

# Preaching Helps

**Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost —  
Christmas Day**

## From C to A, from the End to the Beginning

This issue of “Preaching Helps” moves toward the end of the church year with readings from the Gospel of Luke. On the last Sunday of November, we leave Year C (Luke) behind and move to Year A (Matthew), the focus of this issue of *Currents*. But we know that life is also lived outside the lectionary! From October through All Saints Sunday on November 5<sup>th</sup> we will be trying to survive the last weeks of the presidential campaign. How will people hear the scripture texts with campaign promises running in the background? How will we preach during this non-liturgical season? While endorsing candidates isn’t allowed, is there any place for politics in the pulpit—politics in the sense of *polis*, the public place (not only the city, but every rural town and hamlet)? What will we hear from the prophets as the church year comes to an end? On October 16<sup>th</sup> we will hear Jesus tell the story of the persistent widow in Luke 18. Is this a story about persistence in prayer or about persistence in the face of injustice or about faith? Some people say prayer and faith are good topics for preaching, but justice seems, well, too political. Jesus wants us to hold prayer and justice and faith together rather than tearing them apart. As the church year draws to a close, how will people hear texts about “wars and insurrections” and “famines and plagues and dreadful portents?” (Luke 21:9, 10) It may depend on how people feel about the results of the election.

Moving from the end of the church year to its beginning, the First Readings for Advent, Year A, provide particularly rich visual gifts. On all four Sundays these readings come from the book of Isaiah, and each reading includes visual images that could shape our preaching. On the First Sunday in Advent the reading from Isaiah 2 begins: “The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” We would usually say, “The word Isaiah heard” or “The word Isaiah spoke”—but what does it mean to see a word? (I doubt that this was an early reference to texting or tweeting!) Each Sunday of Advent, Isaiah holds up visual images to help us see God’s word: swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Advent 1); a shoot from a stump, animal enemies lying down together, babies and toddlers living in safety (Advent 2); desert blossoming, weak hands strengthened, lame people leaping, waters flowing in the wilderness (Advent 3); and the sign of a pregnant woman (Advent 4). How can

we help people see these words? Think of these Advent sermons as image sermons. Our task as preachers is to make the biblical images real to people who haven’t seen a shoot growing from a stump, who can’t imagine that swords will ever be beaten into plowshares. We ask the questions poets ask: What is this like? Where have I seen something like this?

Give yourself permission to preach on Isaiah through the season of Advent. You might want to let people know that’s what you’ll be doing. After all, Jesus was shaped by Torah and the writings of the prophets. In Isaiah we hear visions of hope and restoration that will shape the ministry of Jesus. Focusing on an image in the Isaiah text will mean focusing on the visual image in the text and connecting that image with something people have seen in their own lives. Where is the wilderness blossoming? Perhaps in the vacant lot that once was strewn with trash and crack vials but has been transformed into a community garden. Can you see elders and children working together to weed rows of string beans? Some may consider projecting visual images on the screen. If you’ve sworn never to put a screen in the sanctuary, consider a bulletin cover with a picture of each Isaiah text. This is a good time to invite artists and weavers and banner-makers to create visual words to augment the spoken words of the sermon. Or set a physical object in the middle of the aisle or in the narthex. The sermon may begin even before you say a word as people wonder about what they see: *What’s this plow doing here?* (Isaiah 2) *Who left this stump in the narthex?* (Isaiah 11) *Is that supposed to be a blue river flowing up the center aisle?* (Isaiah 35) *Who put the baby crib in front of the altar?* (Isaiah 7) The congregation can also sing the images. Years ago I wrote new words for the familiar Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come, Immanuel.” This hymn is based on the Great “O Antiphons” that have a deep history. Some will not want to ever change those words. But there is something anti-Jewish when we sing about ransoming “captive Israel.” These new verses change the refrain and each verse picks up images of the Isaiah texts. You might sing the verse appropriate for each Sunday, then the whole song on the last Sunday of Advent.

## O Come, O Come, Immanuel

*Advent 1*

**O come, O come, Immanuel  
And bless each place your people dwell.  
Melt ev’ry weapon crafted for war,  
Bring peace upon the earth forever more.**

**Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear,  
God’s chosen one, Immanuel, draws near.**

*Advent 2*

**O come, strong branch of Jesse, free  
Your people from despair and enmity;  
Forge justice for the poor and the meek,  
Grant safety for the young ones and the weak.**

*Refrain*

*Advent 3 (Isaiah 35)*

**O come now, living water, pour your grace,  
And bring new life to ev'ry withered place;  
Speak comfort to each trembling heart:  
"Be strong! Fear not, for I will ne'er depart."**

*Refrain*

*Advent 4 (Isaiah 7)*

**O come, O Dayspring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by your advent here.  
Love stir within the womb of night,  
And death's own shadows put to flight.**

*Refrain*

**D**uring this season of Advent, invite people to see and sing God's word of hope. God bless your preaching at the end and at the beginning.

We welcome several new but very experienced writers to this issue of "Preaching Helps." **M. Susan Peterson**, a graduate of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia has served congregations in Pennsylvania, Minnesota and the U.K. In 1990, Susan was called as the senior pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and became the first clergy woman in the ELCA to lead a large congregation. **Catherine Malotky** is currently Director of Development at Luther Seminary. She earned an MA in theater from Northwestern University and the MDiv from Luther. Catherine has served congregations in inner city Minneapolis and rural southwestern Minnesota, sharing a call with her spouse David Engelstad. In addition to her regular column, "Amen," in the magazine, *Gather*, she edited the e-book, *How Much is Enough—A Deeper Look at Stewardship in an Age of Abundance*. She authored the "Genesis" Bible study for *The Book of Faith* series. She and David give thanks for their grown daughters and are grateful their two-year-old grandson lives close by. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is co-lead pastor at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Reno, Nevada. She recently received the PhD in New Testament from Vanderbilt University Graduate School and is interested in inclusive, justice-oriented readings of Scripture with a focus on the place and voices of children. Her lectionary reflections can be found at Political Theology's *There Is Power in the Blog*, where she is a regular contributor to their Scripture section. **Erik Chris-**

**tensen** has been the pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Logan Square in Chicago since 2006. After ten years of intentional redevelopment, the congregation sold its century-old building and relocated to a nearby storefront where they have enjoyed new growth and vitality. Erik is a frequent contributor to *Sundays and Seasons* and has written for *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (2012) and *In These or Similar Words: Crafting Language for Worship* (2015). He lives in Chicago with his husband, Kerry. **April Ullring Larson** attended Luther College, the University of Iowa and Wartburg Theological Seminary, and was ordained in 1978. In 1992 she was elected bishop of the LaCrosse Area Synod, becoming the first woman bishop in the ELCA and the second Lutheran woman bishop in the world. Larson has received Doctor of Divinity degrees from Wartburg Theological Seminary and Luther College, and the Distinguished Service Award from California Lutheran University. She has led LWF Bible studies for bishops in Geneva and for women pastors and theologians of Africa. Her twin daughters, Katie and Amy, are physicians at the University of Iowa. Ben, her seminarian/musician son, died in the Haiti earthquake in 2010. April and Judd, her husband of forty years, have seven grandchildren. They are both trying to retire and live in Decorah, Iowa.

*Barbara Lundblad  
Editor of Preaching Helps*

## Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 9, 2016

**2 Kings 5:1–3, 7–15c (end in "except in Israel")**

**Psalm 111**

**2 Timothy 2:8–15**

**Luke 17:11–19**

### Engaging the Texts

Using contrasts to expose differences or place an emphasis on a particular idea is a device often used by writers to prove a point without having to spell it out in plain language. In at least two of the texts placed before us this Sunday there are a number of such contrasts to consider. Is there a common theme that emerges out of these contrasts that can help the preacher discern a focus for the sermon of the day? I believe that is a worthy question to pursue.

In 2 Kings, our introduction to the person of Naaman immediately provides a contrast—"...commander of the army" ... "a great man and in high favor with his master..." , but also a man brought low having "suffered from leprosy," a disfiguring disease. Here the contrast is between power and vulnerability at work in the same person, perhaps making

room for what is to follow. In the quest for a cure, Naaman's actions suggest still another contrast as he takes the advice of a mere servant girl and rushes headlong into an encounter with an unknown prophet from enemy territory. Master/servant; power/vulnerability; insiders/outside; haves and have nots—Naaman is faced with contrasts in and around him as he seeks healing. Add to that his arrival in Israel with an elaborate array of gifts to give and no one to receive them provides yet another contradiction as his rendition of more is met with less. It is not Elisha who rushes out to greet him but a mere messenger who tells him to go and wash in the Jordan seven times. Offended, Naaman, the great warrior, rejects the simple directions from the prophet's messenger. Only his lowly servants can succeed in calling him back. In the face of all these contrasts or contradictions, Naaman finally uncovers room in himself where healing can take hold. Is it truth speaking to power that emerges here as the theme out of all these contrasts?

In 2 Timothy it is perhaps more of a stretch to see contrasts at work, yet the writer of the epistle does call on the name of Jesus Christ as the model for a life of servanthood. In the letter's attempt to "groom" leaders for the early church, the warning is that there surely will be hardships and suffering ahead and they will be greatly challenged. But could it be that the strength of their leadership will lie within the context of a life made vulnerable in faith?

In Luke we come face-to-face with the real thing—Jesus healing the lepers. The contrast that presents itself most obviously in this text is a familiar one when it comes to Jesus—insiders vis-à-vis outsiders. Bypassing the rich and famous, Jesus focuses his attention on the lowliest, the outcasts of the world, the outsiders. In this instance, walking the land that borders Samaria and Galilee, he doesn't bother to check citizenship or status before healing. He simply heals the ten who call out to him. In this classic story of Jesus' healing ministry, he challenges the powerful by ignoring barriers and choosing to heal the most vulnerable. While only one of the lepers returns to praise God, like Naaman, he who is washed clean is not only cured of his leprosy but is transformed as he comes to recognize who it is who has done this healing.

### Pastoral Reflections

It seems to me, these are "texts for the times." In a world where the gap between the haves and the have-nots, is becoming alarmingly greater, where immigrants struggle to find a home, where healthcare is still unavailable to so many, and in the throes of a hostile presidential election, we focus on healing—not a cure, as in the other nine lepers who were washed clean but failed to return to the healer—but healing that opens and transforms a life, making room for faith to grow.

Like Naaman, we are surrounded with contrasts and con-

traditions that require us to make choices. In some cases, those choices can be life-changing. As people of faith, we are often made aware of contradictions in our world that cry out for healing—feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, toppling the dictators, curbing the violence. Yet, as the power of money, status, rank and position outweigh the need for healing, there seems no cure on the horizon. How do we speak truth to such power?

Closed minds and hearts seldom respond to the cries of the afflicted. What we learn from these texts is that often it takes recognizing our own vulnerability, our need for the wisdom and strength of one another to open us to the possibility of our own healing. Like Naaman and one leper we may discover wisdom and compassion in places and people we never expected. And they may well be the beginning of a turning around that is life-changing.

We wring our hands in the face of new crises that threaten to undo our world and we cry out in the midst of the pain and suffering. Can we who have come to know the healing love of Jesus Christ be signs of hope in our world? Can our gratitude for all that has been done for us through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection renew our commitment to a life of speaking truth to power?

*M. Susan Peterson*

## Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost October 16, 2016

**Genesis 32:22–31**

**Psalm 121**

**2 Timothy 3:14—4:5**

**Luke 18:1–8**

### Engaging the Texts

It is not hard to get caught up in the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling with the (unknown) *man*. It carries in it all the makings for good drama—a well-known protagonist, a mysterious antagonist, and a physical encounter with the one who prevails eking out a blessing before he walks off into the sunrise! But wait—the victor, i.e., the one who "prevails," is limping.

If we look more closely at the story we discover the clay feet that bring Jacob to the edge of the River Jabbok and this encounter with God. Fearful for the impending encounter with his brother Esau, Jacob sends his family ahead and remains alone on the other side of the river to gather his strength, maybe even to pray. But that alone time is quickly interrupted by a "knock down drag out" struggle with "a man" (v. 24). Later, Jacob names this mysterious stranger saying, "...I have seen God face to face..." (v. 30). In the course

of the encounter, Jacob is wounded, his hip put out of joint; thus, the limp. However, despite his wound, Jacob persists in this divine struggle, insisting on a blessing before he sets his opponent free.

Clearly, in this story, wrestling with God carries with it the possibility of being wounded. Yet, it was only after he was wounded that Jacob could insist on what he truly needed—a blessing. The wound inflicted, strangely enough, does not seem to weaken Jacob's resolve but in fact becomes an intimate mark of his growing strength, a phenomenon expressed by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians when he declares, "...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Jacob's openness to engage in an encounter with God and his persistence in the struggle—or, as Matthew Henry calls it "importunate prayer"—eventually lead Jacob to cross the River Jabbok as "The sun rose upon him" (v. 31). In the strength of that encounter with God, Jacob (now Israel) makes his way to a reunion with his brother.

In both the 2 Timothy text and the Gospel we meet up with versions of these same themes of persistence and struggle, vulnerability and strength. The author of 2 Timothy is clear in his declaration that persistence in proclaiming the message whether in good times or in bad is a hallmark of a faithful leader of God's people. The warning is clear, however, that the time will come when those who proclaim Christ will be ignored or subjected to suffering. Yet, they are commended to "...do the work of an evangelist" and "...carry out your ministry fully" (4:5).

The Luke text calls upon one of the most vulnerable citizens of the time, a lowly widow, to plead this same case for persistence. Wearied by the widow's unending persistence the unjust judge relents and grants her wish. Persistence in prayer is a good thing, says Jesus. God's heart is open to the constant prayers of a longing heart.

### Pastoral Reflections

"Show them where you limp, because that is where you will meet the Gospel." This was advice from a well-seasoned pastor to a seminarian who was encountering some pushback from the congregation where she was interning. The first woman clergy to serve in that congregation, she was feeling the sting of resistance and the insecurity that can produce. Keeping a stiff upper lip and avoiding conflict seemed the best way to survive those difficult days. Yet, the advice from the pastor suggested something completely different—be vulnerable, be open, be honest in the face of conflicting circumstances. In other words, "Show them where you limp..."

The texts for today would support that same kind of advice for anyone in the midst of conflict. Jacob wrestling with God, stubbornly staying in the struggle and even standing his ground provides a metaphor for our own struggles with

faith and life issues. Seeking the wisdom of God, persisting in prayer and turning toward one another we strike a pose, not of defiance or impenetrable rightness but of humility, vulnerability, and the desire for reconciliation.

In the wake of the violence of this past summer that has wounded communities across the country, people of faith might well attend to the lessons for today. Much of the rhetoric has turned to lamentation fearing the lack of this country's resolve to face the issues of racial injustice and violence and to "do justice, and to love kindness and walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8). Yet, the writer of 2 Timothy urges us on to continue to proclaim Jesus Christ and his message of mercy and justice, and to "...be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable" (4:2). Like the widow in the parable in Luke, we are commended by Jesus himself to persist in our prayers and to trust in the efficacy of such acts of faith. For those of us who claim to believe in a God of love and mercy, that can be the source of our hope and strength even as we limp into the heart of the controversy and wrestle with our own doubts and fears.

*M. Susan Peterson*

## Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost October 23, 2016

**Jeremiah 14:7–10; 19–22**

**Psalm 84**

**2 Timothy 4:6–18**

**Luke 18:9–14**

### Engaging the Texts

Upon first looking at the texts for this Sunday one might be drawn to the dark side of things—Jeremiah pleading for his people suffering at the hands of an angry God; Paul, anticipating his death, recounting the struggle and rejection he has known; and that poor tax collector throwing himself on the mercy of God acknowledging his own sinfulness while the arrogant Pharisee basks in his own self-righteousness. To coin the words of an old song "Is That All There Is?" To be sure, there is more to be learned here.

In Jeremiah we overhear a dialog between God and the prophet that is truly one-sided. While Jeremiah piles up agonizing similes to describe the chasm that separates the lamenting Israelites from the mercy of God—"...like a stranger in the land, like a traveler turning aside for the night...like a mighty warrior who cannot give help..." (vs. 8, 9)—the basic message of this whole conversation with God comes down to the ultimate imperative: Despite all we have done "... do not forsake us!" (v. 9). But God is not moved by the prophet's supplication. We might feel left in the dark—at least until



the last words of verse 22 anticipate hope that can only come from waiting on God.

The darkness in Paul's farewell begins amid the assurance of his own righteousness (that might feel off-putting at first) and is followed by this practical and rather painful review of how difficult things have been for him and how alone he has felt in his mission. Yet, the final word is really quite different. The tone changes, the focus is no longer on Paul and his travail but on his absolute confidence in the Lord who has sustained his faith, given him strength to finish the race, and in whom he places all his hope.

Because the parable Jesus tells in Luke is so familiar it would be easy to parse it into a rivalry between arrogance and humility in which we can find ourselves more like the arrogant Pharisee while wishing we were more like the humble tax collector. It isn't simply arrogance that Jesus is getting at here, but arrogance borne out of total reliance on works that justify a life. Conversely, in his prayer, the tax collector is confident in only one thing—that God is the only one who can justify, the only one to whom he can turn to confess his sins and from whom he can receive mercy and forgiveness. In God, and not his works, he places his hope.

### Pastoral Reflections

In the throes of this campaign season, we have been inundated with the inflated claims of politicians who want not just our ear but our vote. At times it feels like the Pharisee in the parable Jesus tells in Luke has moved right into 2016! It is so easy to be caught up in the rivalries and the rightness of one claim over another and to list all the accomplishments the candidates claim as a means for deciding our vote of confidence. This is true not just for political campaigns but it is a very current example of how we are susceptible to placing our hope, even our faith, in what we measure as success by way of works.

On the other hand, what might seem like Paul campaigning for a vote of confidence as he reflects on his mission and ministry provides a different model. It is an example of the vast difference between self-promoting and testifying to good works that are accomplished only by the grace of God. Paul is not simply boasting about himself but about the God who is in him, with him, and for him in all that he has accomplished. It is that kind of surety of God's presence at work in him that gives Paul the confidence to claim what has gone well and to look into the future even as he is considering the end of his life.

Boasting without grounding our good works and successes in something more than ourselves alone can get us into trouble. It is a direct route to competition that leads to hostility and even violence. It is a dead-end when dreams for the future rest only on individual successes. But when those dreams

are attached to a sense of purpose and grow out of our values and our beliefs, they provide the grounding for our own good works to flourish. And in that there is reason for hope.

In all three of today's texts we can discover hope emerging out of dark places. We can identify with the Israelites who, after suffering drought and famine, long for relief. We can empathize with Paul who, as he approaches the end of his life, wants to recount where he has been and what he has been able to accomplish. And, if we are honest, we can see some part of ourselves in each of the "two men (who) went up to the temple to pray..." (v. 10). In each case, hope shows up when the reality of our need for God's grace permeates the dark places. The audacity to hope in the midst of struggle points us to a future grounded in the belief that we are not alone in our greatest distress or in our greatest success. God is with us!

*M. Susan Peterson*

## Reformation Day October 30, 2016

**Jeremiah 31:31–34**

**Psalm 46**

**Romans 3:19–28**

**John 8:31–36**

### Engaging the Texts

All the texts appointed for this day drive toward the always-reforming understanding of who God is, who we are, and the nature of our relationship. The Jeremiah text addresses a time of identity chaos for God's chosen people. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) fell in an earlier repositioning of global power, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) has been decimated as a pawn in a similar global upending. God's chosen people have lost everything, especially and devastatingly, those signs of God's covenant they assumed were inviolate: land, fame, and progeny. Perhaps all that remained after this drubbing was progeny, and they were likely falling in love with the conquerors!

This clip follows language promising restoration to the shattered people, "I am going to restore the fortunes of the tents of Jacob, and have compassion on his dwelling; the city shall be rebuilt upon its mound, and the citadel set on its rightful site" (30:18). Chapter 31 begins with promises to the exiles—God will bring them home. Our text then promises a new covenant for the old one has been broken.

The promise of a new covenant means that God has not abandoned this relationship. It will be restored because of God's faithfulness. In fact, knowing God will be baked in, according to the text, so that even teaching will not be necessary, "for they shall all know me" (v. 34). What will make this

possible? “For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (v. 34).

Psalm 46 is a hymn of trust in the one sure thing, God’s refuge and strength. When everything else has been upended, God is still faithful. This is an important theological assertion, given the profound losses the people had experienced. Certainly, they must have wondered if God had abandoned them, if they had lost their “chosen” status. This hymn is the outcome of a good deal of theological work, a pastoral response to a people lost.

In the Romans text, Paul draws deeply from the images of his Jewish tradition, a tradition that predates the pain of Jeremiah’s words and continues to evolve over the history of this people. Paul portrays Jesus as God’s sacrifice of atonement or, as I learned in seminary, “at-one-ment.” The NRSV offers an alternate reading, as God’s place of atonement. This hearkens back to the Ark of the Covenant, which held the tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were chiseled. The cover of the Ark, also called the mercy seat, was the place where God would meet God’s people (Exod 25:16–22). It traveled with the people through the wilderness and eventually settled in the temple.

Paul proposes that Jesus is that place where atonement happens, where we meet God. He transforms the old sacrificial practice of sprinkling blood on the mercy seat, and suggests that, through his blood, Jesus incarnates God’s “place” of meeting.

Finally, the Gospel text pulls these threads together. “If you continue (Greek is *meno*, or dwell) in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (8:31–32). Jesus’ hearers protest that they have never been enslaved. Their understanding of being enslaved was narrow, Jesus pointed out. A sinner is enslaved and is not, therefore, secure in God’s household. However, in Jesus, the son, a place is secured. “So if the Son makes you free, you are free indeed” (v. 36).

### Pastoral Reflections

If you’ve chosen these texts, you are celebrating Reformation Sunday rather than the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost. The idea of renewal and re-formation is the context for preaching on this day, and the texts speak to these themes.

I am struck by our first-world illusion that we are in control of our lives and our world. Yet we are confronted by random violence that kills children in their classrooms, police in the line of duty, and black men stopped for traffic violations. People are gunned down in a McDonald’s restaurant, a priest is executed at the altar, hospitals are bombed, and hundreds of schoolgirls disappear. Add to this the volatility of the climate, floods, storms, and disease. We are not in control. In fact, our desperate attempts to control often exacerbate the situation.

Some will choose to quiver and recede, and some will choose bluster and revenge. It’s all fear, fear born of the false belief that we are in control, or should be.

I remember an experience as a chorister in high school. I sat with a thousand other singers on one side of the gymnasium, the university orchestra and a few professional soloists before us. The other side was filled with family and friends. We made our way through Handel’s *Messiah*, drawn in some cases from the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Jeremiah. When it came time to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” the crowd rose to their feet. I was unaware of this tradition and was overwhelmed with emotion. I was carried by them all, and those hallelujahs were, for me, a deep spiritual expression of what these texts lead to. It is God’s world, and, in Jesus, I am welcomed into a life of faith, where I belong. The rest, as Luther would say, is *adiaphora*. I do not need to be afraid, but return again and again to this truth. Then, and only then, can I live a life of righteousness. Then and only then, can I face the chaos and seek to renew and reform.

Catherine Malotky

## Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost October 30, 2016

**Isaiah 1:10–18**

**Psalm 32:1–7**

**2 Thessalonians 1:1–4, 11–12**

**Luke 19:1–10**

### Engaging the Texts

This Sunday, we may experience whiplash—from harsh, even sarcastic, prophetic words to sweet words of comfort, to words of affirmation, then to a gospel story many of us learned to sing in Sunday school. Quite a range of emotions and sentiments!

The words of the first chapter of Isaiah draw from a story the lectionary visited last summer—Sodom and Gomorrah. You may have made the point then that this is a story about what constitutes righteousness and justice for those seeking to live faithfully (see Gen 18:17–19), namely welcoming strangers. It’s important to point out that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was not a sexual sin (though it was expressed as sexual violence), but an assault on the frequent biblical command to offer hospitality, “for you were once strangers” (Deut 10:19–20).

In the Isaiah text, God’s discouragement with the chosen people is palpable. God sees their worship as a mockery—all their careful positioning and sacrificing mean nothing anymore. Theologically, the prophet is trying to make sense of the devastating overthrow of the Northern Kingdom (Israel), and

the threat to the Southern Kingdom (Judah). He points to a profound failure to live up to the covenant demands to seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.

Note that the text turns in verse 18. God takes a big breath after the long complaint, and turns back to the relationship, offers an invitation to argue it out and a promise to redeem. This pivot leads us to the warmth of the Psalm (“happy are those who are forgiven,” 32:1), the affirmation of 2 Thessalonians (“your faith is growing abundantly,” 1:3), and the grace of the story of Zacchaeus in Luke.

The story of Zacchaeus takes place in Jericho, in the Jordan Valley. Sodom was also in the Jordan Valley (Gen 13:8–13) before its destruction. Would early hearers have made this connection? The story of Zacchaeus is also a story of hospitality—Jesus asks Zacchaeus to provide hospitality for him. Where the people of Sodom failed to offer hospitality, in this case, it is offered, but the crowd rejects the host as unworthy.

Jesus’ willingness to ask for and accept Zacchaeus’ hospitality transforms Zacchaeus into one who recognizes his sin and at least verbally commits to making amends. Like the affirmation for the congregation in Thessalonica, Zacchaeus is growing in faith because Jesus is willing to stand with him.

“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (v. 10). This summary statement in Luke is the parallel to the last verses of the Isaiah text. This is the expression of God’s redemptive nature, and the faithfulness of God’s hospitality to us.

### Pastoral Reflections

In the United States, we are closing in on the end of a campaign season that has been hard on immigrants. The U.S. is not alone in its struggle to make sense of its relationship with immigrant people. Nor is our time unique; history has its own stories. Certainly the biblical command to welcome the stranger was prompted by powerful human instincts to seek out and protect those who are most like us.

Luke’s story of Zacchaeus extends the command to welcome the stranger beyond culture to class. Zacchaeus was wealthy, engaged in an exploitative enterprise, and by his own admission likely defrauded people. Class is also more and more a source of strife in our human interactions and social structures. As the wealth gap continues to widen, we can expect this to get worse rather than better. Our judgments of each other quickly revert to stereotyping, and our naturally protective instincts lead us to stay within our comfort zones and hang out with people who are more like us than not.

This, however, is damaging to community, and particularly damaging to faith communities where we claim to be trying to live faithfully. If we simply dismiss wealthy people as sinners (as the crowd did Zacchaeus), we don’t have an op-

portunity to have a broad conversation about class at Jesus’ table of plenty. We miss the potential to curb the tendency to divide and isolate us across class lines. Similarly, if we dismiss those who are poor as sinners, we miss the opportunity to learn the real human stories of what it is like to live without resources. We miss learning what it means to take responsibility for our wealth for the sake of the greater good and how to live responsibly within our dependence on those who have resources.

These are not easy conversations, but we are on an Isaiah-like path if we ignore these matters in our congregations. Not hearing and honoring each other’s stories, not building relationships of respect among us and beyond “us” will drive us to protect and exclude. This is true whether we preach in a congregation that is homogenous, or one that is diverse by class. Our attempts at faithful living and worship will always be gutted from God’s perspective by our denial.

How do we come at this homiletically? Certainly not by being preachy! We can follow God’s example in Isaiah: “‘Come now, let us argue it out,’ says the Lord. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool’” (1:18). We hear Jesus’ invitation to all of us to eat at his table, to be influenced by his hospitality. We are all welcome. How does that change things?

*Catherine Malotky*

## All Saints Day November 6, 2016

**Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18**

**Psalm 149**

**Ephesians 1:11–23**

**Luke 6:20–31**

### Engaging the Texts

On All Saints Day, we hover between this world and the next by remembering those who have died in the past year. This is the liturgical context for today’s readings that peer into liminal space in the life of faith.

Daniel is a wild ride, a nightmare let loose, complete with beasts and voices. Not unusual in apocalyptic literature, his visions are expressions of the chaos in which he was living, a chaos that clearly threatened his wellbeing and that of his community. The symbolic expression was a way of wrapping his mind and soul around it all.

In his vision, the beasts rise up out of the sea, traditionally seen as a place of primordial chaos. Most scholars believe these beasts represented world powers of the time who were having their way with tiny Judah as they jockeyed for position

among themselves. Daniel's vision clearly illumines his powerlessness and lack of agency.

Reading straight through the text, including those verses excluded, introduces us to the Ancient One, who has astonishing power, impervious to fire and served by thousands. The Ancient One puts to death the fourth and scariest of the beasts (interesting that the one with arrogant words is silenced), but the other three remain for a time though they no longer have dominion. Then we are introduced to "one like a human being," or in Aramaic, "one like a son of man." This familiar title has been leveraged in our tradition. This "Son of Man" is given dominion over all.

The final verses interpret the vision: in spite of the beasts, "the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever and ever" (v. 18). Here is the promise to those living without power over their own lives—in the end (and for eternity) the holy ones will come home to their own once again.

Ephesians does not explicitly call out the imagery from Daniel, but similar themes are working in 1:20–23. From the description, it would be fair to say that this lines up with Daniel's description of the Son of Man, and draws a circle around believers as the holy ones of the Most High.

Lest we get too secure in our election as holy ones, Jesus' sermon on the plain in Luke lays out just what is true about those who are blessed and those who are warned.

### Pastoral Reflections

The primordial chaos of the sea is a biblical metaphor. Check "leviathan" in a concordance. In more contemporary story-telling, recall the sea serpent that enslaves the Dark Island in the 2010 film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (based on C.S. Lewis' book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, published in 1952). Remember that C.S. Lewis was writing with WWII fresh in his mind. I wonder if the power of the sea serpent, which took its shape from Edmund's greatest fear in the story, was a way to embody what C.S. Lewis had seen happen in people's souls as the war raged and lives were destroyed. Not so far from the apocalyptic drama we find in Daniel.

On All Saints Sunday, we can get lost in remembering those who have gone before, but this Sunday is as much a reminder of the saints who live, namely, us. Those of us who gather in Jesus' name are, in baptism, recipients of this identity, not because of our merit, but because of his. We so easily get confused about this. Being elected can get distorted so quickly.

The apocalyptic visions of Daniel are directed at a besieged people who have suffered much, who have lost life and culture and hope. While it is true that Americans can find themselves besieged, in reality, we are closer to being conquer-

ing powers than powerless pawns. The assertion in Ephesians that Jesus Christ is Lord was politically risky because Caesar was considered lord. American exceptionalism can too easily lead us to see ourselves or our democracy or our economy as lord. Jesus challenges us here, and may make us squirm if we are honest about our place in the global economy.

That said, it is also true that the relentless pace of our lives, the stresses under which we work, the fact that many of us are being left behind as the wealth gap widens, the realities of racism and sexism, our persistent xenophobia, and a fragile sense of teetering on the edge of disaster can produce perspectives that lead us to feel powerless and run over by an economy and social order that seems rigged.

What might it mean to invite a renewed focal point through the lens of faith? What might it mean for us to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, not as a weapon against others, but as a north star for ourselves, so that loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who abuse us is an invitation to correct the balance in our lives of faith? If we are people with means, we cease disparaging those who are poor for not putting forth the effort. If we are without means, we cease disparaging those who are wealthy for being greedy and self-centered. Instead, perhaps Jesus' invitation is to a genuine relationship, where we deal with each other first as children of God, then explore our differences and empathetically discern together how to do unto others as you would have them do to you.

*Catherine Malotky*

## Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost November 13, 2016

**Malachi 4:1–2a**

**Psalm 98**

**2 Thessalonians 3:6–13**

**Luke 21:5–19**

### Engaging the Texts

This is the first Sunday after the election of a new president as well as other national and local leaders. Depending on who was elected, some people in the congregation may indeed feel that it is the end of the world. (Since these reflections were written in July there was no way of knowing what would happen on November 8<sup>th</sup>.) On this next-to-last Sunday of the church year, we expect to hear texts about last things or what some will hear as the end of the world. But those who claim to know when that will be haven't listened to Jesus.

Malachi has the last word in the First Testament. He warns about a day to come, a day of judgment when the arrogant and evil-doers will become "stubble" (Mal 4:1). But



Malachi also gives a promise: “the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” (v. 2). Christians see Jesus as this healing sun. Perhaps this is a Sunday to preach about healing the divisions among us, both within the congregation and in our country. In 2 Thessalonians Paul also gives a warning: “Don’t be idle!” This is a text some people quote against welfare policies: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat” (2 Thess 3:10). We can’t be sure what was going on in Thessalonica, but Paul wasn’t talking about SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program! He was talking about some in that community of believers who had become lazy. In a kind of summary of his concern, Paul pleads: “Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right” (v. 13). That could be the theme of many sermons for it’s not so simple to know what is right! We’ve heard many different definitions during this campaign season. Our temptation can be to focus on “those lazy people” (not us!) rather than on discerning what it means to do what is right in our own time of history.

The Gospel text from Luke may be the scariest of all with Jesus’ words about wars and insurrections, famines and plagues. “Do not be terrified,” is a hard word to believe when terrorism is in the news every day. Throughout history, Christians have asked the disciples’ question: “When will all this take place? What are the signs?” By the time Luke wrote this gospel, the stones of the temple had been thrown down and most of Jerusalem destroyed. Some have heard this as proof of Jesus’ prophetic prediction. Some will hear this as Christianity replacing Judaism. But Jesus never said that. Jesus’ main focus here is not on predicting the future, but on testifying in the present.

### Pastoral Reflections

But what will we testify? Even the word “testify” may be scary to some of us. Will I talk about my faith in public? Say grace aloud at a restaurant? Tell others that Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior? In the midst of disasters and despair, what shall we testify? Jesus doesn’t tell us what to say: “Don’t prepare in advance. I will give you words and wisdom that none can refute” (Luke 21:14–15 paraphrased). But Jesus isn’t physically here with us now and we aren’t sure what to say.

What did Jesus testify? That can be a place to start. Jesus didn’t make up his testimony from scratch! He was shaped by Torah and the prophets. Our testimony, too, is shaped by Torah and the prophets—and by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are called to testify because we have heard Jesus’ testimony. We don’t have to start from scratch any more than Jesus did.

We aren’t left clueless in Luke’s gospel. Testifying began even before Jesus was born when his mother Mary sang about a world turned upside down: the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty because they had enough

already. She sang in past tense even though Emperor Augustus was still on the throne (Luke 1:46–55). Jesus picked up her song when he picked up the scroll of Isaiah for his first sermon. “The Spirit...has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). If we are called to testify, we can begin there. We can tell the parables Jesus told: God is a shepherd seeking for one lost sheep. God is a woman searching high and low for one lost coin. God welcomes the prodigal home even before he can stammer his confession. God is searching for each one of us no matter how unworthy we feel. We can share Jesus’ vision of the banquet where everyone is invited including those who were always on the outside. We can remind one another of Jesus’ story about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus who longed for crumbs from the rich man’s table. We can testify about Jesus who was faithful to God all the way to the cross. But that wasn’t the end of Jesus’ testimony, for God raised him up from the bonds of death to life eternal. No matter who has been elected this is what we are called to testify, even when we are afraid.

*Barbara Lundblad*

## Christ the King/ Reign of Christ Sunday November 20, 2016

**Jeremiah 23:1–6**

**Psalm 46**

**Colossians 1:11–20**

**Luke 23:33–43**

### Engaging the Texts

This is a dissonant day. We may sing “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” but the upbeat hymn clashes with the king whose only crown is made of thorns. This strange king is hanging on a cross between two criminals, condemned to death along with them. What kind of king is this?

In the first reading, Jeremiah talks about shepherds, but he is thinking about kings. A shepherd was supposed to protect the sheep, but the shepherds of Judah had put the people in peril. However, verses 5 and 6 bring a promise: God will raise up a “righteous Branch” who will execute justice in the land. His name will be “The Lord is our righteousness.” The Hebrew makes it clear that this new shepherd/king will not be like the current king: “In Hebrew the name is *YHWH zidqenu*. These two words are in reverse order of the name Zedekiah (*zidqi yahu*). The messiah will be the direct opposite of King Zedekiah.” (Ralph Klein). The writer of Colossians

speaks of neither shepherd nor king but one who is “the image of the invisible God.” This text proclaims one of the most comprehensive christological visions in the New Testament, perhaps part of an early baptismal creed. Is there a way to frame verses 15–20 as a Statement of Faith the congregation can say together?

Luke 23 disrupts our sense of time: it is Good Friday on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. The Roman authorities wrote the inscription over Jesus’ head: “This is the King of the Jews.” With this title, they mocked Jesus and all of Israel. In the midst of mockery, Jesus exercises his strange kingship. He speaks two “words” from the cross in Luke. The first word echoes the ministry of forgiveness Jesus practiced all his life, including forgiveness for enemies: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing!” The second word promises mercy to the criminal hanging beside him: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (vs. 34, 43). This word anticipates Jesus’ authority as the Son of Man, reigning with justice and mercy. He is the righteous king Jeremiah had promised long before—a different kind of king.

### Pastoral Reflections

Theologian Delores Williams was my colleague at Union Seminary. She grew up in the South and remembers Sunday mornings when the minister asked: “Who is Jesus?” The choir sang out loud and strong: “King of kings and Lord Almighty!” Then, little Miss Huff, in a voice so soft you could hardly hear, sang her own answer, “Poor little Mary’s boy.” Back and forth they sang—“KING OF KINGS...Poor little Mary’s boy.” Delores said, “It was the Black church doing theology.” Who is Jesus? “King of Kings” cannot be the answer without “poor little Mary’s boy.”

To proclaim Jesus as king was a subversive act. To pray “Thy kingdom come” is a subversive prayer. I had heard that many times—perhaps you have, too—but there are times when we hear something familiar for the first time. This happened to me some years ago in my evening preaching class. We were discussing whether there are biblical texts we should preach against. “What about Romans 13?” I asked. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God.” For me it was a discussion-starter, but for Ron it was far more than that. He was an Anglican priest from South Africa. “Our whole congregation was arrested,” he told us. I thought I misheard him, but what I heard was true.

The congregation was St. Nicholas Anglican Church in Elsies River, a so-called “Coloured” township in Cape Town. On June 16, 1986, people gathered to worship on the tenth anniversary of the uprising in Soweto. “People were drawn from every walk of life and all denominations and churches,” Ron said. “There were women, men, children, seniors—one

man was 91—and two pregnant ladies.” The preacher got up to read the text from Romans 13. He barely got started when police with AK47’s burst into the church. They locked the doors, took over the PA system and told the congregation they were all under arrest. The charge? Contravening a by-law under the State of Emergency decree enacted one year before. All 220—mostly Christians and a few Muslims—were under arrest. “I couldn’t imagine how they could arrest our whole congregation,” he said. But the police had planned ahead with many trucks waiting outside. The young priest was one of the last to leave, after tucking notes inside a Bible to let people know where their loved ones had gone. Women and children went to Pollsmoor Prison; men and boys to Victor Vester Prison where Nelson Mandela spent the last years of his imprisonment. “At least the babies and children were allowed to stay with their mothers,” he said. Most of the people were released after a short time, but Ron spent two years in prison.

To claim that Jesus is king—not Caesar or Herod or the Prime Minister—can be dangerous, and hopeful—hopeful to believe that this strange king transforms life here and now. Today is a dissonant day. The King of kings is poor little Mary’s boy. Brokenness and transformation live side by side. Perhaps this is the reality of many in the congregation: expectant faith and excruciating doubt live side by side.

*Barbara Lundblad*

## First Sunday of Advent November 27, 2016

**Isaiah 2:1–5**

**Psalm 122**

**Romans 13:11–14**

**Matthew 24:36–44**

### Engaging the Texts

When I was in middle school the skate brand “No Fear” was popular. They made all sorts of t-shirts and I owned several. My favorite asserted in dramatic lettering, as though crashing through a brick wall, that “Knowledge is Power.”

Our texts for today are about knowledge. Isaiah professes a desire to learn the ways of the Lord. Paul chides the Romans that they already know the time and appropriate behavior, yet continues to instruct them in the ways of the Lord. The psalmist builds upon the anticipation of following the Lord’s commandments to go up to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. And Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel lesson is a part of his longer response to his disciples who ask when the Day of the Lord will be and what will be the sign of Christ’s coming (Matt 24:3).

Yet, for all the teaching that these texts convey, complete knowledge remains lacking. This becomes abundantly clear when Jesus ends his prolonged response to the disciples' request for knowledge more than thirty verses later, explaining, "But about that day and hour *no one* knows" (Matt 24:36, emphasis added).

If knowledge is power, then we mortals are perhaps most of all to be pitied. This is the point Paul makes in 1 Cor 15:19 when he laments, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." For this life, this world, knowledge of and within this world, all remain finite. The hope of Christianity, Paul makes clear, comes in the trust that Christ has been raised from the dead (1 Cor 15:20), in the trust that this life is not the end.

It is out of this confidence that Paul can later say in his letter to the Romans that as Christians we "know" what time it is. For the time is *now*. The time is that period between Christ's resurrection and Christ's promised return. It doesn't matter what the exact hour is. It doesn't matter that we cannot mark the date on a calendar. Because we know all that we need to know.

This, I believe, is also the point that Jesus is hammering into his disciples in his discourse on the end times. Not a hidden map of signs and portents for later generations to decode and come to "know" or own. Not even an overly complicated lesson about times and seasons. Jesus is teaching them and us that power—real power—comes not in knowledge, but in trust. In faith that the Son of Man *will* come again. That God *is* in this world. That our lives, as a result, can never again be the same.

### Pastoral Reflections

I have to admit, I feel bad for Noah's generation. As a child, I always imagined Noah warning his neighbors to repent as he labored at building the ark. I rationalized that had his neighbors headed Noah's warning, God would have saved them, too. I'm sure that this picture of the pre-flood days came largely from the number of picture Bibles and Sunday school lessons that painted just this story.

However, that's not how the Bible tells it. Genesis mentions nothing of Noah warning his neighbors. And Jesus explicitly states that the people knew nothing about the coming calamity (Matt 24:36–39). Indeed, even if Noah's neighbors knew what he was up to, Genesis tells us that the flood covered the whole earth (Gen 7:19). Surely those people who lived a further distance from Noah—who, perhaps, didn't even know Noah existed—would not have been warned.

So, in these readings, we are left to grapple with an element of surprise that flies in the face of our Western culture that values a correlation between hard work and reward. Our culture, like my t-shirt, uplifts knowledge as the highest end,

while these texts suggest something different.

Perhaps it's fortuitous that we're presented with these texts in the first week of Advent. This is a time in the year when many parents across America shift from telling their children to always be forthright, to saying, "Shhh! It's a surprise!" Gifts and surprises are hidden and stashed throughout homes and the ambitious even plot surprise visits from elves, Saint Nick, or Santa Claus.

In a world that values always knowing, the time before Christmas has become a break—a pause during which *not knowing* increases the element of expectation, celebration, and surprise.

But that, you might say, only applies to *good* surprises. The description in our gospel text doesn't quite fit the bill. Or does it? Would the expectation of filled stockings on Christmas morning really be quite so sweet if there wasn't at least a hint of fear that we might find coal instead? Would God's grace really feel like grace if there was never anything to be fearful of in the first place?

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is not trying to scare us into submission, but to help us to realize what is at stake. For in this knowing, we are reminded that when that hour comes, unlike in the days of Noah, our visitor in the night will not be an earth-enveloping flood, but rather, the gracious and forgiving Son of Man (Matt 24:43).

I still feel uncomfortable with the implications of the flood for Noah's generation. But I rest in the trust and the hope that the promise of the Son of Man extends beyond our knowing—beyond time and place—to envelope us all in God's grace. As we prepare to receive Christ this Advent season, may this be our hope.

Amy Lindeman Allen

## Second Sunday of Advent December 4, 2016

**Isaiah 11:1–10**

**Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19**

**Romans 15:4–13**

**Matthew 3:1–12**

### Engaging the Texts

Although I'm far from a fashion critic, the role of the belt across this week's texts strikes me as a somewhat surprising connection. The words in Hebrew (*ezor*) and Greek (*zōnae*) used in both the Hebrew Bible and Gospel texts describe roughly the same piece of clothing—not so much the thin fastener we think of today, but rather, a broad piece of cloth or leather generously covering the loin area. For its relative restrictive properties, most dictionaries render the words

more literally as “girdle.” Symbolically significant, while there is only one word for a girdle predominantly in use in Koine Greek, Hebrew offers several alternatives, and the one used by Isaiah in this passage is typical specifically of a prophet as opposed to, by way of contrast, the girdle of a soldier or state official.

With the restrictive capacities in mind, one envisions both righteousness and faithfulness (Isa 11:5) as those qualities that restrain or “hold in” the action and power of the prophesied one. This is already alluded to in the previous verses when Isaiah describes judgment as coming not from the individual’s capacities, “what his eyes see” or “what his ears hear,” but rather, as a function of “righteousness” itself (Isa 11:3–4).

Although the belt language is not carried over explicitly in Psalm 72, this theme of righteousness as the restraining and directing force of God’s ruler comes through abundantly, particularly in verses 2 and 7. Moreover, the psalmist strengthens this conception of righteousness with the related concept of justice in verse 2.

Which brings us to the Gospel, where the term “belt” (or girdle, if you will), shows up again, this time not in a figurative or symbolic sense, but rather, with reference to John’s clothing. While contemporary fashion trends (and diets, for that matter!) tend to recoil a bit at the physical description of John in Matt 3:4—and it does certainly paint the picture of a bit of an outsider even in biblical times—some cultural perspective on John’s dress suggests it isn’t quite as odd as it first sounds.

The material of his belt, of course, is actually one of the two fabrics most common for this type of outer garment. Although linen may have been the more artisan choice of the elite, leather belts in this period were fairly common. In addition, remembering the prophet-specific language used to describe the belts of righteousness and faithfulness in Isaiah, it’s worth noting that the camel’s hair clothing John wears in Matthew is also a garment favored by the prophets (cf. Zech 13:4; 2 Kgs 1:8).

### Pastoral Reflections

Having neglected Paul’s letter in my former remarks, I want to begin with it here, specifically, with the concept of “hope” (*elpida*, Rom 15:4). In our secular world, it feels like we’ve watered down the idea of hope. For example, I hope I’ll win the lottery. My children hope I won’t make them clean their rooms. We might even describe our house pets as hoping for a scrap of food from the table.

But this isn’t hope. At least, not hope the way Paul intends it. Except, perhaps—if your household is like mine—the pet *will* receive food at some point from the table. Hope, as it’s defined in the original Greek, is not a pie-in-the-sky

concept. It isn’t a maybe someday promise. Hope is real. It’s a conviction, a confidence, a solid assurance that what is not yet will, in fact, come to be.

From where do we get this assurance? Paul tells us, from the scriptures (15:4), from believing (15:13), and ultimately, from the Holy Spirit (15:13).

Upon what is our confidence based? Paul tells us, quoting our text from Isaiah, that it is in “the root of Jesse” whom “the Gentiles shall hope” (15:12). What, then, will be the content of this sure conviction? Isaiah describes it as that day when “The wolf shall live with the lamb,” (11:6) and a host of other prophetic images that may seem a bit more of the pie-in-the-sky, lottery-winning kind of fantasies. But Paul gives us a bit of a different perspective when he exhorts, “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you” (15:7).

In our current political climate, perhaps one does not seem significantly more difficult than the other. But while we cannot control the lion’s ability to lie down with a lamb in this moment in history, we can and should act to bring about Christ’s expansive welcome in the here and now. I believe this is a big piece of the beatific vision that Isaiah conceived: a community of welcome in which one member does not attack another. In which, together, we sing to God our praises and work together for the good of one another and the creation God has made. It isn’t an easy hope. If it were, Paul wouldn’t have to exhort the Romans to live into it.

Yet, as Christians—baptized and claimed children of God through Christ—it is *our* hope. Not in a pie-in-the-sky someday future world, but in the here and now world into which God is calling us to live and act with confidence, assurance, and conviction for God’s righteousness and justice here and now.

*Amy Lindeman Allen*

## Third Sunday of Advent December 11, 2016

**Isaiah 35:1–10**

**Psalm 146:5–10**

**James 5:7–10**

**Matthew 11:2–11**

### Engaging the Texts with Pastoral Reflections

The day our first child was born was a day of joy and surprise. At 5’1” and 110 pounds, I hadn’t worried how quickly the pregnancy visibly progressed. My mother at 5’3” had five children completely naturally, all of us born between nine and ten-and-a-half pounds. On that hot August morning, I remember looking at my brand new daughter, Katie,



and thinking, “How could I have been so large and have such a small baby?” Two minutes later, the doctor yells to the nurses, “Get back over here, there’s another one in there!” That someone was Katie’s twin, Amy. I was so surprised and twice blessed.

In this Third Sunday of Advent Gospel, John the Baptist, in prison, has time to ponder. He thought he knew all about the Messiah for whom he was preparing the people, and yet, the surprise. “Maybe I’ve been wrong all along. Maybe cousin Jesus is not the guy.”

The Advent readings bring eschatological themes. We move toward the Incarnation. These texts set forth the vision: we are at the end times. God will have God’s way with this world and for that matter the entire cosmos. Last Sunday Isaiah brought the image of Shalom, the Peaceful Kingdom, the transformation of earth, the shoot from Jesse, the vision of wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion, lying peacefully together and a little child leading them. All the earth knowing the Lord. In Isaiah 35, the eschatological themes include the entire cosmos. There is praise and joy and singing. Sorrow and loss and disabilities are reversed. Does not creation begin to dance in this text? In most of the world, people cannot sing without moving. Creation must be dancing. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap, the mute speak. The Garden of Eden breaks forth. Danger and hostility are destroyed. A highway of joy and safety and dancing appears. “No travelers, not even fools, shall go astray,” the poet writes in Isaiah 35:8.

These texts point to the healing of the sick, a sign of the new world dawning. The world’s rules are shattered. God turns everything on its head. God’s will, God’s promises, God’s vision, God’s dream prevails. We hear these promises and dreams in Mary’s Magnificat (alternate psalm, Luke 1:46b-55). These themes also reverberate in Psalm 146. Jesus answers the Baptist’s disciples—The Great Reversal has begun. The signs are all around you. “Go and tell John what you hear and see. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (Matt 11:4–6).

We know these texts of reversal: Miriam’s ancient song with dancing and tambourine (Exod 15:20–21) “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider (our oppressors) thrown into the sea.” Hannah’s song (1 Sam 2:1–10) rejoicing in the promise of a child. Both of these great-great-grandmothers’ songs become the model for Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:47–55). Other texts of reversal include the Beatitudes in Matt 5:1–12, and many Psalms including our Psalm of Praise for Advent 3, Psalm 146.

God is turning the rules of the world upside down. The world’s rules say that the powerful, the rich, those with certain skin colors, gender, and intelligence, the fine athlete

will be blessed with even more, are turned on their heads. The hymn, “The Canticle of Turning” communicates this eschatological reversal. Even John the Baptist the greatest prophet of all, as Jesus describes him, is surprised by God’s unexpected promises in Jesus Christ. Don’t we wish we could join John the Baptist, and personally decide who and what our Messiah, our God, should be?

Our U.S. culture has become passionate about each of us deciding who and what our God is and how our God should behave. The Baptist speaks the question of our hearts, “Jesus, are you really the best God has, or should we look for (or create) another?”

In James 5:7–10 the writer declares a theme of patience, waiting for Christ to come again, with two examples: the farmer who plants and waits patiently for the rain and the prophet who waits patiently over his entire lifetime.

My high school choral teacher was a brilliant director who taught us Bach cantatas and other great works. Sometimes he would yell to move us to sing beyond our ability. A few years later this director decided to quit teaching and farm. My mother, daughter of a farmer, said, “I do not think he will be a successful farmer. You cannot go out and yell at the crops to make them grow.”

Perhaps our American culture knows nothing about patience. The patience of the prophets, the patience of a good farmer, is beyond us. This is a time to learn from our two-thirds world global brothers and sisters about patience. Like the world of John the Baptist, they have endured poverty, poor medical care, oppressive tyrannical governments, famine, violence, and lack of education. Many walk miles each day to their farm, for water, to worship on Sunday, to secure an education, hunched over with great physical burdens. Trusting God, waiting patiently in Christ, is their middle name.

Through these texts we look to our God who promises to come again and put all things right. We look to God in Jesus who enters our lives as flesh and blood with mercy and forgiveness. Jesus, you are the one! Save us from ourselves. Help us to trust you only and wait patiently for your coming again.

*April Ulring Larson*

## The Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18, 2016

**Isaiah 7:10–16**

**Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19**

**Romans 1:1–7**

**Matthew 1:18–25**

### Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

When I was in Ethiopia, President Wakseyoum of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus proudly announced to me, “My six-year-old son can recite ten generations of his family.” At a weeklong gathering of the Lutheran women pastors and theologians of Africa at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, one young pastor urgently stopped me after my Bible study on Ruth because it was imperative to clarify the genealogical relationship between Lot and Ruth. Years later, a young Tanzanian Lutheran Bishop visiting in the United States said, “If someone does not know my family, my ancestors, they have nothing to say to me.” Our African sisters and brothers in Christ clearly have a deeper understanding of the meaning of genealogy than I do.

In contrast to Matthew, Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus is joyous. There is no illegitimate pregnancy. And the singing, Mary sings. The angels sing. The shepherds sing and Simeon sings. We hear no singing in Matthew’s infancy narrative, only the sound of mothers weeping. Matthew tells a dark tale of a wicked king, the massacre of the babies of Bethlehem, and the Holy Family’s midnight flight to Egypt.

Matthew’s birth narrative, nestled between his genealogy and Joseph and Mary’s refugee escape to Egypt, is filled with tension, intrigue, and God’s promises at risk. Nevertheless, the cry from Psalm 80, “Come to save us!” finds its YES in Matthew’s birth narrative. Jesus is linked within the genealogy to Isaac, son of Abraham, the son of God’s promise, and so is linked to the origin of Israel and God’s promise to Abraham, which includes “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3; 22:18). *Jesus* (God Saves), “for he will save his people from their sins.” They will call him Emmanuel, “God with us” (from our Old Testament text Isa 7:14).

Matthew sees the scriptures through the “Jesus lens.” Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of Heaven. He is the Son of God, son of Abraham, and son of David. Jesus is the authoritative teacher of the law who lived a life of righteousness/justice (which includes mercy). In our Gospel text Mary’s husband, Joseph, signals this mercy in his naming and adoption of Jesus—refusing to publicly punish Mary for what he assumes is her adultery. Joseph is *dikaios* (righteous) following the laws of Scripture, yet it is a righteousness made perfect in mercy (1:19).

We yearn for God and pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Yet here in Matthew’s infancy narrative, *God’s yearning for us* is revealed. Some scholars argue that in Matt 1:1 the Greek word *genesis* is the title of the entire book. The Gospel of Matthew is about a new creation. Matthew signals this disruption with the fascinating women in the genealogy who are outside the proper “begetting,” setting up Mary, a woman not in the Davidic line, as the sole biological parent of the Messiah.

The genealogy, the grand recitation of ancestors with its patriarchal begets, begins with the first Gentile, Abraham, and is then disrupted four times by women. Two Canaanites. One Moabite. One married to a Hittite. God disrupts God. God keeps widening the circle of love and mercy. God does what we cannot do for ourselves. God saves us. God saves all peoples. God keeps the ancient promise made to Abraham and Sarah, “Through your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 22:18).

Jesus, ruler of this in-breaking kingdom, is in opposition to Herod, the violent puppet of Rome’s kingdom. This Jesus, “He who saves,” son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God, sets forth God’s new kingdom with healing, forgiveness, and justice that includes mercy as God’s morality measure!

Given Matthew’s infancy narrative of intrigue, danger, and God’s promises in constant risk, perhaps this Advent with more than 65 million refugees and displaced people in the world, we should focus on Jesus as refugee and displaced person. A central text of Matthew speaks these haunting words of Jesus, “Foxes have holes. Birds have nests. But the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matt 8:20).

It was the LWF Assembly in Hong Kong. Sitting on the floor were Bishop Munib from Jerusalem and Bishop Dumeni of Namibia in a room filled with other church leaders and their delegations from countries of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East also seated on the floor. Bishop Munib called to me, “Bishop April, come, come and join our *refugee* camp.” And so I did.

Like his refugee great, great, grandmother Ruth, Jesus knows every lonely place of our lives. He knows every secret we worry will be exposed—every fear—every anxiety. This one calls us to welcome the stranger, the homeless person, embrace the refugee, and to risk everything for the outsider. Righteousness is not getting all the moral rules correct, but is justice with mercy.

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the psalmist sings the refrain of our hearts, “Let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps 80:3, 7, and 19). Matthew responds from our Gospel text, “YES! God saves!” God’s reckless, inclusive, extravagant love in Jesus is for all people in all nations (Matt 1:1 and 1:18). God says: “Gentile or Jew, enemy or friend, I am passionately in love with you and saving you.”

*April Ulring Larson*

## Christmas Eve December 24, 2016

**Isaiah 9:2–7**

**Psalm 96**

**Titus 2:11–14**

**Luke 2:1–14 [15–20]**

### Engaging the Texts

Tonight is for “the people”—the ones who have walked in darkness (Isa 9:2), the ones who have come to sing the new and ancient song (Psalm 96), the ones God has come to redeem (Titus 2:14), the ones to whom God sends angels charged with proclaiming good news of great joy—which is to say, tonight is for “all the people” (Luke 2:10).

Before we can address the people who will gather on this night to hear that good news, before we make any guesses about what might bring them great joy, we are reminded of that which would be good news in every generation and which should inform our exegesis of the worshipping assembly. “For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian” (Isa 9:4). The people here are imagined as beasts of burden, working animals, who have not been treated to the comforting rod and staff of the good shepherd, but instead the abuses of the oppressor. “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire” (v. 5). Now we glimpse the source of the light that has pierced the darkness, an end to war. A light that is not kindled after war has already ceased but is cast when the implements of war are thrown into the fire as fuel.

As the Gospel of Luke will later remind us, this “good news of great joy” will bring a fire to the earth (Luke 12:49), calling households to a very different census than the one called by Caesar Augustus. That later choice is introduced this night in the contrast between the oppressor who lays a bar across the people’s shoulders (Isa 9:4) and the child on whose shoulders authority rests (v. 6). It is the choice between “the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13) and agents of empire (Luke 2:1–2) whose names may change but not their nature.

These are the stakes tonight. “The hopes and fears of all the years” are felt not only in the little town of Bethlehem but across the planet. The yearning for release from exploitative labor, from violence in our neighborhoods, from wars fought on our streets and across the seas, from garments soaked in blood—these yearnings are real. These texts demand an honest reckoning of the state of the world and so do the people.

### Pastoral Reflections

The people (*laós*) will be gathered this night. Some will have been herded to the church by parents and grandparents. Perhaps they will have come in search of a memory, or a feeling, or the keeping of promises made by a culture constantly offering “great joy” but rarely delivering. Others will have stayed awake with you through the watches of the Advent night, waiting for this worship service, for the sermon you will preach, for the mystery of the incarnation and the sacrament of God’s solidarity with burdened people. How will you invite the laity into the new reality inaugurated by the coming of this child? How will you help them to notice that the yoke has been lifted and the bar across their shoulders has been broken?

Before you can lift the burden you have to be able to see it and call it what it is. The sign that set the shepherds in motion was news that “the Messiah, the Lord” was swaddled in bands of cloth and lying in a manger (Luke 2:11–12). Not in a palace, but a trough. A tool of the shepherds’ trade. This is a detail drawn from their own lives—that’s what the angel told them to look for. A sign that God understood their burdens and, further, that God was waiting to meet them in the very places where they labored.

Perhaps you are struggling with how to balance all the demands, explicit and implied, hitched to this night. How can you satisfy the desire for the warm glow of candlelight with the urgency of good news that pierces the darkness and wakes us up rather than sending us off to bed? What detail can you lift from the people’s lives? What hard fact of their daily labor can you point to as the place where God is already waiting to meet them? How will you name the burdens of their hearts so that the people can trust that God truly sees them?

Dear sisters and brothers, do not be afraid of the magnitude of the task before you! Whether this is your first Christmas Eve sermon or your last, God is waiting for you in the crafting of it. You will not find Jesus enthroned in the pages of the sermon drafted by some other, better preacher. Christ is resting, even now, in your fingers and your words, in your heart and your mind, and will meet you as you labor to shepherd those entrusted to your care.

*Erik Christensen*

## Christmas Day December 25, 2016

**Isaiah 52:7–10**

**Psalm 98**

**Hebrews 1:1–4 [5–12]**

**John 1:1–14**

### Engaging the Texts

The scriptures for Christmas Day insist on assigning body parts to everything they possibly can! We look at the messenger's beautiful feet and listen to the sentinels' voices, but the very ruins of Jerusalem are also singing and the Lord is flexing a divine bicep before the nations (Isa 52:7–10). The psalmist is also drawn to God's "right hand and holy arm," then assigns voices for singing and hands for clapping to seas and floods and hills so that they can join the marching band of lyres and trumpets and horns held by human beings (Psalm 98). All of this in support of the claim we make by faith that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14) and that this living Word, Christ our Lord, is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3).

It is more than anthropomorphic metaphor that is going on here. It is theological anthropology, an intentional blurring of the lines humanity uses to draw distinctions between us and the rest of creation. If it is not only we who have voices and make music, but also the land and sea, then what else might we share in common with the imperiled Earth? If God has a strong arm and a skillful hand, then how else might we mirror God? The lines are blurred, and never more so than in the appearance of Jesus the Christ, who hallows human life and humanizes the God who exists beyond all knowing.

The voices of these texts call out to each other, beginning a thought in the letter to the Hebrews ("in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son") that concludes in the gospel of John ("but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God"). Could we share so intimately in God's own being that we, like Jesus, might be called sons and daughters of God? Does God dwell in flesh like ours? Christmas Day answers these questions with an exuberant "Yes!"

Like John the Baptist, we ourselves are not the light (John 1:8), but that light dwells with us and is the source and end of the life we share in common with everything that has come into being through God's Word. This is why we are able to claim that "the life was the light of all people" (v. 4) without fear of erasing the many and diverse ways that we differ from one another. This good news announces peace not by colonizing others with one way of being in the world, but by revealing the divine wisdom through which "all things came into being" (v. 3).

### Pastoral Reflections

In "Poem (The Spirit Likes to Dress Up Like This)"<sup>1</sup> the poet Mary Oliver ruminates on the relationship between spirit and body with lines like these:

The spirit / likes to dress up like this:

*ten fingers, / ten toes, / shoulders, and all the rest...*

It could float, of course,

but would rather / plumb rough matter.

Our lives are filled with rough matter—the indignities of the body, the back that aches, the wheezing lungs, all the various plumbing always getting backed up. Our lives themselves are rough matter. The traumatic childhoods. The messy marriages. The lonely times. The violence. The anger and the despair. The routines that wear us down like fine-grain sandpaper.

We find ways to briefly float above it all. We binge watch TV on-demand. We pour another drink. We stare at our phones. We disconnect. We pull away. We retreat. Even our faith can be a kind of attempt to float above it, to disengage from the messiness of the real world by focusing on some future reality and giving up on the present one. Who cares that this world is going to hell in a hand basket, whatever that's supposed to mean, if the main event is yet to come?

Well, God cares. The message of Christmas is that God, who we might imagine to be floating above it all, actually prefers the plumbing. Picks the pipes. Accepts the aches. Longs for the lungs. Wants to breathe into us and through us. More than wants, the Spirit needs us. It needs the metaphor of the body. It needs the body's world, the way our bodily experiences of hunger, exhaustion, pain, pleasure, passion, and delight give rise to instinct and imagination. Without bodies we would not know the real cost of war, or the rewards of love. Without bodies we would not experience the miracle of birth, or the possibilities of family. Without us, the Spirit can only be an undifferentiated unity. With us, it can know the inexhaustibly diverse permutations of life. Without us it is just light burning where no one is. With us it is the light of all people, shining unconquerably in the darkness.

As your bleary-eyed assembly arrives—perhaps the dutiful remnant who show up Christmas morning after a night filled with carols, or the empty nesters luxuriating in a quiet morning after decades of impossible expectations—how might you help them unwrap the gift of their own bodies as the house of the Lord? What stories do they need to hear to assure them that their frail flesh is sturdy enough to bear divine light?

*Erik Christensen*

1. "Poem (The Spirit Likes to Dress Up Like This)" from *Dream Work*, by Mary Oliver (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 52.