

Preaching Helps

The Sundays of Ordinary Time to the Season of Christmas

October 1–December 31, 2023

A Hasty Beginning, An Abrupt Ending

“**T**he beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Where’s the verb? The teacher marks the sentence as a fragment and sends it back for revision. But perhaps Mark meant this sentence as a title. Or perhaps he was simply in a hurry to tell anyone who would listen the story of Jesus. Good grammar wasn’t a priority. Mark’s ending isn’t a fragment but it leaves us hanging: “And [the women] went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) Well, they must have said something to someone, or this ending wouldn’t even be here. This issue of *Currents* offers several insights on what comes between the beginning and the ending of Mark’s gospel. Be sure to save this issue where it’s accessible to you as we enter the season of Mark on the First Sunday of Advent.

How do we think about beginnings and endings as we create our sermons? Of course we know that context matters. Some congregations, as well as the preacher, expect a prayer at the beginning: “Let the words of my mouth...” Some expect the preacher to say something like, “I want to put a tag on this morning’s sermon...” Imagine that the sermon is on Mark 1:1–8, the Gospel for the Second Sunday in Advent. The tag could be, “A wild word in the wilderness for you.” That’s a fragment, a bit like the beginning of Mark. Perhaps you don’t start with a prayer or a sermon tag, but the beginning is very important. Here are some things to consider:

- **Look around the congregation** before you say a word. Let people know you care about them. You don’t have to grab their attention—they’ve come to listen. But you don’t want to lose their attention at the beginning!
- The first sentence needs to be **short and easy to remember** so you can speak without reading. If your opening sentence has more than one comma, it’s too complicated! You can look down later if you need to find your place, but look at listeners when you say your opening sentences.
- **Be compelling rather than dull or predictable:** “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness.” That’s true,

but so what? You might begin with a question: “Have you heard God speaking to you in the wilderness?” This question connects the wilderness in the text with wilderness in listeners’ lives. Remember: always leave space after a question as though you want people to be answering even without speaking!

- **Don’t promise what you can’t deliver:** “Why is there evil in the world?” is a question too big for many sermons and surely too big for one.
- **Anticipate** the whole sermon, but also **connect directly to the next part** of the sermon. The beginning sentence(s) need to be “conductive” leading people into the sermon.

Endings

Endings are the hardest part of a sermon. It’s tempting to think the ending will just come to us and if it doesn’t come, we’ll simply say, “Amen.” How can you think about endings?

- **Look at people** as you preach the last sentences. Where do you hope listeners will be at the end? Is this a call for some action? (Be as specific as possible) Is the ending a blessing? (Look around the sanctuary; include everyone and don’t read the last sentences) Whatever your hope for listeners, look at them — and stay a moment without dashing off!
- **End once, not twice or more.** Avoid “Finally” especially if you have another page to go! Overall, I encourage preachers to avoid numbering all together (“First of all... secondly...”, etc.) People will worry that they’ve missed No. 2 when you go on to No. 3.
- **No new material at the end.** Yes, you might surprise people at the end, but it’s not the time for completely new ideas or a completely new subject.
- **Reinforce the central theme of the sermon.** If you’ve used a visual image to tie the sermon together, bring it into your ending. If you began with a story, recall bits of it at the end.
- **Plan your ending carefully** (even if you sense the Spirit giving you a new ending as you preach). Don’t count on “Amen” to be your ending. Ask yourself: “Does my sermon end without ‘Amen’?”

Though Mark’s ending seems abrupt and unfinished, his ending was carefully planned. In her book *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark*, New Testament scholar Joan L. Mitchell says that Mark shaped his ending with great care: “the grammar and syntax of Mark 16:8 show a carefully constructed verse in two parallel parts...the two halves of v. 8a each have six words in Greek; the two halves

of v. 8b wind down to four words, then two.”¹ In Greek, the final word is *gar* (“for,” in English). Mitchell claims this abrupt ending is for us — “to bring the readers and hearers to their own thresholds of faith, to the limit of words to speak the unspeakable, to the limit of story to make the absent One convincingly present, and to the limit of human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death.”² That’s not a bad definition of preaching.

I’m grateful to each writer for this edition of “Preaching Helps.” They span the United States from California to Maine. They’re poets and seminary professors, campus pastors and parish pastors, authors and doctoral students. Some are retired and others are early in their careers. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), called to serve as Indiana Christian Church Associate Professor at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. She has authored two books: *For Theirs is the Kingdom: Inclusion and Participation of Children in the Gospel According to Luke* (Lexington/Fortress, 2019) and *The Gifts They Bring: How Children in the Gospels Can Shape Inclusive Ministry* (Westminster John Knox, 2023). **Meta Herrick Carlson** (she/her/hers) is a pastor and poet. Her ministry is rooted in a love for meaningful ritual, accessible language, and healthy communities. Her fourth book, *Ordinary Blessings for the Christmas Season* (Broadleaf Books, October 2023) offers blessings about what is holy and hard about the holiday season. Meta laughs at her own jokes, dresses her pit bull in sweaters, and packs extra snacks just in case. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and their three kids. Much to her surprise, **Christa M. Compton** celebrates ten years of ordination this year. The first chapters of her professional life were spent in a high school English classroom in South Carolina, where she was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year, and in classrooms at Stanford University, where she earned a PhD from the School of Education in 2007. Christa currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey, where she delights in bringing together people across generations to worship, pray, sing, learn, serve, and play. You will often find her borrowing an unrealistic number of books from her local library, writing poetry, and cheering for her beloved Virginia Cavaliers (especially during basketball season). **Caleb Crainer** (he/him/his) serves as pastor at St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church in Los Angeles, California, where he also serves as Dean of the LA Metro Conference. He is a product of Valparaiso University, The Graduate Theological Union, The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, 4 billion years of evolution, friends, parents, and a fair amount of Star

Trek. Caleb is currently savoring his second year of PhD work in Contextual Theology at Claremont School of Theology.

Elaine Hewes is a retired Lutheran pastor who now serves St. Brendan Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine. She has lived in the small coastal town of Sedgwick for more than forty years, where she and her husband, Michael, raised their three children. A former homiletics teacher at Bangor Theological Seminary and a lover of the arts, Elaine is passionate about finding ways of breaking open (kaleidoscoping) the biblical text using the language of music, poetry, and the “ordinary things” of our beautiful, fragile, suffering world. **Catherine Malotky** is a retired ELCA pastor who is celebrating grandchildren, an aging dog, a steadfast spouse, and an occasional foray into theological reflection. She most recently authored the third quarter of the Augsburg Adult Bible Studies, “The Righteous Reign of God.” **John Rohde Schwehn** (he/him) serves as one of the University Pastors at Augsburg University in Minneapolis. When he’s not working alongside his amazing colleagues and students at Augsburg, he can be found riding his bike, cooking, and attempting to manage the chaos of his home. He lives in north Minneapolis with his wife, Anna, and their two daughters. **Susan P. Thomas** is tremendously grateful to have served in congregational, campus, and international ministries that challenged and broadened her understanding of faith, hope, and love. She lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire with her husband, Michael, with whom, in contradiction to her concerns about climate change, she travels to the Pacific Northwest and Austria fairly often to see their far-flung sons and families. **Wilbert “Wilk” Miller** is a retired ELCA pastor living in Essex, Connecticut, with his wife, Dagmar. He has been blessed (or as Eugene Peterson would have it in his initial *The Message* translations of the beatitudes, “lucky”) to have lived and served congregations in wildly diverse settings: inner-city Philadelphia; downtown Washington, D.C., San Diego, and New York City; Main Line Philadelphia and Old Saybrook, Connecticut.

Reader, I’m grateful to you for joining our conversation about preaching, as we bring “hearers to their own thresholds of faith.” God bless you and your preaching wherever you are.

Barbara K. Lundbad (she/her)

Editor of Preaching Helps

1. Joan L. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 15.

2. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence*, 114.

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost October 1, 2023

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25:1-9

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Engaging the Texts

“Repent and turn from all your transgressions,” Ezekiel says, speaking on God’s behalf. Turning – or returning – to God is a thread that runs through this season as we move toward the conclusion of the church year. Over several weeks, in a series of stories that challenge and perplex us, we are reminded of the many ways that we turn away from God. We are also reminded of the many ways that God calls us to repent, to turn back. The final words of the Ezekiel text lay it out directly: “Turn, then, and live.”

Having just literally flipped the tables in the temple, Jesus now flips the tables on the chief priests in a different way. They challenge him on questions of authority, and Jesus replies with a scenario that seems designed to provoke them. He highlights two sons who both change their minds about doing the will of their father. One son, at least, ends up doing what his father wants, but neither son moves swiftly or enthusiastically to work in the vineyard. We often approach obedience to God with that same reluctance, both over-promising and under-delivering.

The Christ hymn in Philippians sets before us the example of our self-emptying, humble savior who does not hesitate to do the will of God – even when that obedience means his own death. At the same time, Philippians reminds us that whatever change we are able to accomplish – in our life or in the world – is not our own doing, but the result of God’s faithfulness: “It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for [God’s] good pleasure.”

Paul’s hope is that we will take Christ’s example as our own, looking not to our personal interests but to the interests of others. That sacrificial love is not always our first instinct. And so we pray, alongside the psalmist, that God might show us God’s ways and teach us God’s paths, trusting that God forgets our transgressions and remembers us with steadfast love.

Pastoral Reflections

“It’s not fair!!” How many times have we heard this complaint from children, who are keenly aware of all discrepancies in how they are treated? *It’s not fair that my big sister gets to stay up later. It’s not fair that everyone else has a cellphone and I don’t. It’s*

not fair that I always get blamed for what my little brother does.

We laugh at the child’s skewed sense of justice, but as adults, we aren’t any better. We want to see other people punished according to the measures that we deem fair. “Throw the book at THAT guy,” we cry gleefully when our favorite real-life villain goes to court. We take special delight when “cancel culture” goes after the celebrity we want to see cancelled. Meanwhile, when it comes to the consequences of our own terrible choices, we long for a mercy beyond measure.

Ezekiel names our propensity for crying out, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” To which God replies: *How is it unfair when I have shown you the way to new life, a new heart, and a new spirit?*

We, like both sons in the story Jesus tells, resist following God’s ways. Sometimes we initially refuse to do God’s will and instead follow our own reckless paths. But God’s steadfast love eventually pulls us back to a better way. At other times we insist that this time we will do God’s will immediately, but we don’t follow through. We keep putting it off, and eventually our feelings of shame convince us that God’s grace is not for us.

Neither son in the story Jesus tells is a great role model. Only the Son of God shows us what complete obedience to God looks like. As the Philippians hymn reminds us, Jesus “became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”

It’s that death that accomplishes our salvation. It’s the cross that means we can trust that God will not remember our transgressions but will instead remember us according to God’s steadfast love. It is God’s goodness that redeems us, not our own.

Even though it’s not the season of Lent, several of the readings throughout these weeks suggest that we might sing the Lenten version of the Gospel acclamation: *Return to the Lord, your God, for [God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and abounding in steadfast love.*³ I love how one setting of the Lutheran liturgy bids us sing the last phrase twice, as if realizing that we need to be doubly reminded of that steadfast love.

Even though God’s steadfast love is unfailing, we still struggle to accept that it is for everyone – for the tax collectors and the prostitutes, for the chief priests and elders, for the people we revile and the people we love best, for those of us who run away from the vineyard and for those of us who begrudgingly end up there.

Everyone, God? Really? It’s not fair.

To which God says: *Exactly. And that’s the point.*

Christa Compton

3. See *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Holy Communion Setting 3, page 142.

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost October 8, 2023

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:7-15

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

Engaging the Texts

Pour a full glass of wine from a top-notch vineyard for this week's sermon prep, folks. Or another beverage of choice, given that these texts suggest that vineyards are an awful lot of trouble.

At first we catch glimpses of the care with which vineyards are built. The beloved in the Isaiah text finds a fertile hill, clears out the stones, plants the best vines, builds a tower and a wine vat, and waits for the premium grape harvest to roll in. This care is echoed in the gospel, as we hear how the landowner plants the vineyard and then adds fences and watchtowers to protect it.

But the vineyard life quickly goes off the rails. In Isaiah, the yield turns out to be wild grapes – a disappointment to the one who had so carefully planted the vines. Still more dramatically, in Matthew's gospel we find a vineyard populated by masochists and murderers. Each newly arrived group of slaves is horrifically abused, and some of them are killed.

Our default interpretation is to assume that the landowner in the parable is God. That approach is even more tempting given that it's the landowner's son who ultimately dies at the hands of the tenants. But I always struggle to understand why the landowner would be so reckless with all of those lives. He keeps sending slaves into the vineyard, even after the slaves are beaten and killed and stoned. At best it seems foolish, at worst, cruel. Furthermore, to put God in the role of the landowner, especially when coupled with Jesus' warning about the kingdom of God being taken away, has too often been deployed in the service of supersessionism.

It's true that in this moment Jesus seems fully aware that his life is in danger. Perhaps he is putting these leaders on notice that their ultimate plans to eliminate him won't turn out the way they hope.

But here's a thought experiment. What if we imagined ourselves in the position of the landowner? We have built all kinds of systems and structures that perpetuate violence and harm, especially against the most vulnerable.

I'm writing just days after the University of North Carolina spent several hours on lockdown after a faculty member was shot and killed on campus. A new academic year has barely begun, and already there have been incidents of gun violence at several schools across the country. CNN

reports that almost 42 million Americans (over one-eighth of the U.S. population) are estimated to live within one mile of a mass shooting since 2014.⁴ The concentric circles of gun-related trauma wreak havoc in all directions, even more so when we include incidents of family violence and death by suicide.

And yet we have done little as a country to interrupt these recurring massacres. We keep sending people to schools, movie theaters, offices, concerts, banks, and grocery stores without doing anything to protect them from the violence. And we know that racism fuels additional violence that targets people of color.

We have also constructed systems that keep people in poverty. We don't provide a living wage to people who are employed full-time. With rents skyrocketing and mortgages out of reach, there's a lack of affordable housing. And health care is prohibitively expensive, even for those lucky enough to have insurance.

Like the vineyards, our systems of injustice have been carefully constructed. The exploitation and harm that result from them are, as they say, features and not bugs. These systems are designed to get the results that they get, which is to hold some people back so that others can prosper.

Our response to these unjust systems has not been to dismantle them. Instead, like the landowner, we keep sending more people into them to be chewed up by those injustices again and again. We keep letting people get hurt instead of taking action to change things.

It's time to start over. Tear down the fences. Knock over the watchtowers. Take apart the wine press.

That's the solution that the prophet offers us in the first reading. What does the beloved do with the vineyard? "I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down." No amount of pruning and hoeing can salvage the vineyard, so it's time to try something new.

The Psalm also gives us a glimpse of what might be possible when the walls come down: "All who pass by pluck off its grapes." The harvest is available to everyone, even the boars and the beasts that roam nearby.

It's intimidating to imagine what it would take to level the systems we've constructed and to bring about a life-giving access to safety and economic security for people whose ability to thrive we have thwarted. Here's where the Philippians text helps us. Paul reminds us that our righteousness comes from faith in Christ. We have a God who is all about bringing life out of death. Resurrection is our inheritance, and so we can press on with the confidence that Christ Jesus has made us his own.

4. <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/08/us/americans-living-near-mass-shootings-statistics-dg/>

When we feel daunted by the powers of evil (both within us and around us), we press on. When we despair at the intransigence of those unjust systems, we press on. When we fear the suffering that might await us when we topple the powerful watchtowers, we press on.

God can bring about a new harvest where we least expect it. And so we press on.

Christa Compton

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 15, 2023

NOTE: The familiar readings for this Sunday and the next give preachers a choice to rely on standardized interpretations or explore new avenues. As we consider the contexts of each passage, we can read nuances that challenge privileged readings we might be used to. As we consider the perspectives of ancient characters and audiences, we have more insight into the ways that we bring ourselves to these texts too.

Isaiah 25:1-9

Psalm 23

Philippians 4:1-9

Matthew 22:1-14

Engaging the Texts

The reading from Isaiah (in the first Isaiah/proto-Isaiah chunk of the book) is set against the impending destruction of the Southern Kingdom of Judah at the hands of the powerful Assyrian army. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has already been conquered decades earlier, but the prophet Isaiah encourages Judah to remain steadfast in the face of certain doom. Jerusalem is their mountain fortress where God's justice will finally be done. The enemy armies who threaten death will be destroyed and the faithful people of God will enjoy a grand banquet. Judah eventually loses the war, but in holding out they were able to preserve some of their culture and religion. How do we build ourselves up to face difficult situations?

Psalm 23 is the most popular psalm primarily because of Christian conflation of "The Lord" and Jesus. Many people find comfort in being "sheep" guided to safety and nourishment. But do we want to be considered simple sheep? In terms of structure, the psalm seems to split into two parts, verses 1-4 and 5-6. In the second part the metaphor seems to change to a strange banquet with one's enemies. Traditionally this is seen as an image of kingly hospitality and protection. But if we try to preserve the continuity of the psalm and imagine the main character remains the sheep, the psalm can take on a different tone. "Setting a table before me in the presence of my enemies" no longer has a triumphant tone, but one with

foreboding. The sheep will be slaughtered. Dwelling in the House of the Lord, the place of sacrifice, for mere days, not years. I imagine this could be a psalm of sacrifice from the sheep's perspective. How do we determine where to place our trust?

Paul's address to the community in Philippi comes in the form of a composite letter compiled into one book in the Bible. Philippi was the location of Paul's first arrest after healing a possessed woman. Now he explicitly addresses two women by name and urges them to resolve their differences. Sometimes Euodia and Syntyche are assumed to be in conflict with each other, but the text doesn't say that. For all we know, they could both be leaders within the community and Paul is encouraging them to work together. Paul extols their virtues of gentleness, prayer, and the peace of God. According to this passage, focusing on virtuous living without hyper-fixating on rules (doing "whatever" is honorable...etc.) is what leads to God's peace. By lifting up the place of these named women in this community and their faithful work, Paul challenges traditional patriarchal hierarchies. How do we encourage one another in serving others?

The Gospel of Matthew presents us with another familiar parable of a wedding banquet. The king gives a wedding banquet for his son, and no one wants to come. We wonder why they are choosing not to come. The king sends out slaves to promote the party, but folks are still not interested; some even hurt or kill the king's slaves! The enraged king reacts violently by sending troops to kill the murderers and burn their entire city and we see the king for who he truly is. The king seeks vengeance because he feels disrespected. He sends his remaining slaves to bring people off the street and they fill up the hall with all sorts of folks. The king shows up and berates one guy for not having the proper attire. The guy stays silent, but the king has him restrained and tossed out. I believe an ancient audience would have recognized a tyrannical ruler and an innocent bystander in this parable. Many are called into danger, but few are chosen for violence. Slaves are murdered and the plot moves on, a whole city is destroyed, and the banquet continues; an innocent man is berated for his clothing, and we are all witnesses to these injustices. Will we choose to intercede?

Pastoral Reflections

There are so many ways to interpret these passages. In Los Angeles we are currently seeing massive labor strikes that highlight the ways that rich and powerful people exploit the labor and creativity of working-class people trying to get by. These texts can speak powerfully to those who feel unfairly treated when we see the conflicts of the texts in terms of class struggles. The class struggles are often conflated with urban/rural divisions.

Cities in the ancient world, like today, were places of consolidated power and resources and diversity and consolidated exploitation, whereas rural communities tended to be more demographically homogeneous places that did not always benefit from their labors. I hail from a more rural midwestern context and currently serve in a dense urban setting, so I am tuned into the ways that urban and rural divisions are stoked to prevent class solidarity. Corporate powers benefit from public division.

In reading these texts I see a strong message of cooperation among vulnerable people who work together to resist exploitation by maniacal people with money and power. Isaiah encourages his people to stand firm in the bonds that connect them. Psalm 23 highlights the sacrificial paradigm we fall into. Philippians lifts up the leadership of those who had been excluded, and the Gospel parable confronts us with an example of the violence done to innocent people. The good news is that our salvation is not dependent on our complicity. So, how will we respond?

Caleb Crainer

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 22, 2023

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm 96:1-9 [10-13]

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22

Engaging the Texts

In order to understand what's happening in the first reading, we must remember that Cyrus conquered the Neo-Babylonian empire and founded the first Persian empire, becoming the liberator of the Jewish people in the process. In the reading from Isaiah 45, the prophet declares Cyrus as God's "anointed." That word is also translated as "Messiah" and "Christ" but in the context of the Hebrew Bible, the term is usually reserved for a kingly role. Here God's anointed one, Cyrus, is empowered with violence and destruction to free God's people. The prophet is clear that God's people are to credit God alone for this, not Cyrus, who is merely a vessel of divine power. How might this inform how modern Christians approach people of other religious traditions?

Psalm 96 is another text that might open conversation about how our religious tradition relates to others. While verse 4 seems to imply that many gods exist (but the LORD is the most powerful of them all), verse 5 further demotes other gods to mere idols. The psalmist calls for giving God credit for the splendor of the world and proclaiming God's reign among other cultures. The command to God's people is to remain

faithful to God. One important point is that God's "righteous judgment" upon the earth is not clarified. In fact, God's fair judgment on the earth is a cause for celebration. In waiting for God to judge, can we remove ourselves from that role?

Paul's letter to the Thessalonian community opens with this declaration of praise for their imitation of Paul himself and Jesus in the face of persecution. Paul extols their reputation in the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia (the areas of Central and Southern modern Greece) for their conversion from worshiping "idols" to worshiping the living God and waiting for Jesus' return and rescue. Paul is convinced that the apocalypse is near, that his work is urgent, and this letter commends this community for their faithful example. As a new Christian community living in a religiously pluralistic society, their distinctiveness comes as much from what they avoid as what they practice. How do modern Christians try to distinguish themselves?

The Gospel of Matthew presents us with a scene of the religious leaders attempting to trap Jesus. They come with false compliments before they ask a seemingly simple question. Instead of answering the question directly, Jesus turns the question back on the religious leaders, asking them to produce the coin used for the tax. They do, even though they probably shouldn't be carrying it themselves. Jesus gets them to identify the coin as stamped with the emperor's likeness. Then he instructs them to give to the emperor things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. This could be taken in several ways, but it begs the question: "What things bear God's image?" If everything bears the image of God, does that mean that nothing really belongs to the emperor besides the money?

Pastoral Reflections

These texts present a difficult challenge to any congregation engaged in interreligious dialog or learning experiences. The Bible is a little library from a long time ago from the other side of the planet. God's spirit flows through these pages and into our lives, but as a living tradition, we also approach these texts with our own experiences. Having engaged in a fair amount of interreligious dialog myself, I can tell you that starting with "your gods are idols, and my God is best" is not going to build trust and understanding.

We always assume that people are adherents of their religious traditions for their own reasons that we don't need to critique. If your ultimate stance is that others need to conform to your religion, then you aren't ready for true dialog. We engage in interreligious dialogue to be agents of God's peace, to build solidarity with others, and to practice the unconditional love of Christ.

The psalmist wrestles with how to approach a religiously diverse context, ultimately deciding to let God be the judge.

The second reading is addressed to a Christian community amid many religious traditions. Paul commends them for their imitation of Christ's hospitality. The Gospel lesson about paying taxes is also an interreligious question as the emperor was worshiped as divine. Leaders within Jesus' own religious tradition are trying to entrap him publicly, but in doing so they produce the proof of their hypocritical allegiances. As a gay Christian, it's important for me to recognize that just because we share the same faith doesn't mean we are on the same team. The Good News of these texts is that we are liberated from narrow, zero-sum, exclusionist religion that would put the mantle of judgment upon us. Instead, we experience the gift of true love and connection by respecting others as we would hope they respect us.

Caleb Crainer

EDITORIAL NOTE: Two options are offered for October 29: Reformation Sunday texts and the texts for Pentecost 22. Preachers and listeners may appreciate the chance to hear an alternative to the Reformation texts assigned every year.

Reformation Sunday October 29, 2023

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalms 46

Romans 3:19–28

John 8:31–36

Engaging the Texts

In each of the texts assigned for Reformation Sunday, we are dropped into a broader discernment about how those who seek to keep the covenant God has established are to imagine God and God's role in our lives and the life of the world. Jeremiah spoke into a world at war, the Judean people small players in a much bigger world-power drama. Just 150 years after their Northern cousins had fallen to the Assyrians, now his people, too, hauled off into exile by Babylonian conquerors, were severed from markers of the covenant – their land and their identity as God's chosen ones. To manage this theological (and political) crisis, Jeremiah identified the people's faithlessness as the trigger for God's wrath. Jeremiah begins with the spotlight trained on their infidelity to the covenant, God's destructive response, and repentance as a condition of restoration. Then, he turns his focus to the grace of the God who established the covenant in the first place. To the Babylonian exiles he prophesied restoration by a God who satisfies God's own demands. God offers a new covenant with Judah, and Israel, too. God will "remember their sins no more" (31:34b).

Psalms 46 also appeals to God's persistent accompaniment

in the midst of natural chaos (this was earthquake territory, after all), and political calamity. Tumultuous waters (46:3) tame into rivers that provide (46:4). The God of desolation is also the God who is refuge (46:1, 11).

In the Epistle, Paul lays out his argument for the believers in Rome – none of us, not one, is without sin according to the law (3:23), but in Christ, we are justified by faith (3:24). In a swirl of theological tussling about whether Gentiles could be counted as legitimate believers, Paul shifts the attention from whether and how humans can measure up, to the grace of God. A case can be made that the "faith" being described is not human, but divine. God is the faithful one, who, through Jesus, frees us from sin.

John's gospel was written later than Romans, likely to Judean believers who were experiencing friction in their communities because they were followers of Jesus. Again, believers are contending with the contours of their faith. Jesus' offer of truth leading to freedom (8:32) was met with patrilineal defense: we are children of Abraham and have never been enslaved, so what is the value of this freedom being offered? John's Jesus builds on Paul's argument that everyone who sins is a slave to sin (8:34), a different kind of slavery than first came to mind for the believers (though their forebears certainly had been slaves in Egypt). From Paul, the law reveals our persistent failure to keep it, which means that, jumping to Jesus' angle, we are all in bondage to sin. So, what is sin? What is truth? What is freedom?

Pastoral Reflections

Like the Babylonian exiles trying to figure out how to behave more faithfully, like the psalmist who pictures God as refuge, like the Roman believers trying on a new framework for God's welcome, and like the Judean believers who were getting grief for following Jesus, we, too, are contending with the faith we've inherited from our forebears. Context makes a difference. Our "enemies" are different, social norms have shifted, and our awareness of deep trouble now extends beyond humans to the earth and all its creatures. Our atmosphere is super-charged, our jails are inequitably full, our attempts to self-medicate the complexity of living sometimes goes way off the rails, and no place seems safe from the guns that are everywhere. We are more and more numb to our dependence on each other and on our miraculous creation.

Fundamental assumptions about our lives are being challenged by looking behind the victor's version of history. How do we absorb the truth about the steady, calculated, persistent offences that have been and are committed in the name of Westward Expansion, our quest for economic dominance, and the assurance of our own survival? How do we, on Reformation Sunday, speak of the church's complicity in the devastating impacts of assuming we Christians are exceptional

(Manifest Destiny), and clearly deserving when others are not (*Doctrine of Discovery*)?

John's Jesus posited that the truth will set us free. Perhaps sin is not so much the things we do, but the very way we are wired—to survive at all costs, and, if we have the power and privilege, to justify our relentless extraction of land and labor from sibling human beings and the earth as compensation for our perceived hard work and superior intellect.

Perhaps, the truth we need to see is our own shadowed underbelly, the bargains we make with ourselves to rationalize our less seemly behavior. And, especially in these days of political uproar, another truth needs to be spoken. We cannot appeal to our political or even our spiritual lineage as a sign of our freedom, for all have sinned and fallen short. No one can earn God's approval.

Of course, it's all a mess. Whatever we build is built by us, sinners all. We are displaced because we displace ourselves. Finally, we must stop. Finally, it is God who is faithful, not us. It is God who can see through our defenses, and it is God who, in Jesus, renews God's covenant with us and remembers our sin no more. This painful and glorious truth will set us free.

Catherine Malotky

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost October 29, 2023

Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1–8

Matthew 22:34–46

Engaging the Texts

Psalm 1 paints in broad strokes the major themes of the day. There are two ways to live: as righteous (keyed to God) or as wicked (unmoored). Of course, few decisions in life are that clear cut, but the hymn establishes a continuum on which to locate. The psalmist sees the consequences clearly. The righteous are happy and the wicked are not so. The righteous are grounded and fruitful. The wicked will perish.

The Old Testament text from Leviticus 19 creates more gradients on the continuum. The cultural *Zeitgeist* of the people was in transition, from the powerlessness of the enslaved to residents of their promised land. What should guide the spirit of the people into this new identity? The book of Leviticus was the answer. Leviticus 19 is a part of the Holiness Code. It starts with Ten-Commandment adjacent material—rules for living. The point of the quest is captured in 19:2. “You shall be holy, because I the LORD your God am holy.” This can sound to our ears like an impossible demand,

but it is more instruction than imperative. God's holiness, God's overwhelming power, requires some boundaries in order to welcome unholy people into God's presence. An alternate translation could read as promise—you *will* be holy, because God, with whom you are in relationship, is holy.

Note the subtly imbalanced attention on those with power in the community. Only one who renders judgment can render unjust ones (19:15). Only those who have a voice can slander another, and only those who access another's blood can profit by it (19:16). Just a few verses later, though beyond our assigned text, the instruction addresses those who rape an enslaved woman claimed by another man but whose ownership is not yet transferred, sparing her life and requiring a guilt offering on his part (19:20).

The Gospel text is positioned in a longer confrontation between Jesus and the Sadducees and Pharisees. These competing religious factions were both vying for the loyalties of the synagogue's populace, all of whom were familiar with the Levitical Holiness Code and the broader requirement to live holy lives by following the law. Prior to today's verses, the Pharisees had tried to discredit Jesus by posing a question about paying taxes (22:15-22). Following this episode, he tangled with the Sadducees about the resurrection, which the Sadducees rejected (22:23-33).

Once again, the Pharisees attempted to discredit him by posing another trick question: Which is the greatest commandment? If Jesus answered with the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5), he would be aligning with the Pharisees. If he denied the Shema, they could accuse him of sacrilege. Jesus cites the Shema and then adds Leviticus 19:18, love your neighbor as yourself. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of holiness are equally important and interdependent. This was not a new idea, and, in fact, loving the neighbor can be seen as the central message of Leviticus as an expression of God's holiness incarnate.

Pastoral Reflections

These texts tread on a slippery line for human souls between despair of ever meeting God's holiness requirements and compulsive, single-minded allegiance to a list of rules that imply righteousness. Of course, there are those who abandon the whole enterprise, who walk away from moral or ethical frameworks, choosing instead a fierce commitment to self-survival, without consideration of the well-being of and interdependence with community and creation. Our times are rife with people signaling loyalty with one approach or another. Unfortunately, unbounded capitalism's incentives preference individual survival over community wellbeing.

But Leviticus and Jesus call us to the difficult work of living in the tension of being unholy people seeking to live lives that reflect the holy God who made us. We can never

claim to be more holy than another. That's not the right game to play at all when the bar is God's holiness. Instead, like our Israelite forbears on the brink of the promised land, we can orient ourselves toward anything that loves our neighbor as a way of incarnating God's love for us. What central values guide the work? Neighbor is broadly understood—any of our human siblings, and now, in these days of climate change, the neighbor can be the seas and air, the ecological web of creatures and plants and even stones that make up the whole intricate system that keeps us alive. If all are our neighbors, or, as Native wisdom asserts, if all are our relatives, how might that change our behavior?

Would we still ignore those who do not thrive in our economic system? Would we choose to bear some inconvenience, some lesser personal fiscal gain, to leave to our children (and our neighbors') the world they deserve—not just our children, but our children's children, and theirs after them?

Would we tame our impulse to make enemies of those with whom we disagree, and discipline ourselves to really see them, to first find common ground before sorting out our differences? Would we take on the painful truth of our national history (the church's, too) and allow our hearts to repent of the wrongs perpetrated in the name of settlement, development, and being right?

And can we do all of this hearing the voice of Jesus? Seeing his empty tomb? Can we stand humbled in the truth of God's love for us, as unholy as we are? Can we trust God's holiness to sustain us, to try again, to open our hearts to hope for a better world?

Catherine Malotky

All Saints' Sunday November 5, 2023

Revelation 7:9-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

Engaging the Texts

In the dedication to his book *What Christianity Is Not*, Douglas John Hall writes to his grandchildren: "One can only trust that there will be enough human ingenuity and wisdom in your generation and those to follow that the human species will find the will and the courage to embrace and act upon the best dreams of the past."⁵

As you prepare for All Saints' Sunday, ponder these "best

dreams" for the people you are called to serve and those they have loved. Use the beatitudes and Revelation as a catalyst. Seek to create a proclamation that is lavish, extravagant, and surprising, even magical. Refuse to tame the sweeping imagination of the biblical writers. Dare to dream!

As an aside, when I was in divinity school, our New Testament professor Luke Timothy Johnson urged us not to turn too quickly to the "expert opinions" of biblical scholars; rather, he summoned us to immerse ourselves in the fanciful biblical witness, teasing out our own initial impressions from God's word. We should take care not to jeopardize the originality of our sermons with the ideas and proposals of others that are untested by our parishioners' everyday wounds and losses, longings and aspirations.

Every preacher remembers saints craving words of hope: mourners standing at freshly dug graves; homeless people yearning for an iota of tenderness from passersby; old folks in nursing homes craving a family visit; parents staggering from the dreadful news that their fourteen-year-old son has been murdered. Every word counted on such occasions and every word counts this All Saints' Sunday.

I craved similar salutary words seventeen years ago. I spent too many days in intensive care with four pulmonary emboli. It was touch and go and excruciatingly difficult to carry on the briefest of conversations. This experience put pastoral visitation into a new perspective: no longer did the quantity of time spent matter; what mattered was the quality of the words spoken. I longed for others to gift me with a few familiar words from the Psalms or Jesus' "take and eat"—curative words overflowing with confidence and love.

People will eagerly gather in the pews on All Saints' Sunday longing for dreams saturated with confident hope for themselves and those they love. Trustworthy pastors will labor prayerfully in anticipation of this occasion; their wordsmithing will seek the finest words possible, unflinching words uttered in the face of cruel betrayals and startling evil, words reverently passed down from generation to generation.

In *Why the Bible Began*, Jacob L. Wright says that the Bible is entirely a loser's tale.⁶ We preach to losers, to those fearful tomorrow will never come. Jürgen Moltmann reminds us: "The messianic hope was never the hope of the victors and the rulers. It was always the hope of the defeated and the ground down."⁷

Many in our culture have understandingly grown weary of words. In recent gun control debates, well-meaning people have demanded, "Spare the prayers, take action"—as if prayers are not action. St. Francis of Assisi's words seem to ring truer, "Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." Of

6. Adam Gopnik, "How the Authors of the Bible Spun Triumph from Defeat," *The New Yorker*, August 21, 2023.

7. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 13.

5. Douglas John Hall, *What Christianity Is Not* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2023), xi.

similar sentiment are St. John Chrysostom's words, "A good example is better than a thousand words."

Though we may also harbor cynical sentiments about words, I beg preachers not to suffer a failure of nerve on All Saints' Sunday. Recall what Mark Twain said, "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning-bug and lightning." Pray to choose words carefully, courageously — words, God willing, packing a powerful surprise. Experiment with words, phrases, and thoughts that, like the beatitudes and Revelation, are extravagant and surprising, sometimes unsettling and almost always unfathomable. Believe that lavish words flowing from your heart and mouth will convey such an overwhelming robustness that our groaning world might shift a bit on its axis for the better.

Try these words on for size: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Such words are almost unimaginable and yet we do not forget them. "...behold a great multitude which no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb"—merely words penned by John of Patmos, but words that prompt dreams of heaven as an unimaginably rich and diverse and peaceful place. Or, "Blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are the persecuted." Who would ever utter such stuff and yet don't we measure all other words—and even actions—by these words of Jesus?

Whenever I doubt the power of words, I recall what Aidan Kavanagh writes in *On Liturgical Theology*: "When the citizens of Antioch expected savage punishment after a riot in 387, the imperial commissioners suddenly found their way to the doomed city barred by a group of Syriac-speaking holy men. While these wild figures interceded for the city, and their speeches were translated from Syriac into Greek, the bystanders 'stood around,' wrote a witness, 'and shivered.'"⁸

Entrusted with such precious dreams of the past, dreams of John of Patmos and Jesus, may we be confident that our words chosen carefully and courageously will cause people to shiver with hope on All Saints' Sunday.

Wilk Miller

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 12, 2023

Amos 5:18–24 (or Wisdom 6:12–16)

Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Matthew 25:1–13

Engaging the Texts

Oil.
And no oil.

As Jesus relates this parable in Matthew, we learn that—*incredibly*—half of the young women coming to keep vigil for a bridegroom's arrival brought the required lamps, but no oil to fuel them. *Wait, no one told me to bring oil!* Where was the miscommunication? Who was supposed to take care of this? Surely, they hadn't literally interpreted the instruction "Bring your lamp" to mean just bring the lamp itself!

Until this time around, I had always assumed the five ran out of oil because of their long wait. That they let their lamps burn a while, extinguished them to catch some sleep, and then—as the call came that the bridegroom was near—realized there wasn't going to be enough left in their lamps to illumine the way to the wedding feast. That they foolishly hadn't brought any *extra* oil.

But no. If you look more closely at the text, it appears that *they didn't bring any oil at all*. What were they thinking? And when did they realize none of the five had brought the necessary oil?

Were they foolish because they didn't bring oil? Or were they foolish not to use the time *before* the heralding of the bridegroom's arrival to seek some out? Yes—and yes.

Or did they expect that others would fill in their lack, providing what was needed? *Oh, dear, I guess I don't have any salad to put into this bowl that I'm bringing to the potluck. But surely someone else will fill it!*

These thoughts occurred to me when I came across a footnote in Ulrich Luz's *Hermeneia* Commentary on this passage. His close reading led him to the question of whether the lights referenced were oil lamps or torches. He quickly eliminates small oil lamps because they easily blow out in the wind and don't provide much light. But if torches, what sort? He writes about a garden party where his working group experimented and found that vessel torches, documented in antiquity and easily replicated by fastening a tin can on the end of a pole to hold the cloth wick and oil, impressively burned for up to two hours (Luz, footnote 29, p. 230).

This kind of detail and homemade research appeals to both the scholar and the Vacation Bible School teacher in me. But the overriding theme of the story isn't greatly affected

8. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York, Pueblo Publishing, 1984), 163.

either by the type of lamp or what it was that resulted in half of the young women being so unprepared. Neither is the delay of the bridegroom the theme (even though that delay parallels the delay of the *parousia*).

The overriding theme is that those who aren't ready may miss out on the *kairos* of joy (Luz, p. 232). They miss out on joy! This is a wedding, after all! In this story, being unprepared to meet the bridegroom results in separation from him. Being unprepared prevents participation in his joy.

Pastoral Reflections

So, what might have been the conclusion of this parable if the foolish young women, rather than leaving the scene to replenish their oil, had simply joined their wiser sisters by the light of *their* torches and gone to the event for which they'd been waiting, where their presence was expected? What if they had recognized it was more important to BE THERE to welcome and honor the bridegroom now that the time had come, than it was to have the right equipment with them? How often have you missed something important because you thought you needed to do something else instead, something you can't even remember in hindsight, while the event you missed is seared into your memory?

On the other hand, while there are stories and events in Jesus' life and teaching that lift up the grace of sharing the small amount one has, this doesn't happen to be one of those stories (witness the refusal of the wise women to share their oil—a rational decision, since it would have meant proceeding on the last portion of the celebratory way in utter darkness). *This* story is about taking seriously the task you've been given and being ready to fulfill it when the time comes. What was, after all, the bottom-line expectation of the bridegroom? That these women be in joyful attendance? Or that they joyfully light the way (which surely, in the middle of the night, someone needed to do)?

Either way, what the ending of the story does tell us is that the door of opportunity eventually closes. And sensing the ticking of the clock and the closing of certain doors makes the present time especially important. NOW is the time for active faith and love and hope as we live into an unknown, yet secure, future in God. In this sense, the parable is parenetic, directed to the Christian community. Live like the wise women, it tells us, in such loving, complete obedience that you can even sleep while you wait, knowing you are ready to meet your God.

Susan Thomas

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost November 19, 2023

Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18

Psalm 90:1–8 [9–11], 12

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Matthew 25:14–30

Engaging the Texts

At first reading, except for the glimmer of light in the second lesson, where Paul insists God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, these texts are not at all bashful about judgment, whether final or intermediate.

Who is going to be able to just go out and drink coffee after hearing them?

Yet, I would once again proclaim that there is gospel here, even (and maybe especially) in the Gospel text from Matthew, the parable of the talents. Good news. Joyful news.

First, we can rejoice that destructive, hateful, greedy, actions don't fall beneath God's radar. God sees them and God's prophets don't hesitate to describe their very real consequences, whether they are final or intermediate consequences. Take the long view, we're urged. A thousand years is but a watch in the night in God's sight, and so on.

But we don't have a thousand years. We may, as an example, have only ten to turn around the greediness that has put our inhabitable earth at such risk.

I hear you. More importantly, God hears you. And this parable, while being one of a series of judgment parables grouped together in Matthew, shows us a way forward, a way that two out of three characters in the story take.

You could read this parable as lauding capitalism, of industriously turning a profit on what you have to invest, rather than just hiding it away. Some, understandably, might think that's the no-brainer moral of the story.

Or you could step away a bit and be justifiably suspicious of the potentially usurious business practices that allow such growth in investment. How many cultures were wiped out, how many square miles of rainforest destroyed, how many lives impoverished by this growth?

Or you could read it as a story of joyfully receiving, using, and expanding that which you've been given. Investing in the investment made in you.

What I would suggest is to explore this last option and compare it to the fear (and even despair) under which the third slave lives. Here I would be preaching to myself, as I am frequently at a loss to imagine what can actually be done during these last days on earth as we've known it.

Take a moment to notice that the first two slaves have

chosen to live in the (super)abundance of what they've been given—and they've also been given time to do so. When their master returns and says to each of them, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master,” he is simply describing where they've already been living. In that joyful place of enough to share, to give away, to risk. In that place that allows for even more abundance to flourish in their lives and the lives of others.

In contrast, the third slave might be living a version of our second option above, the suspicious option. He tells his master he knows him (to which we can hear the master replying, “You think you know me? Think again!”). His master is “a harsh man, one to fear, one who reaps where he doesn't sow.” And out of that fear, the slave explains, he buried what he'd been given rather than risk losing it by using it. He despaired of being able to return it intact to his master. But, actually, it wasn't the treasure he was trying to keep safe. It was himself. He buried the potential to live in joy and abundance with others so that HE would be safe when the master returned. Meanwhile, during the long time that the master was away, the treasure loaned to him did no one any good. Not one tiny bit.

This is a story well-told, and we're not done with it yet. Matthew gives it one of his scary judgment endings. It may seem that the master does turn out to be harsh, yet it is the slave who has effectively condemned himself to the same joyless life he's already been living, a life of darkness and pain and isolation. As Dirk G. Lange notes, “He's buried himself.” (*Working Preacher*, Nov. 16, 2008)

Pastoral Reflections

When, years ago, I first heard the phrase, “To despair is presumptuous,” it felt like someone had reached in and shaken my soul so that I would pay attention. These are words I desperately(!) need. Perhaps you do, too, as we live with the knowledge that we've been given everything necessary for abundant life on this planet but have squandered it.

I didn't know the source of these precious words at the time I first heard them. Since then, I've found the phrase in John R. Claypool's writing, as well as hints of it in Josef Pieper's 1972 book *On Hope*, where he engages with Saint Augustine's idea that the virtue of hope lies midway between the two vices of despair and presumption.

In *The Hopeful Heart* (2003), Claypool credits an elderly rabbi, whom he met at a time of losing hope, for this particular insight: “Despair is presumptuous,” the rabbi told Claypool. “It is saying something about the future that we have no right to say because we have not been there yet and do not know enough.”

In this parable, we are told in no uncertain terms that a life of faithful discipleship is not a life of disengagement. Or

inactivity. Or presumptuous despair. It is a life that humbly admits it doesn't know the future and proceeds to act in hope.

My husband has, in the last few years, frequently remarked, “Anything can happen.” Because we've seen such unprecedented political and climate-related events in quick succession, this previously never expressed idea has taken root. The comment often has a negative connotation. But not always. The words “Anything can happen,” can also be, and on occasion we've seen it become, a statement of hope.

Now, knowing what we know and what we don't, what will we invest in the investment made in us at our creation? What will we invest to see these words turn into words of hope?

Susan Thomas

Reign of Christ Sunday November 26, 2023

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Psalms 95:1–7a

Ephesians 1:15–23

Matthew 25:31–46

Engaging the Texts

Both Ezekiel and Matthew describe what is known in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic thought as the “Day of the Lord.” This is a time when the political powers of the present world will be overthrown, and the people will be scattered. These prophecies tell us that, during this dark time, God will come to earth in unmediated form—Matthew envisions this as the return of Jesus—and will call together all people. For the author of Ephesians, writing at least a generation after both Matthew and the undisputed letters of Paul, this is not so much a future hope as a present reality—Jesus already sits in power over all the powers and authorities of this earth, (1:20–21) even if that authority is not yet fully realized in the present age. In the final day, most apocalyptic visions maintain that the dead too will be raised.

Scripture promises that God's dominion fully realized will be different from human empires of the past. Ezekiel especially emphasizes the care with which God will tend to the people in their time of distress: rescue, restoration, pasture, water, rest, and healing (34:11–16a). Although not directly related, the psalmist speaks of a similar sort of rescue, or salvation, using the metaphor of shepherding (95:1, 7). Moreover, Matthew describes the righteous unknowingly tending to God's self in similar ways with food, drink, welcome, clothing, and care (25:34–40). These pastoral images are intended to paint a strong note of hope for people wrestling with suffering and injustice in the present world (Eph 1:18), although the

specific contexts of each of the biblical audience's sufferings are varied, just as are our own contexts of suffering today.

At the same time, the work of God is not limited to triaging the damage wrought by human suffering. The Day of the Lord is a day of justice. In Hebrew, the term Ezekiel uses to describe God's justice is *mishpat* (Ezek 24:16), which refers to a legal decision based on what is right and orderly. Contrary to Matthew's vision of punishment (Matt 25:45), the picture that Ezekiel paints is not one of retribution, but rather, deliverance. The "fat and strong" sheep are excluded from the flock because they have become so at the expense of the lean sheep, whom they "pushed," "butted," and "scattered" (Ezek 34:21-22) to attain the strength that now must be destroyed (Ezek 34:19). Ezekiel's vision of deliverance is thus a type of restorative justice rooted in the equitable treatment of all, which requires the destruction of self-centered conceits on the part of the privileged.

Similarly, Matthew describes a separation of the flock based upon the treatment of others. Only for Matthew it is insufficient simply not to abuse those who have been marginalized by the earthly powers; instead, the divine ruler casts judgment upon all those who are not actively implementing God's justice already. Moreover, the consequence of inaction becomes, for Matthew, not merely exclusion but punishment (Matt 25:45).

Pastoral Reflections

Growing up, one of my favorite Sunday School songs was, "I Just Wanna Be a Sheep," by Brian M. Howard.⁹ I enjoyed the rhymes and accompanying gestures, acting out sheep ears as we sang "Baa, Baa, Baa, Baa," then mimicking goat horns as we professed our collective wish, "Don't wanna be a goat... nope!" while shaking our heads. In the clear dichotomy laid out for us, the choice was simple: sheep or goat. Hope or hopelessness. *No one* wanted to be a goat.

As an adult, I know the real world cannot be so simply divided. Most identity markers, such as race, gender, sexuality, and so forth, are social constructions, invented by those in power to create the illusion of clear difference and separation where none exists and so to keep people apart. In contrast, the author of Ephesians speaks of a God who knows no division, the fullness of whom "fills all in all" (Eph 1:23). Although both Ezekiel and Matthew are speaking metaphorically, it's telling that for Ezekiel God does not separate the sheep from the goats, as though such an artificial division was destined from the beginning, but rather, God separates the sheep from the sheep (Ezek 34:22). In the day of darkness when the powers of this world have completely failed, God comes

to earth to protect and save God's children from themselves.

I wonder what my childhood song would have looked like if it were based on Ezekiel's text instead of Matthew's. I'd still be a sheep, yes; but I might have avoided the harmful essentialization of people like the Pharisees and the Sadducees whom the song sets in opposition to the children of God but who, in fact, are all a part of God's expansive flock. Indeed, I might have realized that such essentialization is the very kind of bullying act that, in Ezekiel's vision, causes God to need to separate God's children in the first place—and that it puts me on the wrong side of the sheepfold. We live in a world prone to quick labels and easy divisions. In this world, may we see with the psalmist the sovereignty of our great God (Ps 95:2-5) who formed and loves us all. And may we each do the work incumbent upon us from our respective place in God's fold to name and dismantle the dichotomizing privilege that seeks to dominate or accepts as normative the domination of one group of people over another, destroying the foundations of such false strength and all its abusive, deleterious horns.

Amy Lindeman Allen

First Sunday of Advent December 3, 2023

Isaiah 64:1–9

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

Engaging the Texts

"How long?" the psalmist cries out, hoping for God's intervention (80:4). Isaiah recalls God's unexpected actions in the past (64:3) and longs for God's intervention in the present (64:9). Mark's gospel recounts Jesus' own description of God's return with reference to signs and warnings (13:31), while insisting that ultimately the time of God's action remains unknowable (Mark 13:32). So too, Paul speaks of God's past action for the people of Corinth through Christ (1 Cor 1:5) while waiting for Christ's final revealing among them (1:8-9). These writings occur generations apart from one another, yet all hang upon the common hope and expectation that God will intercede.

If the *when* is inscrutable, however, the biblical texts have much to say about the *what* of God's involvement in human affairs. The account in Mark's gospel, recorded as the prophetic teaching of Jesus, is most vivid—picturing a darkened earth, with the Son of Man coming, surrounded by angels (13:24-27). At the heart of this dramatic action, though, as in the prophecies last week in Ezekiel and Matthew, is to "gather [God's] elect" (Mark 13:27) and deliver them for

9. Mission Hills Music, Copyright ©1974, 2002, www.ButterflySong.com CCLI – 35445.

salvation (see Mark 13:13, 20). In fact, more of Mark's mini-apocalypse, as scholars have labeled it, is devoted to describing the scene and the time than the actual experience of the Day of the Lord.

In contrast, Isaiah's imagery immediately cuts to the point of God's purpose. Isaiah describes God tearing open the heavens—removing the barrier between God and humanity (64:1). This is the same action that Mark describes at the beginning of his gospel when the heavens are torn open for the Spirit to descend at Jesus' baptism (1:10). Isaiah then predicts that God's presence, furthermore, will be met with fear and respect by God's adversaries (64:2), but pleads for God to look with mercy upon God's people (64:9), even when they have gone astray (64:6-7). Such mercy is the restoration that will make God's people whole—the salvation (Greek *sozo*, rescue, preservation, wholeness) toward which both Mark and Isaiah point.

Similarly, the psalmist repeatedly calls for salvation (80:2, 7, 19) and restoration (80:3, 7, 19). Even Paul, with a more generous view of the human condition, at least as far as God's people in Corinth are concerned, likewise recognizes the need for divine intervention and strengthening on behalf of the Corinthians “so that you may be blameless” (1 Cor 1:8). In other words, at an unknown day and unknowable hour, God will break the final barriers that separate this world from the divine—whether cosmological, moral, or political. And in this hour, prophets, psalmists, and Messiah alike plead for divine mercy and for God's children to “Keep awake!” (Mark 13:37).

Pastoral Reflections

The term “woke,” past tense of the verb “awake,” has a long history within African American communities, dating back to the early half of the twentieth century. Journalist Dana Brownlee describes use of “the term ‘stay woke’ within the black community...to mean ‘stay vigilant’. ‘don't be fooled’, or ‘don't sleep.’”¹⁰ Recent appropriation in the past decade by white liberals and conservatives alike, however, has led to uses varying from purportedly well-intentioned misrepresentation to outright weaponization and all varieties of abuses in between. It is, therefore, with caution that I, as a white person, employ this term in commentary on Mark's gospel text.

I do so, however, with attention to the originating

context of Mark's gospel within an ethnically and religiously marginalized community of Jewish followers of Jesus, possibly located in the diaspora of Syria, but whether in Judea or Samaria, clearly under Roman domination. When Jesus tells his followers to “stay awake,” I believe he does so with the kind of urgency and awareness with which the warning, “stay woke” is employed among black communities in the United States today. Having previously cautioned that his disciples may be beaten and brought to trial for proclaiming God's coming reign (Mark 13:9-13)—liberation for those marginalized and oppressed under the current reign—Jesus now warns them to stay vigilant as long as they live in the oppressor's house (13:32-37). Jesus does not advise vigilance lightly or with a lack of awareness of the plight of enslaved people in the first-century world who might face the whims of a returning master's wrath.¹¹ Jesus commands vigilance as a survival strategy.

What, then, does it mean to stay awake in our local and global contexts today? Assuredly, it means more than playing the role of Santa Claus, checking our naughty and nice lists to see if we are ready to face the judgment when the Son of Man returns (or the ruddy old elf descends the chimney). In fact, neither Mark nor Isaiah cast Jesus in the judgment seat at all. Rather, Mark describes Jesus as the one who gathers all people together in the wake of the darkness of the apocryphal days of darkness. Isaiah clings to the hope of a God who will remember God's own people; and Mark's Jesus builds upon that hope to assure his disciples that it is such remembrance that has caused God to cut short those days of darkness—for their own salvation. “Stay awake!” Jesus cautions us, that we not let the darkness of the present world blind us to God's just and merciful light. “Stay awake!” so that we may tell the truth about the powers that threaten God's justice in the dominion of the present reign. “Stay awake!” so that we may help to bring into being the coming Realm of God, inaugurated by a vulnerable, marginalized, infant.

Amy Lindeman Allen

10. Dana Brownlee, “Exhibit A Bill Maher: Why White People Should Stop Using The Term ‘Woke’... Immediately,” *Forbes* 19 April 2021 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danabrownlee/2021/04/19/why-white-people-should-stop-using-the-term-wokeimmediately/?sh=4ca38ca27779>. See also Domenico Montanaro, “What does the word ‘woke’ really mean, and where does it come from?” *NPR* 19 July 2023 <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/19/1188543449/what-does-the-word-woke-really-mean-and-where-does-it-come-from>.

11. Mitzi J. Smith argues convincingly that Jesus himself may have been born into slavery in this world. See, “Abolitionist Messiah: A Man Named Jesus Born of a Doule,” in *Bitter the Chastening Rod: Africana Biblical Interpretation after Stony the Road We Trod in the Age of BLM, SayHerName, and Me Too*, edited by Mitzi J. Smith, Angela N. Parker, and Ericka S. Dunbar Hill (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington/Fortress, 2022), 53-69.

Second Sunday of Advent December 10, 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Engaging the Texts

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us...”
(John 1:14)

The Gospel of John’s opening, world-turning poetry about God’s incarnate Word is Advent’s final destination. But we’re not there yet. Before we arrive, we need to spend a couple of weeks (Advent 2 and 3) in the wilderness with Isaiah and John the Baptist.

Dr. Frederick Niedner has taught one possible etymology of the Hebrew word for wilderness, *midbar*, as a mash-up of the preposition *min* (“away from” or “apart from”) with *dabar* (“word,” “speech”). In the Bible, wilderness is the space between exile and home, a place where our language may come up short, where words fail us. The *midbar* is a place *away from* or even *beyond* speech, where we join the Israelites with murmurs, grumbles, or even silence as we await a future we long for but has not yet come.

It is during periods of murmuring and grumbling that God sends a prophet. Isaiah 40 announces “Comfort!” and promise to a people long in exile from their home. John the Baptist preaches repentance to an occupied people, announcing God’s imminent liberation through a coming Savior.

John the Baptist and Isaiah were probably received by their communities as lone voices offering hope in a world where hopefulness had become but a distant, unrealistic exercise. These texts mark the *beginnings* of God’s good news: Mark opens his gospel with John’s solitary, camel-hair-covered rantings, and Isaiah 40 opens Second Isaiah, a pivot from the preceding 39 chapters of this book toward a vision of wholeness and repair.

God’s incarnate Word is coming, but how might we be called to join with Mark and Isaiah in giving voice to this promise in desolate spaces where no one dares (or even remembers how) to speak words of hope and new possibility? Can crying “comfort!” to an uncomfortable people actually initiate God’s redeeming acts?

Like Isaiah and John, when the church incarnates God’s promise of hope and salvation, it may find itself participating in strange and countercultural acts. In our worship, we draw upon ancient language and story that may give language to a despairing people who daily navigate a wordless wilderness.

And when even these words fail, we have been given some simple instruction by Isaiah 40: “lift up [your voice], do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”

Those who navigate wildernesses of addiction, illness, marginalization, abuse, poverty, or war may be living an experience with an unknown resolution for which the words of others offer little comfort. But these prophets (and others) invite us into a way of living that bears witness to another Way, a way of justice, compassion, mercy, and liberation for *all*.

“To be a Christian is to live dangerously, honestly, freely,” writes Dr. Cornel West, “to step in the name of love as if you may land on nothing, yet to keep stepping because the something that sustains you no empire can give you and no empire can take away.”¹²

This time of Advent trains us to bear witness to a hope, a liberation, that is true but not yet seen. “Here is your God!” is a good announcement, but it’s even more convincing as embodied proclamation:

- A community member organizes a group of volunteers to resettle new immigrants and refugees who are fleeing persecution and war around the world;
- A construction worker stands on a street corner with a sign reading “End War Now” every single Saturday morning since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003;
- A congregation establishes an overnight shelter and services for LGBTQIA+ folks who have been kicked out of their own homes for coming out as who they are;
- College students organize a vigil in response to another episode of police violence in the neighborhood.

As a preacher, these Sundays are opportunities to “step in the name of love” boldly, joining with the prophets in announcing God’s promised shalom to a weary congregation. And if words are failing you, you only need preach “Here is your God!” The Incarnate One is with us, all around, even as we wait. May the speaking and living of every lonely prophet join together in initiating another beginning when God’s will is done.

John Rohde Schwehn (helhim)

12. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 172.

Third Sunday of Advent December 17, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126 (or Luke 1:46b-55)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Engaging the Texts

Only one week before Christmas Eve, Advent has likely morphed into the familiar yet altogether different season of last-minute holiday shopping. The quiet of these dark winter nights is soon overtaken by the frenzy of shopping lists, menu planning, end-of-semester activities, and Christmas pageant chaos.

Of course, there is blessing in all these things, but our texts from Isaiah and John's gospel this week invite a sudden, divine interruption. It's a change in the usual narrative, a badly needed witness that points to God's wondrous intentions.

Last Sunday, we thought about the prophetic speech of John the baptizer calling out in the wilderness. But in John's gospel, we do not know this prophet as a camel-hair-wearing, honey-sucking prophet. He is known simply as John, who comes as "a witness to testify to the light."

These first two verses of our gospel text are peculiar, as they seem to interrupt the evangelist's divine poetry about the incarnate Word. Some biblical scholars believe these to be verses out of place.

Right here in the text we get a perfect example of what it means to witness. (The gospel of John alone uses this word for "witness" thirty-three times, while the Synoptics use it only twice!) A single, ordinary person gets inserted into the middle of the divine narrative, almost pleading with us to pay attention to what our vocation as Christians might be, too: "testify to the light, so that all might believe through [you]!"

Isaiah is no different. Here in the home stretch of this prophetic text that addresses generations of the faithful, the prophet invokes the Levitical year of Jubilee: a cancelling of debts, rest for the land, and release to the captives! Jesus will pull from Isaiah 61 in his first sermon, using it again as a sort of prophetic interruption into the grumbles of a skeptical home-town crowd (Luke 4:18-19).

In a little over a week, we will hear the opening verses of John's gospel that are not included in our reading today, about how the eternal Word, present at creation, became flesh with and for us. It is a prologue of cosmic proportions, about how *all things* came into being. But in our Christmas gospel, we will not cut out verses 6-8 in the same way we exclude verses 1-5 and 9-14 today. John, that ordinary witness, will be plopped right in the middle, standing in for each one of us.

We are witnesses, people who point toward the Light that is the source and love of all. So what does it mean to be a witness?

In the sixth century, the Christian church established the feast day celebrating the birth of John the Baptist as June 24. The Nativity of Christ and the Nativity of John the Baptist, therefore, are celebrated exactly six months apart. The other two calendar days that line up with these dates – historically pagan celebrations, in fact! – are the winter and summer solstices. December 21 is the *darkest* day of the year and June 21 is the lightest.

Why did the early church make these choices? In the third chapter of John, when Jesus is finally on the scene, John responds to concerns that Jesus' popularity is beginning to eclipse John's. John tells them (again!) that he is *not* the Messiah, and that he actually *rejoices* in seeing the long-awaited Savior finally come. John says, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

"He must increase, but I must decrease." As witnesses, we are called to testify to the light of Christ – not to believe that we ourselves *are* Christ, but instead to announce the promises of God that are always already here through the death and resurrection of Jesus. By aligning the feasts of Christ and of Christ's chief witness with the patterns of the sun, the Western Church was recognizing how the drama and truth of this most central Christian story is illustrated by the patterns of the whole earth.

As we approach the darkest time of year, the light of Christ pierces our hearts once again, and, though this light may be hard to detect, our days slowly, *slowly*, become longer and lighter for six months after Christmas. And then, when light is the longest and brightest, we remember John, the one who witnessed to it first, but who always pointed away from himself and toward the Source.

John Rohde Schwehn (helhim)

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 24, 2023

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16

Luke 1:46b–55 (or Psalm 89:1–4, 19–26)

Romans 16:25–27

Luke 1:26–38

Reflections on the Gospel

Mary said "yes." Not a cheery bright kind of "yes." Not a "yes" with a "can-do," "I've got this" sort of attitude. But a "yes" that sounded from a place deep within her that bore both sorrow and hope; sorrow for the pain of her people, long-held in the grip of empires built on the backs of the

powerless, and hope for the promise carried in stories she had heard since childhood, both in the synagogue and at home (her family being part of the *Anawim*, marginalized Jews who trusted God's promises of old).

Mary had been shaped by these stories... Stories about a God who had said "yes" to life from the depths of God's being (real life, authentic life, a life lived in the beautiful complexities of *shalom* for all of God's creation) ... A God who, knowing the cost of such a "yes," spoke the Easter Word since the beginning, moving over the darkness and chaos to bring something from nothing, light from darkness... creating from God's own heart moon and stars, seas and oceans, flora and fauna... God looking ever-after for others who might respond to God's invitation to live in the Spirit and the power of God's fierce, tender, brilliant and burning "yes."

There were others who said "yes" before Mary: Abraham for one, and his wife Sarah. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Miriam, David, the prophets, just to name a few. But Mary said "yes" from her *"point vierge"* (Thomas Merton), that virgin place within us all where we are empty of all things except God. Mary said "yes" when asked about her willingness to bear a particular incarnation of God to the world; an incarnation that would be known through mercy and grace, through accompanying, suffering love, and through a "yes" so deep and true and tender and fierce the world would never be the same...

Mary said "yes" in her encounter with Gabriel. A "yes" we might imagine this way as the story unfolds before our eyes... *As Gabriel comes near/ she who hears/ attends,/ extends,/ uncurling/ unfurling herself like a seed -/ like a "yes" seed,/ a "bless" seed,/ an "into the mess seed,"/ an "into the swirl of mess seed,"/ as it uncurls/ from the hard cold burl/ of the knot,/ of the not,/ and stretches itself upward/ from death/ into the blessed "yes"/ and guess/ of love.*

Gabriel came near, and Mary said "yes," not only to the possibility of bearing that particular deep incarnational "yes" to the world. But also "yes" to a new order of things; a new creation, through which systems of injustice and powers of coercion would be overturned in exchange for justice, peace, and reconciliation. Mary's song of "yes" to this new order of things being a beautiful, haunting, defiant "no" to the powers of the world that seek to maintain the status quo in support of those who hold all the aces and all the kings and queens in their hands. (In the 1980's, Mary's song, "The Magnificat," was banned from public worship in Guatemala because the oppressive government found its message so subversive).

Mary said "yes," receiving the Spirit's breath into the womb of her heart, conceiving the incarnate presence of God in such a way that the "yes seed" of Easter would be seen and heard and known in the world, even in the guess of things... even in the mess of things... even in the swirling mess of

things... the green shoot of Mary's "yes" rising up from the burl of every "knot," of every "not," and stretching himself upward into every closed, narrow, hateful, and deadly thing, all for the sake of God's fierce and tender love. (That green shoot being Jesus, who would come to sing a version of the song Mary had sung while he was still in her womb; Jesus' version using the melody Mary had hummed over her months of waiting, and the lyrics from the poetry of the prophet Isaiah, as he had sung generations before, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor.")

Mary said "yes" ... Her "yes" being a "yes" to God's dreaming, a "no" to the world's scheming, and a "may it be so" to the Spirit's leading... Her response seeking to awaken the "yes seed" within each of us where we are emptied of everything except God (our *point vierge*), so we too might receive God's Spirit, and by so-doing *uncurl/ from the hard cold burl/ of every knot,/ of every knot,/ and stretch ourselves upward/ from death/ into the blessed "yes"/ and guess/ of love.*

Look, even now Gabriel is coming near... An annunciation to ponder in our own day and time... Might we attend and extend ourselves toward Gabriel's "ah bright wings"? Might we uncurl and unfurl ourselves like "yes" seeds into the darkness of our world? Might we respond to God's invitation to live in the Spirit of God's fierce, tender, brilliant, and burning "Easter yes"? Might we, like Mary, sing "yes," "no," and "may it be so" even as we ponder the meaning of such a response for our own lives?

Elaine Hewes

Christmas Eve December 24, 2023

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Adam Came, Too

'Twas on that blessed holy night
When our dear Lord was born,
A man trudged on toward Bethlehem
Bereft and bent and worn,
From years of bondage, worn.

He held within his trembling hand
The symbol of his shame,

From ages past and miles gone by,
And Adam was his name,
Poor Adam was his name.

Before the sheep and shepherds came
He came to see the child,
To place into his open hands
The apple once defiled.
In a garden once defiled.

And into Jesus' open hands
He put the apple scarred;
Two wounds that told a tale of love
By doubt and fear once marred.
The love once whole was marred.

"My Lord I know not what to do,"
Dear Adam said in pain.
"I only know that by Love's power
Can brokenness be gain."
Can Eden be regained.

So Jesus took the apple gift
And blessed it with a kiss.
And then three wondrous things he did
To right what was amiss.
To mend the deep abyss.

He reached into the apple deep
And found within the star.
He flung it high into the heavens
For travelers from afar.
So to follow from afar.

And then he took the seeds therein
And cast them on the snow
In trust that when the spring did come,
More apples they would grow.
Green shoots from death would grow.

Then last the apple he did break
In thanks and praise, complete,
And give to all the manger guests
A Christmas feast to eat.
Even Adam he did eat.

And oh, the joy that rang that night

From in the stable rude,
Across the miles, the hate, the fear,
For creation thus renewed.
By love and grace renewed.

'Twas on this blessed holy night
When our dear Lord was born
That by the power of love's desire
Dear Adam was transformed,
No more for shame to mourn.

All praise to God Creator then,
And to the Son now given,
All praise to Spirit, bearing love
To earth from highest heaven...
To you from highest heaven.

Adam came too, you know. Although Luke doesn't make it explicit in the story. But if someone had suggested the possibility, Luke would most certainly have included Adam in the telling of the story for of the three Synoptic Gospel writers, Luke's reach in all directions was the farthest and the deepest and the most expansive, straining all preconceived understandings about time and space and saving grace.

It was Luke who saw God's saving grace on the move since the beginning of time, tracing Jesus' ancestral line back to Adam, as recorded in Luke 3. Luke thereby suggesting that God's passion for God's creation from the beginning was not limited to the act of creating, but included the act of healing, liberating, and saving in the same ways in which Jesus embodied those action verbs in his life and in his ministry. For Luke, Jesus' incarnation was a direct challenge to all attempts to confine God's liberating and saving movement on behalf of God's creation to any notion of **time** as we know it.

That same challenge as related to time coming clear in Luke 2:1-2, as the Gospel writer set the timing of Jesus' birth "while Quirinius was governor of Syria," but then in vs. 11 proclaimed Jesus' birth to have taken place on "**this day**" ... "This day" ... as in "every 'this day' of creation's existence" ... Including the "this day" in which we find ourselves. **Because** Jesus was born into human history, God's arrival is every "this day."

If Jesus' birth narrative in Luke is a challenge to all perceived limits to God's liberating and saving grace prescribed by time, it is also a challenge to all efforts to restrict the saving grace by race, class, gender, religious affiliation, or moral litmus test. It was the shepherds who were visited by the angel of the Lord and told the good news of Jesus' birth; shepherds being considered marginal characters in both cultural and religious contexts of the day. **Fine, upstanding citizens they**

were not, nor examples of righteous living. And yet they were the first to recognize the fulness of God's presence in the gift of the child. (Luke's entire Gospel being a challenge to preconceived notions about who is included in the radical reach of God's love and saving grace... And about who has the capacity to recognize the presence of God's saving grace in the person of Jesus... It was always the sinners, the demons and the women who recognized him, while those who were "righteous" did not... Hence, the possibility of Adam's arrival at the birth, carrying the apple...).

Meaning, my dear reader, the most radical reach in Luke's birth narrative may be this line, "For to **you** is born **this day** in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." To **you**... (Who would expect the reach of God's saving grace to include me?) **This day... today... now.**

And who would expect a **sign** of God's presence to be found in a baby born in a backwater town to parents of no social or religious standing? **Such an affront to all limitations when it comes to God's saving grace.**

All praise to God Creator then,
And to the Son now given,
All praise to Spirit, bearing love
To earth from highest heaven...
To you from highest heaven.

Elaine Hewes

Christmas Day December 25, 2023

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1-4 [5-12]

John 1:1-14

"In the beginning..."

John's poetic gospel telling opens by borrowing these ancient words from Genesis. My friend and colleague the Rev. Andrea Roske-Metcalf recently reminded me that the phrase might be better translated, "in a beginning" or "in beginnings." These scriptures, in their original languages, don't pretend to have the market cornered on one fiercely literal and finite beginning. Rather, they remind us that God is present and active in all kinds of beginnings across time and space.

In fact, immediately following the organized telling of the cosmos unfolding in Genesis 1, we get a completely different creation story in Genesis 2. What a gift! From the very start, our scriptures are inviting us to hold stories in tension, trusting truth to show up in more than one way and leaving room for mystery. When you read the first verse of John's gos-

pel, I hope you resist the urge to lay it perfectly atop Genesis, as though their chronology would match and reveal a most reverent, singular beginning.

The beginning in Genesis 1 reminds me that God can make something out of nothing, order out of chaos, substance from void. It reminds me that God creates in spectrum and layers and multitudes, intersecting and tangled up together with a life and agency of its own.

The beginning in John 1 reminds me that God remains curious about this beautiful mess, breathing and speaking in such close proximity and then decides to close the gap between heaven and earth in a brand-new way. It means so many things to say that the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, but this is what I hear on Christmas Day:

So many times, and specifically this time, God wants to be as near as possible to our beautiful and broken world. The Word becomes flesh every time we notice the finite holding the infinite, our mortality a basket that holds the immortal, the ordinary a sign of something extraordinary.

The shepherds hear it in the descant of angels, the invitation to go and see for themselves that heaven lives on earth.

Mary sees it looking into the face of her newborn son, remembering the angel's announcement and pondering everything in her heart.

Joseph senses the danger in it, more dreams that warn them to flee and hide and wait for what the world needs but does not necessarily want.

How are you noticing the sacred up close, in your life and in your ministry context? How will you help the people imagine on this day and with all their senses, the wonder of beginnings here and now?

Isaiah 52:7 says, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'"

This visual from the prophet Isaiah, of feet coming down a mountain to announce a much-needed message, reminds me of the time I hiked to Upper Dewey Lake in Skagway, Alaska. In 2.5 miles, we gained more than 3,000 feet of elevation. My spouse wanted to keep going another half mile (and 1,000 more feet in elevation) to the Devil's Punchbowl, one of his favorite mountain views. I told him he could keep his mountain view and I sat down by the lake while he continued on without me. I love to walk in the woods. I enjoy backcountry hiking and don't mind going up, but huffing and puffing on steep switchbacks for four straight hours while in my first trimester of pregnancy was not my idea of fun.

I soaked my feet in the lake and thought about most of the people who were coming down when we were going up the mountain. They cheered us on and promised we were

close to the top when we most definitely were not. My spouse couldn't understand why I was so offended by their words of encouragement. "Because they are lies. All lies!" I cried with drama and martyrdom.

But there was one woman who told the truth, and her feet were beautiful. When she passed me, she placed her hand on my shoulder and said plainly, "This is the hardest hike I've ever done. I've hated every minute." When I agreed with her, she smirked and said, "The good news is we can do it just as well as those who love it. And now we know how bad it is and we never have to do it again."

I actually smiled because she came down the mountain with a message of peace and good news, announcing salvation! Her hand on my shoulder reminded me that the worst thing is not the last thing. My quivering muscles helped me remember that when the news is good and true, it can make a way forward where I could not see one.

Oh, Preacher. How beautiful are your feet this Christmas Day. You have been finding the words for Advent and Christmas Eve and still more for today. You make your way back into the sanctuary this morning to *announce peace and bring good news. You announce salvation and say to Zion, "Your God reigns."* Perhaps this sermon--the one on Christmas Day with a quorum of saints who sing like sentinels, like ruins redeemed, like signs of salvation--is also for you.

What do you need to hear this Christmas morning? Because this good news is for you, too.

"For Christmas Day"

From *Ordinary Blessings for the Christmas Season* (Broadleaf Books, 2023)

Today is for marvel and praise,
celebrating the collision of love
and unbreakable connection with
the God who gets small and near
enough to know our mortality,
who makes dauntless promises
and finds a way into every generation
with a Word and a breath that live!

Meta Herrick Carlson

First Sunday of Christmas December 31, 2023

Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

All these texts have something to say about identity, belonging, and community as members of God's family. While some Christian traditions have over simplified and skewed what biblical marriage and family values can mean, these passages offer ingredients for a wider imagination for faithful families and good care of children in the name of Christ.

Isaiah 61 is rich with wedding day imagery. Christ comes to the marriage table with generous gifts to adorn us, signs of a love that cannot be purchased or earned. There is a festive delight and public fuss made of the giving. *Try it on! This is for you! Salvation and righteousness look good on you. Seeing you clothed in these things inspires praise and celebration.*

Isaiah 62:1-3 is a passage I have offered at naming ceremonies and during affirmation of baptisms that recognize a person's chosen name. God will not keep silent about the way you shine, about your new and true name, about your belonging that is a jewel in the crown of the God who knows who and whose you are!

Psalm 148 rejoices in the name of the LORD, in the name of the God with many names, in the name of the God who told Moses I AM. Scripture makes it clear that God understands the power of a name. The first human was given the duty and joy of naming all the animals. More often than not, the meaning of a character's name holds meaning that helps us encounter the Bible story. Sometimes a character is given a new name—or asks to be called by a different one.

This passage from **Galatians** uses the metaphor of adoption to explore what it means to be heirs of God's kingdom, claimed by God's love in Christ Jesus. This text offers an opportunity to explore the complexities of adoption in the Western world today. If there are members of your community with personal experience, invite their reactions to this text. Notice the nuance and themes reflected in each role in the adoption process and the uniqueness of each situation.

In the **Gospel reading**, we accompany Mary and Joseph in one of their first duties as parents. They travel all the way to Jerusalem to present Jesus as holy to the Lord. They offer a sacrifice in accordance with the law of Moses and encounter two elders that Luke deems worthy of mention by name.

Simeon has been faithful and patient in waiting for the

consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit told him that he would see the salvation of God, the Messiah they had been waiting for, before he died. When he sees Jesus in the temple, he takes the baby into his arms. I love this image of an elder not long for this world holding someone so new. The birth of Jesus is a gift, not only to those who came after him, but to the generations before him. Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph and tells Mary what she already knows: this child has come to turn the world upside down. It will heal, but it will hurt, too. What a gift he offers Mary, an external word to buoy her faith in what must be hard and lonely and magnificent!

Then Anna comes in. I love a casual reference to a female-bodied prophet. A woman, an elder, and a widow! Luke tries to explain her less than traditional (whatever that means) story of identity, belonging, and community: she lived with her husband for years after the marriage ended and, as a widow, she lived in the temple where she worshiped and fasted day and night. I'm sure there's a chronological explanation for those two clues about Anna, but I appreciate that they don't make simple sense to me at first read. The point is this: Anna is prophetic and present and unusual. She approaches Jesus and his family with praise on her lips, another bold word about Jesus' identity and purpose.

The scripture says that Mary and Joseph did everything required to keep the law during that visit. And still, there was more! Simeon and Anna add to the liturgy with preaching and prophecy, with physical touch and intergenerational promises and blessings that go with them on their journey. Consider the ways your community keeps the law and also, inspired by Jesus, fulfills the law or adds to it with more praise and joy.

The first Sunday after Christmas lives in the haze of winter breaks from school, hectic holiday travel, or a slow return to the office. This week can feel like an emotional hangover after that pressure to meet expectations, make memories, or fulfill obligations with family. These scripture readings about identity, belonging, and community have a good word to offer your people showing up for worship in the wake of these things. Two stories come to mind from my own ministry life.

C was one of the first children I baptized as an ordained pastor, a brilliant and beautiful preschooler. When I transitioned to another call in the same city, I remained Facebook friends with C's parent. For years, I continued to be aware of big changes and milestones in their lives. There was a divorce and a new relationship. C explored pronouns and gender identity. By the time C was a teenager, they had stopped participating in the church and chosen a new name (which also begins with a C).

It had been nearly a dozen years since their baptism when I recognized C with their parent at a restaurant. Thanks to the information I had from C's parent's Facebook updates, I could approach their table and greet C using their pronouns and

name. I could introduce myself as the pastor who baptized them without causing (more?) harm to their identity and belonging in the name of God and the church. C's parent and I recalled details from their baptism day, and I offered to create an updated baptism certificate that honored this name.

These scripture readings normalize and spiritualize the power of being known by a new name. They rejoice in the fullness of our identity and refuse to keep us small according to things that are no longer true and pass away.

Who in your community might need to hear that God knows their pronouns and name? Who in your community might need to hear the church call them by these things so that they know God rejoices in the fullness of their identity?

I wrote this blessing for a friend who needed words to guide them across the threshold during the holiday season, from spaces of their own delight and design back into their childhood home, where they were raised by a name long since dead and hoped not to hear it again. Perhaps you or someone you know could use this blessing this season.

“For Before You Go Inside”

From *Ordinary Blessings for the Christmas Season* (Broadleaf Books, 2023)

Before you go inside,
put one hand on your heart.
Wait with your body and listen
to the blood that pumps
out through your body
and back to your core.

Remember that you are
being brave and then
coming home to yourself
quietly and fiercely and all the time.

Before you go inside,
hold the soft of your belly.
Breathe with your body and feel
how full you become
when you are taking up space
and holding life in your lungs.

Remember that you are
drawing in what is good, and then
letting go what is finished,
quietly and fiercely and all the time.

Meta Herrick Carlson