conversation to receive the living water he has to offer. He offers grace and renewal to this woman parched by life. It seems there could be a connection here to the Romans reading. We know God by grace. We all have a past. We all have baggage. Yet, while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Here is living water. Here is refreshment for wandering souls, for lives that are scarred by the hardships of living, for people who have lost hope. Moses strikes a rock and water flows for the quarrelling, the complaining, and the ungrateful. Jesus meets this woman and changes her life. Grace can do that. Grace is like that.

There is a theme of testimony running through today's texts. The woman tells anyone who will listen of this remarkable encounter she has with Jesus. "Come and see" she says inviting them to share in this encounter. Many come to believe because of her witness, so that in verse 42 we read: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Encounters with God call for sharing and inviting others to do the same. The Romans passage gives a witness to the hardships faced in following Jesus. But, this life of faith ultimately leads to hope founded in God that does not disappoint. The Exodus reading and the Psalm stand as witnesses that God does amazing things and provides blessings more than we could ask or imagine even to those whose hearts are far from faith and gratitude. God's grace and mercy pour through our lives, flooding us with blessing so that we might live as witnesses to this grace.

I want to return to the living water. There is so much that could be said about the richness of this image of water. Moving water. Stagnant water. Destructive water. Poisoned water. Lack of water. Rising sea waters. Drought. Flood. Hurricane. Tsunami. Water has the power to kill and the power to give life. We see this wonder in the aftermath of devasting storms but also in the reviving power water can bring to a withering house plant. We know for ourselves the necessity of water in the sweltering heat of a summer day on a hike that turned much longer than we planned—nothing is as satisfying or life-giving as that water.

God in Christ Jesus is offering living water, life-giving water. In our desert places, in our broken relationships, in our sufferings, in our complaints—water is flowing. Grace pours from the rock. Mercy is streaming down. Hope is pooling in our midst. Jesus offers this life-giving, life-changing water—let us drink of him and live.

Blake Scalet

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 23, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts

There are strong emotions in the texts for today. Samuel begins with grief, the psalmist lifts up the very present valley of the shadow of death, the writer to Ephesus (either Paul or a colleague) acknowledges the fear or uncertainty of people who have felt lost without Christ's presence; and the gospel demonstrates the fear and dis-ease of leaders and a community trying to make sense of physical ailments—and make sense of the one who would move outside of the religious customs to heal on the sabbath.

Moving beyond the emotions, we encounter actions of anointing and the promise of God being at work. God uses Samuel to anoint the future king; the psalmist announces that God anoints the head with oil and that there is abundance; the gospel demonstrates a strange anointing of dirt and saliva to create mud for the blind man. Each of these holy actions announces a God at work in the world and in the lives of individuals.

As a community we are invited to hear and experience the ways that "the Lord's spirit comes mightily" today. In lift-

ing up leaders, in restoring our very beings and providing in abundance, in being about the work of transformation in the lives of people and even in our religious institutions. This is a day to boldly move from the emotions that can hold us back or even the religious traditions that limit understanding of God's activity, so that we might more fully embody new life.

Pastoral Reflections

The readings portray several dichotomies—rejected/anointed, chosen/passed over, blind/healed, guided by light/living in darkness—and with them a number of potential landmines in preaching with regard to why God chooses some and not others, heals some and not others, and the ways some equate righteousness with health, ability, and prosperity. In moving through the texts, it is important to pay attention to challenges and questions hearers may have.

Years ago, a colleague, who had served a deaf congregation in Minneapolis, challenged our weekly text study group to be extremely mindful of how we approach texts of healing. She noted how easy it is to focus on the gift of being healed without realizing how it profoundly impacts individuals, communities, and families. Within her congregation there were questions of people getting cochlear implants or procedures that would allow for hearing. These "healings" had the possibility of restoration, but also the loss of community and connection. There were ways the individual who experienced a new or renewed sense of hearing could experience deep joy and grief simultaneously.

The story of healing in the gospel for today has significant repercussions for all involved. The young man, blind since birth, now sees. The experience and emotion is likely overwhelming him. The parents have seemingly been very present to their son and have been caregivers in his life; now their lives are changed—likely with excitement, but also trepidation. The community has only known this young man as being blind; now their expectations and ways of being community are dramatically changed. Finally, in the ancient world (and we can still see this today), there are ways that physical ailments or different ways of being in the world are considered to be brought about by sin or wrongdoing. If the young man was blind, clearly there was something he, his parents, or family had done to deserve this.

As a gay man, there are ways that this story resonates with me in regard to community expectations, perceptions, and understandings. I recall knowing I was "different" from a young age—4 or 5 years old. As I grew older I trusted that my family loved me, but I felt that my life would never be what they would hope for or expect. And, when I finally came out to them, my parents asked the question, "What did we do wrong?" What they had heard in society was that this wasn't normal; I was in some sense broken. What I came to experience in my own life is that God created me in such a way that there was a deep sense of purpose and call. What my parents came to realize is that it wasn't about doing anything wrong, but about God creating people wonderfully different with unique ways of being.

If we can proclaim the wonder, the power, and the beauty of God in our diversity, and the purpose of each person in how they are created and called to embody life (and new possibilities) in the world, we may be able to get beyond some of the landmines in the texts.

In fact, we might see a young shepherd boy who is given a purpose surpassing his and others' expectations; we might encounter a blind man who is given the possibility to testify to one who can transform lives, families, and community; and we might see, in the psalm, a God who does not abandon, but who walks with us through lush meadows and deepest valleys, all while inviting us to know God's enduring presence. Through these texts we might find our way to witness in our lives how God shows up and uses the fullness of who we are to share God's story.

Brad Froslee

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 26, 2023

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

Engaging the Texts

Restoration and resurrection are at the heart of the selected readings for this Fifth Sunday in Lent. Ezekiel prophesies to the dry bones and they are reassembled and restored; bone to bone, flesh to skin, breath to life. In John, Jesus weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus and while surrounded by the stench of death, commands a resurrection. God's work bringing about life in the face of death draws a clear connection between these two texts for the hearer, but the emphasis on God restoring and renewing bodies (both allegorical and literal) seems to stand against the Romans pericope. On the face, Romans reads as a case for mind-body dualism, where the body is something to be denied and transcended. "… those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit" (v.8-9)

One could spend time in a sermon distinguishing between Paul's use of the word "flesh" and "body" but by the time the lector finishes the second reading, the impact has been made. Bodies = bad. The ancient world suffered from a discomfort with bodies that is familiar to our current world; bodies can-

not be trusted (how tempting it is to numb away my anxiety rather than uncover what it's telling me), bodies are to be controlled (how many hours of the day must one labor in order to afford to live, especially on minimum wage?), bodies must be overcome (ignoring our body's demand for nourishment or rest for the sake of conforming to a specific beauty standard), bodies must conform (how much more does it cost, literally, physically, and emotionally, for those with fat bodies and disabled bodies to navigate this world made for those with a particular body size or certain abilities?).

When hearing these passages in the season of Lent, which invites us into practices of physical denial such as fasting, we are confronted with questions worth dwelling on: Do our bodies matter to God? Are our bodies sacred?

The valley of dry bones, the body of Israel, is re-membered and restored by God's promise fulfilled. The dead body of Lazarus arose out of the tomb by the power and presence of Christ. In both narratives, bodies *matter*. The power of death is conquered and bodies are brought to life, whether that is the communal body or the individual body… or both.

In John's Gospel, both the physical body and the communal body are resurrected when Jesus calls on the community to participate in this work of new life by unbinding Lazarus. Participating in God's love and desire for the restoration and resurrection of our bodies, our communities, our very lives, is an excellent invitation as we prepare ourselves for the resurrection of Christ. As Anna Carter Florence once wrote, "Resurrection is divine initiative. But unbinding? That may be up to us."[14]

Pastoral Reflections

Recently, I was asked what I would do for work if I weren't a pastor. I've daydreamed about this topic enough to have a list of ideas on the ready, most of them so far-fetched and unsuited for my personality and skills that they are obvious cases of my escapist tendencies. But when I was invited to consider the question more deeply, I paused to imagine scenes of my ministry and what it would mean to release them from my daily work. I saw myself leading worship (how could I walk away from such a cherished view of God's faithful?), teaching middle school confirmation (I would be a fool to step away from some of the best teachers I've known), preaching (I would not miss the anxiety sermon prep produces but the privilege and power of having a pulpit is not lost on me), baptizing (imho: the best part of the job), and then the image that I could not shake: standing at the edge of a grave, laying to rest one of God's own. *That moment* I would truly miss. Not because presiding over funerals is fun, or easy, or profitable. But because it's honest. While I may question my ability to make relevant Luther's Small Catechism for today's youth, or to preach eloquently, or to lead worship with reverence and relevance, I know precisely my job at the graveside; to sit with people in the depth of their grief, to bear witness to their lament, and to proclaim that while death is certainly powerful, it does not have the final word.

The reading from Ezekiel starts with the LORD dropping the prophet in the middle of the valley of death and leading him around to see for himself the dry bones…the *very* dry bones. That emphasis tells me that this isn't simply a place of death, it's where death has ruled for some time, a place where death is convinced that it's won. Preparing to preach for this Sunday should include a tour of the graveyards we've been dropped into—the literal graveyards of departed saints, or the metaphorical graveyards of failed marriages, addiction, poverty, and the systems and sources of death themselves: racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, to name a few. Our role of pastor and preacher is to enter the graveyards of our communities, to know them well, and to speak God's truth to the dry places…the *very* dry places.

Ali Ferin

14. Anna Carter Florence. *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence*. (Luther Seminary, 2016) 50.