

# Preaching Helps

**Sundays after Easter through  
hgSundays after Pentecost**

## Preaching in This Urgent Time

Every four years it happens: the people of this country elect a president. What do we preach in this election year? Some preachers are already making it clear who their congregations must support. Others will be more circumspect, naming important issues but never naming the candidates. There have been past movements that merged Christianity and politics such as the Moral Majority of the 1970's. But in this election season, Christian Nationalism is gaining strength and is even more threatening.

Christian Nationalism is a movement that believes the United States must be a Christian nation, grounded in Christian values and principles, devoted to preserving Christian superiority. Note that "democracy" isn't part of this definition. You may have seen a clip from the 2024 meeting of CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference). Jack Posobiec opened the conference with these words: "I just wanted to say welcome to the end of democracy. We are here to overthrow it completely. We didn't get all the way there on January 6, but we will endeavor to get rid of it." Then he held up a cross necklace and added, "We'll replace it with this right here. That's right because all glory, all glory is not to government, all glory is to God." But that CPAC meeting had everything to do with the government.

"Christian Nationalism" isn't the whole title; it is really *White* Christian Nationalism. White Christian Nationalism has framed U.S. history from 1619 when the first slaves were brought to Virginia, followed by thousands of Africans brought to our country to be enslaved. Those Africans were considered pagans, not fully human, born to be slaves. Indigenous people who had lived here for centuries were also considered pagan, not fully human; they could be driven off their ancestral lands to make room for White Christians.

The Civil War was fought in large part to preserve the right of White men to own slaves. And why not? Slavery was big business. In 1860, slaves as an asset were worth more than all of America's manufacturing, all of the railroads, all of the productive capacity of the United States put together...Slaves were by far the single largest financial asset of property in the entire American economy.<sup>1</sup> The Confederacy's defeat was a

huge blow economically, culturally, racially, and religiously. God's name was written into the Confederate constitution, even though God is not in the U.S. Constitution. How could God allow the South to lose the war? How could enslaved people be set free? How could this happen to good White people?

Over 100 years later, Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in 2008. The election of a Black man was almost as devastating as losing the Civil War. In her book *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism*, Carter Heyward writes:

"We should not underestimate the fear and horror struck...in the hearts of people in this country who could not imagine living under the authority of a Black president...Most of what has happened in American politics since Obama's inauguration has been motivated at least in part by the refusal of significant numbers of American Christians to accept even the possibility that the stranglehold of white male power on America might be broken."<sup>2</sup>

A Black man in the White House was too much to bear. Many White people were terrified and angry. Gun sales skyrocketed after Obama's election.

White Christian Nationalists are doing everything in their power to suppress the vote, especially in areas with large populations of Black people. Suppression became easier after the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That section provided the federal government with a formula to determine which voting jurisdictions should be subject to oversight when passing electoral laws. Many states have now made it harder to vote with little interference from the federal government. Paul Weyrich, a chief architect of both White Christian nationalism and the modern GOP told an audience of evangelicals in 1980: "I don't want everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of people, They never have been, and they aren't now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in elections goes up as the voting population goes down."<sup>3</sup>

## Preach the lectionary with the urgency of this moment in our ears.

The Bible is our friend even though people interpret the Bible in different ways. The lectionary is also our friend because most congregants know we didn't choose our favorite texts! There aren't any lectionary texts about White Christian Nationalism.

1. David Blight, Yale University, quoted in Ta-Nehisi Coates essay, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, 20.

2. Carter Heyward, *The 7 Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism: A Call to Action* (Rowman & Littlefield: New York, 2022), 33.

3. Heyward, *The 7 Deadly Sins*, 20.

At least, not those exact words. But, as Fred Craddock said more than once: “Every text has a surplus of meaning.” In this election year with White Christian Nationalism on the rise, we are called to hear the appointed texts mindful of the urgency and danger of this historical moment.

### Don't hold the lectionary too tightly!

Plan a “Good Question” Sermon Series perhaps once a month until the election. Perhaps this seems more appropriate for an adult forum but isn't it true that we reach more people in Sunday worship? Each sermon could focus on a question such as the following:

- What are White people afraid of?
- Are Jews and Muslims welcome in a Christian nation?
- What would happen in our country without immigrants?
- Is the right to bear arms a God-given right?
- Where are the biblical families in the Bible?

### Preach about the urgency of this moment

Our country is not Nazi Germany, but we can hear echoes of Nazism in the rise of White Christian Nationalism. Adolph Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. By Easter of that year, only three months later, the Third Reich had taken over the German Church and appointed the bishops. Bavarian Bishop Hans Meiser prepared a proclamation extolling the government and its new laws. Every pastor was expected to read this proclamation on Easter Sunday:

A state which brings into being again government according to God's Laws should be assured not only of the applause but also of the glad and active cooperation of the Church. With gratitude and joy the Church takes note that the new state bans blasphemy, assails immorality, establishes discipline and order, with a strong hand...espouses the sanctity of marriage and Christian training for the young...kindling in thousands of hearts, in place of disparagement, an ardent love of *Volk* and Fatherland.<sup>4</sup>

We can almost hear people singing: “Deutschland has arisen today! Alleluia! Our triumphant holy day. Alleluia!” God was making Germany great again! Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer didn't preach overtly against the Reich, but his sermons were political. There could be NO “glad and active cooperation of the Church” with this new government. People had to choose allegiance to Jesus Christ or to Adolph Hitler.

This issue of “Preaching Helps” begins in April. The

4. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English*, Vol. 14, p. 4.

Easter season includes the anniversary of Bonhoeffer's death in a Nazi concentration camp on April 9, 1945. He taught theology and preached at a very urgent time. One of his last sermons was never preached in church. He wrote this sermon for the baptism of his name-sake Dietrich Bethge, son of his dear friends Eberhard and Renata Bethge. Bonhoeffer sent his sermon from prison in May 1944:

Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation...It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings.<sup>5</sup>

I pray that God will give you a good measure of courage and wisdom to preach in this urgent time.

My deepest thanks to writers for this issue who bring their insights from California, South Carolina, Iowa, New Jersey, Minneapolis, upstate New York, and New York City. **Kelly Chatman** became the first director for the new nonprofit Center for Leadership and Neighborhood Engagement in 2020. CLNE provides programs, coaching and training to connect and support congregations and nonprofits and their neighborhoods. From 2001 – 2020, he was senior pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church and the non-profit Redeemer Center for Life. He has served as advisor to the Bishop of the Minneapolis Area Synod since 2010. Kelly holds a Master of Divinity degree from Gettysburg Seminary and a bachelor's degree from Concordia Senior College, Ft Wayne. He is married to the amazing Dr. Cheryl Chatman who was the Executive Vice President and Dean at Concordia University in St Paul from 2000-2020. **Ronald (Ron) Luckey** is originally from Decatur, Georgia. He received a B.A. from Lenoir-Rhyne University, the MDiv from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry from Lexington Theological Seminary. After forty years in pastoral ministry, he retired at the end of 2012, having served as pastor of Christ's Lutheran Church in Stanley, North Carolina; pastor of University Lutheran Church and campus pastor at Clemson University in Clemson, South Carolina; and as pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Lexington, Kentucky for over twenty-five years. He helped found and served as co-president of BUILD, a faith-based community organizing justice ministry that achieved dozens of victories in Fayette County, Kentucky. Currently he serves as vice-president of the board of directors of the national justice ministry organization, DART (Direct Action Training and Resource Center,) and as a trainer for

5. Victoria J. Barnett, ed., *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Volume 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 231.

new community organizers and clergy. He is a certified instructor in Kenpo karate and holds a fifth degree black belt. He and his wife, Pacita, a retired public school teacher, live in Lexington and have four children and seven grandchildren. **Gladys Moore** is a child of God. Ordained in 1984, she retired in February 2021, with her final full-time position serving as senior pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Summit, New Jersey. Prior to St. John's, she was the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life and Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Mount Holyoke College for six years, served as an Assistant to the Bishop of the New Jersey Synod of the ELCA for sixteen years, and served three urban congregations in New Jersey. She is the co-author with Claudia E. Cohen of "Dialogue Circles: Examining the Impact of Intergroup Dialogues About Racism in a Community Setting" in *Currents: Journal of Diversity Scholarship for Social Change* (University of Michigan: Volume 3, Issue 1).

**Heidi Neumark** served as a pastor in New York City for forty years, twenty of them in the South Bronx and twenty in Manhattan where she was also a founder and executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for homeless LGBTQIQ+ youth. Heidi retired in June and lives in Kingston, New York with her husband Gregorio, across the street from her daughter, daughter-in-law, and two delightful granddaughters. She is now learning about part-time rural ministry. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. (Editor's Note: John's books *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Years A, B, and C* are wonderful resources for preaching.) John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church. **Becca Seeley** is a campus pastor in New York City. She serves as Executive Director of The Vine NYC, an inclusive, ecumenical campus ministry serving students across Manhattan. An ELCA pastor, Becca also serves as Candidacy Coordinator for the Metropolitan New York Synod of the ELCA. **Michael Wilker** is the senior pastor of First Lutheran Church, Decorah, Iowa. Previously, he served as senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Reformation, Washington, D.C. A 1994 graduate of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, he served as a bilingual parish pastor in California and New York before becoming executive director of Lutheran Volunteer Corps. He grew up on a hog farm in southern Minnesota which his family has owned since the land was taken from the Dakota. He is vice president of the ELCA Association of White Lutherans for Racial Justice.

*Barbara K. Lundblad*  
Editor, "Preaching Helps"

## Second Sunday of Easter April 7, 2024

**Acts 4:32–35**

**Psalm 133**

**1 John 1:1–2:2**

**John 20:19–31**

### The curious case of the missing disciple

**T**True confession: I'm a mystery buff. My tastes are pretty catholic, ranging from Dorothy Sayers to Ian Rankin, Tony Hillerman to Georges Simenon, and more recently Scandinavian *noir* writers from Henning Mankel to Karen Fossum to Jo Nesbo. All these authors can weave a series of circumstances and scenic backdrops and quirky characters into an intricate plot that moves through all kinds of moods, dialogue and action, suspense and, yes, violence, to a final, usually satisfactory and sometimes ingenious resolution.

The Gospel reading we hear today takes us back to that first Easter evening and has a mystery simmering at its heart. I'd like to suggest that we puzzle our way through together, putting our "little gray cells" to work as Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot was wont to say. The mystery is this: Where was Thomas that first Easter evening as the risen Jesus appeared to the rest of the disciples huddling behind locked doors for fear of those who had conspired to kill their Master? Why was Thomas not there with his fellow disciples as their risen Lord appeared among the frightened and dispirited bunch who seemed to put little faith in the word of Mary Magdalene who earlier that same morning had rushed in to tell them "I've seen the Lord!" (John 20:18)? Where was Thomas as Jesus materialized before his fickle followers with an ordinary word of greeting—a word of "shalom"?

They rejoiced, John says—were "overjoyed" I'd translate it—when they recognized their crucified master as he showed them the identifying marks of the nails and spear that his resurrected body still bore. Again, Jesus said, "Shalom"—peace be with you. And it was, as he added a word of commissioning, "As the Abba has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21). Thus, Jesus transformed his disciples (followers) into "apostles" or "sent-out ones." But where was Thomas? This life-changing word of commissioning that turned his terrified followers into what would become a band of courageous apostles and martyrs, was accompanied, John says, by Jesus' action of breathing on them as he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (vv. 19-22) which could just as well be translated "Holy Breath."

But where was Thomas as all this was happening? Why wasn't he there? And what might his very absence tell us, like the famous negative clue of "the dog that didn't bark" in one of Sherlock Holmes' adventures? No one knows for

sure where Thomas was that first Easter evening. Yet, as every good detective knows, many a case is built on circumstantial evidence rather than eye-witness accounts. So, we begin with the brute fact of Thomas' very absence and ask if this suggests something about Thomas that squares with the little else we know about him. Is there something about his character from which we may "deduce," as Holmes would say, a clue as to where he may have been?

I think there is. Thomas is only singled out for special mention two other times in John's Gospel, but both references tell us something significant about this otherwise little-known disciple. The first mention is when Jesus learns of his friend Lazarus' serious illness and resolves to travel to Bethany, despite the danger of passing so close to Jerusalem. The disciples are quick to warn him that the "people there wanted to stone you." Thomas alone of all the disciples sticks up for Jesus' bold decision and rallies the faint-hearted others with his words: "Let us all go along with the Master, so that we may die with him" (11:8,16).

Then there's that other occasion when on the last night of his life Jesus had gathered his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem for a last meal together. "Don't be worried and upset," Jesus told them and then went on reassuringly to say he was going to prepare a place for them so that "where I am you may be also," adding, and "you know the way to the place I am going." Again, alone among the twelve, Thomas pipes up with that same willingness to express honest doubt we see in today's reading and says, "Lord we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way to get there?" And Jesus responds with those words we know so well, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (14:1-6).

And so, on the basis of these two scriptural clues, I can't help but surmise that Thomas' absence from the company of his fearful companions might best be explained by the theory (literally, "a way of seeing") that Thomas alone had dared to brave the threatening streets of Jerusalem to check out Mary of Magdala's incredible report of her encounter with the risen Jesus. I don't know this for certain, of course, but it fits well the m.o. (the *modus operandi*) of a headstrong, hard-headed, and bold person like Thomas. And it fits too that when Thomas rejoins his fellow disciples, he finds their tale hard to believe on their mere say-so. And so, Thomas utters his famous ultimatum: "Unless I see in his hands the prints of the nails and place my finger in the mark of his side, I will not believe" (v 15).

The good news of this story of the mistakenly nicknamed "Doubting Thomas" is that a week later Jesus invited Thomas to do just that, a clear and wonderful sign that Jesus will do whatever it takes to bring us to faith as he did for courageous Thomas, as Robert Smith argued so convincingly in his

insightful book, *Wounded Lord*.

Sing *ELW* #386, "O Sons and Daughters," its eight verses broken up throughout the service.

*John Rollefson*

## Third Sunday of Easter April 14, 2024

**Acts 3:12–19**

**Psalm 4**

**1 John 3:1–7**

**Luke 24:36b–48**

### A ghost story?

Last week's Gospel reading from John was reminiscent of mystery fiction so perhaps it isn't too far-fetched to suggest that today's reading from Luke could be considered a ghost story of sorts. For here in Luke's version of the events of Easter evening, immediately following the charming story of his encounter with the two disconsolate disciples trudging their way home to Emmaus, we find the risen Jesus shockingly appearing amid his disconsolate disciples back in Jerusalem with the same word of "*shalom*" that John records. But Luke wants us to know that "they were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost" (vv. 36b-37). But if so, they might well have thought Jesus a ghost sent by God to "haunt" them for having abandoned their Master in his time of need. What's more, earlier that same day they had rejected out of hand the testimony of the women who had visited his empty tomb as "an idle tale" not to be believed (v. 11). Luke adds that already the women's perplexing Easter testimony was being interpreted and dismissed "as a vision of angels who said that he (Jesus) was alive" (v. 23). Had this vision now morphed into a ghost sent by God to startle and convict them of their cowardice?

But, as in John's story of the risen Jesus' appearance to the disciples, this is no avenging ghoul sent to punish his faithless followers. Instead, it is Jesus himself who begins by asking a question, as he was so often known to do: "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Then he bids them (shades of John 20!), to "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself." Here, too, for Luke the authenticating mark of Jesus' real presence has now become the marks of his wounds as Robert Smith elaborates in his *Wounded Lord*. Further, just as in John, Jesus insists, "Touch me and see." Here I see a trace of a smile lifting the corner of his mouth (having a little fun at the disciples' expense, perhaps?), adding "for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (vv. 38-40).



But Luke isn't done yet with his tale of Easter evening and the disciples' chronic failure to credit the good news of Easter now standing right before them. "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering," Luke begins, nicely describing their continuing befuddlement and confusion of emotions, he then continues with what I've long savored as one of the great comic non-sequiturs of all time, worthy of Mel Brooks or Larry David, "Have you anything here to eat?" In effect Jesus is saying, "What do I have to do to get you to see that I'm not a ghost: Eat a tuna sandwich or a piece of gefilte fish?" So, Luke recounts, "they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence" (vv. 41-43), all intended, of course, as evidence of Jesus being no mere ghost.

That still isn't the end of the story, though, as Jesus proceeds to hold a kind of Bible study with his disciples, squaring what he had taught them during his ministry with what he calls "everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms" which had to be "fulfilled." Then, Luke says, in what I find to be a remarkable phrase, "he opened their minds to understand the scriptures," everything regarding the sufferings of the Messiah, his rising from the dead and the forgiveness of sins that was to be proclaimed to all. He concluded, "You are witnesses of all these things" (v. 48), words that overflow that first Easter evening to become the commissioning of the disciples into their calling as "*martyroi*" to the good news of Jesus Christ, as we find Peter testifying compellingly in our first reading from Acts. How significant that their preparation to become "*martyroi*" to the Gospel involved Jesus' first "opening their minds" to the true meaning of scripture as it was to be read in the light of the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection which they themselves had experienced without adequately understanding. "Opening minds" in the manner of Jesus, I've come to think, is a pretty good description of the mission of the church.

One last thing. In our Acts text we find Peter using an under-appreciated title for Jesus that I think has the power to reinvigorate our trinitarian God-talk in which the patronymic "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" is now seen refracted through the prism of Jesus who is to be worshiped and served and witnessed to, Peter suggests, as the "Author of Life." "Life's Author" is a title resonant with echoes of Genesis 1, John 1, and last week's second reading from 1 John 1, highlighting the originating creativity of the one whom God raised from the dead, through whom, according to the Prologue of John's Gospel, "all things came into being" and in whom "what has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:3-4). To be "martyrs of Easter" is to "practice resurrection," in the provocative phrase of the farmer-poet Wendell Berry, which begins by defying all death-dealing,

anti-life forces in the world on behalf of the Author of Life. As one of the hymns today, try the simple Taizé chant "Be Not Afraid" (*ELW* #388).

*John Rollefson*

## Fourth Sunday of Easter April 21, 2024

**Acts 4:5–12**

**Psalm 23**

**1 John 3:16–24**

**John 10:11–18**

### Engaging the Texts for Preaching

The church has traditionally titled the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. No surprise there. The themes of sheep and shepherd saturate worship both in scripture—Psalm 23, "the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want" and Jesus announcing, "I am the good shepherd" who will ultimately trade his life for his flock—and in pastoral-themed song, prayer, visual arts, and strong preaching.

Even though most people come to worship with little exposure to sheep and shepherds on an everyday basis, almost all will have probably memorized "Mary had a little lamb" as a child and, as grown-ups have used (probably unsuccessfully!) the counting-sheep method of inducing sleep.

Psalm 23 presents a gentle, pastel conception of sheep and shepherd which offers a backdrop against which listeners will be open to hearing a sermon based on this beloved psalm. This gorgeously lyrical psalm has provided comfort, strength, renewal, and hope on battlefields, in hospitals, at vocational or relational crossroads, and on death beds. Thus, it's a "can't miss" text in a worship setting where listeners have been, are now, or someday will be facing fear, evil, and the shadow of death. The images are all there waiting for the preacher to mine—green pastures, still waters, and a shepherd with protective rod and guiding staff leading the sheep on right paths toward the promise of a well-set table amid goodness and mercy. A sermon based on this text invites both private reflection and communal conversation. I can attest that more than once during my ministry I had parishioners call me a few days after I preached a sermon on this text asking for an appointment to sit down and talk about what it might specifically have to say concerning a particular crisis in their individual or family lives.

The language of the gospel reading for the day is edgier. Gone are the psalmist's still waters and green pastures, and the psalmist's "right paths" lead to a cross in John's gospel. John paints a picture of a *kalos* shepherd. While we usually translate that word in English as "good," in the Greek it is

much richer and more multivalent. *Kalos* carries the sense of a noble, faithful, fearless, model shepherd. This shepherd knows nothing of self-care and self-protection but instead recklessly forgets himself and stands his ground when the wolf attacks, willing to trade his life for the lives of his flock. Jesus' self-description as a *kalos* shepherd surely resonated with John's original audience who knew well the blood-soaked particulars of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. In preaching this text, perhaps the greatest challenge the preacher faces is how to speak of the good shepherd's sacrifice on the flock's behalf without resorting to hackneyed theological boiler plate (as I learned years ago in homiletics class, "shun the shuns," words like redemption, reconciliation, others) — words that are abstract and keep the visceral power of this text at arm's length. Preacher, don't just tell your people about what Jesus is saying in his self-identification as good shepherd. Make them feel it. Using powerful images and relevant stories from literature and the news, urge them to experience the depth of this divine, fearless One's self-giving rescue.

Another challenge for the preacher is making come alive what this good shepherd's intimacy with his flock looks and sounds like. Where are the everyday places and ordinary events where such relational intimacy takes place? Imagine out loud for your listeners contemporary examples of places and events where the shepherd knows them and they know him so that your listeners begin to see the ordinary as extraordinary and the "secular" (if there really is such a thing) as holy spaces and moments where the good shepherd does his best work in individual lives and in the church's communal life.

And while you're at it in preparing your sermon, don't allow your listeners to overlook Jesus' enigmatic reference to "the other sheep who do not belong to his fold." Have them ponder with you who these other sheep could be? Invite them to wonder if they might be those who are "othered" in society and often in the church—people, for example, like the Ethiopian eunuch whom we'll encounter next Sunday, someone who is "not like us" from a neighborhood "not like ours" who pushes the boundaries of what we consider "normal"? Have your listeners grapple with the fact that part of what makes this shepherd *kalos* is that he gladly lays his life on the line for these "other" folks while inviting his flock to do the same.

Thus far, I've suggested two sermons—one based on Psalm 23 and the other based on John's gospel reading. Perhaps a more natural and therefore more helpful sermonic scheme is to preach one sermon using both texts together as the engine driving the message. After all, the church has forever seen the shepherd in both texts as one and the same individual. The *kalos* shepherd who is fearless and strong and who willingly gives his life for the flock is the same *kalos* one who leads, feeds, and shelters in Psalm 23.

I wish I were in the pews on April 21 to hear your astonishing sermon on this astonishing Sunday! Have holy fun crafting and preaching your sermon!

*Ron Luckey*

## The Fifth Sunday of Easter April 28, 2024

**Acts 8:26–40**

**Psalm 22:25–31**

**1 John 4:7–21**

**John 15:1–8**

### Engaging the Text (but which one?)

**A**lmost every Sunday for forty years as a parish pastor, I turned to the assigned Gospel reading as my primary text for the sermon. One of the few exceptions to this pattern was when the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch appeared in the lectionary. I was hooked by the story's drama built around an encounter between two very different people from two very different worlds who were brought together in a way that powerfully propels the on-going Easter narrative. This story contains all the makings for powerful preaching: "an angel of the Lord" (any time an angel shows up in the Bible, watch out!); an exotic character in a chariot (I think I'm safe in saying that this may be the only time such a vehicle appears in the New Testament) who wants answers about the passage of scripture he is reading; an excited request to be baptized; and Philip's apparent teleportation to a town about fifty miles down the road for his next assignment, leaving in his wake a man whose life has been changed forever. What's not to like about this story?

As intriguing as the details of the narrative are, the focus of the text is on this unnamed eunuch who is being chauffeured in a chariot while reading from the book of Isaiah. The irony surrounding this man's life is that, while so powerful and respected within the queen's court as her minister of finance, he is utterly powerless and disrespected once he steps out into the larger society. He is triply "othered."

First, he is an Ethiopian, translated literally as "burnt face" which, while describing his physical appearance, was a subtle way of dismissing him as an inhabitant of the very edge of the earth. If, as Acts 1:8 states, it is God's intention that the good news of resurrection is meant to ultimately extend to the "ends of the earth," this man is Exhibit A of God's expansive evangelistic intention.

Second, the man is a eunuch. As such, he did not fit the conventional norms of gender in the Roman world. Whether born with ambiguous genitalia or castrated later in life either

by choice or by force, he is considered neither male nor female and stigmatized as one unable to perpetuate his name and lineage.

And third, though the text indicates that he is returning from worship in Jerusalem, as a eunuch he is excluded from full participation in the religious life of Israel since Deuteronomy 23:1 decreed that “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” In other words, each time he worshipped, his joy was tinged with the dismaying reminder that he was destined to forever be outside the Temple looking in.

Given the circumstances that governed his life, no wonder he is drawn to the portion of the book of Isaiah about a “sheep being led to slaughter,” a shorn lamb humiliated and denied justice. No wonder he is desperate to have Philip come sit beside him in his chariot and interpret this passage, asking “About whom...does the prophet say this?” No wonder he is overjoyed to hear Philip identify Jesus as the one led to slaughter, the one who was humiliated because he ranked the marginalized among God’s blessed, and the one whose death for such a social crime was vindicated when God raised him from the tomb. No wonder, when he sees little more than knee-deep water alongside the road, he says to Philip, “I want to swim in this good news! I want to drown in this glad community of the rejected resurrected One!” And finally, no wonder the story ends with the man going “on his way rejoicing.” If I were to put words on his rejoicing they would be, “This Jesus gets me! He knows me! He honors me. This man has set me free!”

So, how does one preach this text? One possible direction is to focus the congregation on God’s mission of carrying the gospel of resurrection to the ends of the earth of which the eunuch is a representative. Without being didactic and prescriptive the text clearly displays the essential components of inclusive relationship-building, preaching, teaching, and baptism in the church’s mission of evangelism, inviting listeners to support this mission with their money, their prayers, and their active participation.

Another direction to which the preacher might be drawn (I admit this is my preference) is the relevance of the eunuch’s being raised from the death of social stigmatization to rebirth into a freeing self-understanding through Word and Water. It is a short homiletical leap from the ancient experience of Philip and the eunuch to the church’s current and on-going mission of declaring that in baptism all are made whole because of God’s decision in Christ’s life, ministry, death, and resurrection, a decision that supersedes any decision made by courts or governing authorities. This Word and Water motif gives the preacher a clear opportunity to lift up the good news that this gender non-conforming man who hails from “the ends of the earth” becomes the spokesperson

for all those living today on the racial and sexual margins longing to experience what the gospel has to say to them. At the same time challenging those for whom the eunuch’s life circumstance is alien to their own situation and who need to be reminded that in our baptism God has already decided that all are cherished just as they are.

Who knew that a long-ago encounter on a wilderness road held the possibility of an exciting and fruitful contemporary encounter between preacher and congregation? Happy preaching!

*Ron Luckey*

## Sixth Sunday of Easter May 5, 2024

**Acts 10:44–48**

**Psalm 98**

**1 John 5:1–6**

**John 15:9–17**

### Engaging the Texts

The first reading from **Acts** recalls the story of God moving Peter to experience the Holy Spirit and faith in Jesus Christ among Gentiles, including a Roman centurion named Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48). Another part of this story, Peter’s proclamation of Jesus’ message of peace (Acts 10:34-43), is an optional text for Easter Sunday every year. Read the whole story in Chapters 10 and 11. It begins with an angel visiting Cornelius in Caesarea. The next day, the Holy Spirit gives Peter a famous vision. Eventually the Spirit brings these two people and their companions into a very unlikely relationship. Peter baptizes the centurion and his family. Peter is criticized by the Jerusalem church and had to explain everything to them step by step (Acts 11).

In response to the “unauthorized” baptisms of Gentiles, today we sing **Psalm 98**. The selected refrain is part of verse 4: Shout with joy to the LORD, all you lands (*ELW* translation). Psalm 98 is part of the collection of psalms focused on YHWH’s reign. The assembly is called to “sing a new song” for God has enacted steadfast, loyal love for Israel. All the nations and the whole earth have seen this salvation. The psalmist invites “all the earth” to exuberant worship. Worship includes people using their voices and instruments as well as the sea and all its creatures roaring. They all sing praise because YHWH is coming to judge the earth, the world, and the peoples (gentiles) with righteousness (justice) and equity (a level path).

The reading from **1 John** follows the portion from last week’s text which proclaimed, “God is love” and “Those who love God must love their siblings also.” Today’s selection

continues the theme of loving God, our parent, and loving God's other children, our siblings. The letter says keeping these commandments is not difficult when we trust God has begotten us all and that Jesus is God's son. Then the letter connects the water, the blood, and the Spirit. In John, the blood is the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. The water could refer to both the water of baptism and creation. At least one early manuscript adds an explicit trinitarian claim, naming "the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit."

This Sunday's gospel reading **John 15:9-17**, comes directly after last Sunday's Gospel (John 15:1-8). Jesus is speaking with his disciples while they share a meal before he is arrested. In last week's reading, Jesus tells them he is the true vine, and they are the branches. In this week's text, we hear that love and joy flow through the vine and branches to bear fruit and friendship.

### Pastoral Reflections

The sixth Sunday of Easter is a good Sunday to share the whole, astounding story of the Holy Spirit's engagement with Peter and Cornelius with your congregation. Following last Sunday's story of Jewish (bi-cultural?) Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, this could continue a theme of the Holy Spirit ever widening the family of God in Jesus Christ.

Although we might have heard an excerpt of Peter's speech on Easter Sunday, this Sunday would give more time to explore how the Spirit expands God's reconciling work of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Beware of antisemitism when talking about why Jews, including Jewish Christians, were discouraged from fraternizing with Gentiles. The prohibitions were not silly but were intended to prevent the worship of other gods and participation in the mistreatment of others.

Consider two other power dynamics in this story. Peter is a follower of Jesus and Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers commanded by a *centurion*. Cornelius was a leader in the system that killed Jesus, crucified thousands of Jews, rebels, and enslaved people. Centurions show up in other places in Luke and Acts as petitioners begging God's grace (Luke 7), as perpetrators of oppression (Luke 23, Acts 22), and as partners with Peter and Paul (Acts 10 and 27). We know a centurion was part of Jesus' crucifixion because just after Jesus breathed his last, a "centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent'" (Luke 23:47).

Secondly, consider that the lowest ranking Roman centurions during Caesar Augustus' reign were paid ten times the wages of a day laborer (3,750 denarii a year). For comparison today, that's like a conversation between a White/Italian police or military officer earning about \$150,000 a year and a Black, Latino, Asian, Arab, or Indigenous person making minimum wage (if they can work full-time) for about \$15,080 annually. Peter and his (male) circumcised

companions are sent by the Holy Spirit to have such a conversation. They're invited into the officer's home despite, and aware of, the military and economic inequities. No wonder they are cautious and perplexed. No wonder that they have their council in Jerusalem challenge Peter to one another. Notice and honor the dissent.

In Canada and the USA, May 5 is National Day of Awareness of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). The commemoration was begun in 2010, on the birthday of Lisa Marie Young, a 21-year-old Indigenous person in Canada who disappeared in 2002. Learn more at <https://elca.org/MMIW>.

Jesus' words in the gospel text can also lead to a reflection upon the essence and expression (being and doing) of the church. Here's a link to Mark Allen Powell's reflection on John 15 from the *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*: <https://learn.elca.org/jle/what-does-it-mean-to-be-church-the-mission-of-the-church-in-light-of-three-biblical-images/>

*Michael Wilker*

## Ascension Day Thursday, May 9, 2024

**Acts 1:1–11**

**Psalm 47**

**Ephesians 1:15–23**

**Luke 24:44–53**

### Engaging the Texts

The lectionary gives us both of Luke's versions of Jesus' ascension. In Luke 24, as the two disciples from Emmaus tell the others "The Lord has risen indeed," Jesus himself stood among them. He showed them his hands and his feet, showing them the crucifixion wounds. He makes clear he is embodied and not a ghost by eating fish with them. Next, as he had on the way to Emmaus, Jesus opens the minds of all the gathered disciples to understand the scriptures: the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. Jesus gives them the hermeneutic for interpretation and mission: the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Jesus instructs them to wait in Jerusalem until the Father fulfills the promise to clothe them with power. Then, while Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried into heaven.

Luke opens his second book, Acts, by adding new details and emphasis to the ascension scene. The first few verses in Acts emphasize that after his suffering Jesus presented himself alive ... speaking about the reign of God. The verses from



Acts also explain that the Father's promise is baptism with the Holy Spirit. It seems the gathered disciples misheard Jesus speaking about the reign of God, because they ask instead about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. Jesus tells them that is the Father's business. As for the disciples, when they receive the Holy Spirit, they will be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. While saying this, Jesus ascended. They're still gazing into heaven when two white-robed men ask them why they are looking that way.

According to Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger in *Psalms: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, Psalm 47, "concerns the kingship of YHWH over all nations, over all creation. According to much scholarly speculation, the psalm reflects an actual liturgical event that was regularly reenacted whereby the theological claim of divine sovereignty was given dramatic replication in the temple." We Christians also enact divine enthronement on Christmas, Easter and Ascension. But is this enthronement a nationalist embodiment (Israel or white Christian nationalism)? Martin Buber considered that question in *Kingship of God*. Buber says God will claim sovereignty and issue commandments to every generation and context. There is nothing which is not God's. Yet God will make this claim and demand simply as a reply to the question: does God rule? God's reply will come in the midst of liturgy and, "above all, in the freedom of God's surging Spirit, through everyone whom the Spirit seizes." God will not resolve the tension of the paradox between historical, specific claims (Jacob whom God loves) and the doctrinal, cosmic ones. God has gone up with a shout and sits on the holy throne.

In the opening sentence(s) of Paul's greeting to the Ephesians, he assures them of God's unsurpassing power. Although the powers and principalities are not yet subjected to Christ, they cannot ultimately resist God's power, power which is deployed to save the hearers. Paul points to Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension as the ultimate expression of God's power.

### Pastoral Reflections

Johnny Cash had a song called "No Earthly Good." It was a warning to Christians not to be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. Johnny Cash encouraged faithful followers of Jesus to share the good news in words and deeds with the people around us.

If you're holding heaven, then spread it around  
 There's hungry hands reaching up here from the  
 ground  
 Move over and share the high ground where you stood  
 So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good

The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread  
 But how can you share it where you've got your head  
 There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would  
 So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good

At Jesus' ascension into heaven, two men in white robes pose a similar challenge to the disciples: Why do you stand looking up to heaven? Jesus had just promised the disciples the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to all the ends of the earth. The question seems to spur the disciples into action. They head back to Jerusalem and together, women and men, devote themselves to prayer.

It may at first seem that the disciples are once again going to stare up at an empty sky. But I think the key here is that the disciples learned from Jesus that **prayer is the way to be both heavenly minded and earthly good.**

Jesus prayed and taught his disciples to pray. He sang and prayed the Psalms with them and by himself. Jesus prayed with the disciples at meals and while walking along the fields, seeing the flowers, and hearing the birdsong.

Jesus prayed before healing the sick and casting out demons. Jesus prayed for his towns, capital city, and nation. He prayed for the enemies of his nation and for those who persecuted him.

Jesus prayed when he was in turmoil and suffering. Jesus prayed to thank God for the community that the Spirit had gathered around him. Jesus prayed for his disciples, that they would be protected and unified in the Spirit.

Jesus' prayer life was integral to his life in the world, to his relationship with God, the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Prayer was how Jesus lived and loved the world.

*Michael Wilker*

## Seventh Sunday of Easter May 12, 2024

Acts 1:15–17, 21–26

Psalm 1

1 John 5:9–13

John 17:6–19

The texts for the Seventh Sunday of Easter offer a number of possibilities for preaching.

In **Acts 1** the disgraced and now-deceased disciple, Judas Iscariot, has made a problem among Jesus' closest followers. His death has created a vacancy because the "Twelve," who symbolically represented the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel, are now the "Eleven." How will Peter and the others choose Judas' replacement so the mission and ministry of the early church might continue?

The candidacy requirements are straightforward: The nominee must have accompanied the disciples during all the time that Jesus went in and out among them until his ascension. He must now join them in witnessing to Jesus' resurrection. Since the Scripture had to be fulfilled and since God knows "everyone's heart," the disciples prayed and used the casting of lots, a game of chance, as their means of discernment!

Today we use electronic or written ballots in our selection of church leaders, whether pastors, deacons, bishops, or Congregation Council members. However, of critical importance to our selection process, regardless of position, is the power of prayer in the community's discernment. The necessity of prayer in these endeavors cannot be overstated, especially during this time in which synod assemblies and bishops' elections are being held across the ELCA. May God have mercy upon us and give us wise and discerning hearts.

**Psalm 1** describes the happiness of those for whom the Torah, God's law and teaching, is paramount in their lives. They are like trees planted by streams of water, who bear fruit in due season, and whose leaves do not wither.

Such poetry has given rise to wonderful and ages-old acknowledgement of how, relying on God's presence in both written and incarnate Word, people are able to stand firm in the midst of injustice. Enslaved people used this verse and sang of their resilience during slavery. So too did labor movements, civil rights protests, and a variety of other social justice groups who adopted and adapted the spiritual because of the steadfast perseverance spoken in its refrain. C. Michael Hawn recounts an amazing history of this song in his essay, "History of Hymns: 'I Shall Not Be Moved'".<sup>6</sup> It's definitely worth reading and watching the videos suggested. Where have you seen such tenacity of hope and resilience in your congregations or communities? Where have the people proclaimed in their words and deeds, "I shall not be moved?"

**John 17:6-19.** It always seems strange to be reading texts from Jesus' Passion during the Easter season, and this prayer in John 17 is no exception. Taking place on the eve of his crucifixion, this text is part of Jesus' farewell prayer overheard by his disciples. In it, Jesus prays for a few things that might be helpful for the church to be reminded of in this day and age.

First, he makes it clear that being one of his followers does not exempt them from the world's trials and tribulations. "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (17:15). Jesus recognizes that life on this side of the Jordan can (and will) be painful and that evil does indeed exist. Thus, he prays that God support the disciples amid the troubles of the world.

In addition to being the Seventh Sunday of Easter, today is also Mother's Day which in some contexts is probably a bigger day of celebration than Eastertide! Given the day, one could also use the text to reflect on the ways in which mothers pray for and do their best to protect their children.

Another thing we notice is Jesus' use of the term "world." The Greek word "cosmos" is used eleven times in this text. Jesus' disciples are *in* the world (17:11), but they are also living in an entity or system which is estranged from God. They are not *from* the world and do not *belong to* it. (17:14, 16). In other words, the world's standards are not to be the source of his disciples' behavior and self-identity. Yet, it is precisely this world, the world that God so dearly loves (John 3:16-17) into which Jesus' disciples are sent. (17:18) "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." What might we proclaim about God's mission--about us being *sent as* Jesus' followers into this fragile, violent, and deeply polarized world that God loves so very much?

Lastly, we might pay attention to the fact that Jesus prays for his disciples to be *one*, even as he and God are one. I wonder if *oneness* is what people think about when they consider the church today. How is the average unchurched or even churched person to understand that there is only *one* church: the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and that Jesus is the *head* of that one church, when there are so many different branches on the "church" tree and the branches are often so very different?

What's more, how is the oneness for which Jesus prays related, if at all, to the idolatry that is Christian nationalism? The draft Social Statement on Civic Life and Faith offers wisdom for such a time as this. Article 37 specifically speaks to these concerns:

The ELCA understanding of civic life and faith is at odds with Christian nationalism because the latter seeks to fuse the exercise of political authority with a selected set of supposed "Christian" ideals. It also asserts that Christianity should be a privileged religion in the United States. Such core beliefs represent a political ideology of religious nationalism, whether explicitly acknowledged or not. In its hardline strains, only white, U.S.-born, Christian believers are considered genuine U.S. citizens. Christian nationalists pledge allegiance to their version of the United States, first making the U.S. into an idol and seeing God's plan in U.S. society as including only those whose religious beliefs fuse with a certain view of that society.<sup>7</sup>

The unity for which Jesus prays is not the supposed unifying platform of "Christian nationalism." Carefully

6. <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-i-shall-not-be-moved>.

7. <https://www.elca.org/civicsandfaith>.

preaching against it while avoiding partisan politics will become increasingly important in this election year. Rather, the oneness that Jesus prays for transcends boundaries of many kinds, within and outside of the church, and moves us beyond our own small circles.

Jesus' prayer gives us the courage to go out into the world in which we are sent and do what Jesus was sent to do--to love God and to love and serve our neighbors, whoever and wherever they are. What a blessing it is that we are a community for which Jesus prays. God knows that we need it.

*Gladys Moore*

## Day of Pentecost May 19, 2024

**Ezekiel 37:1–14**

**Psalms 104:24–34, 35b**

**Acts 2:1–21**

**John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15**

There are choices, alternative texts, for Pentecost; I'll focus on Ezekiel for the first lesson and the Pentecost story in Acts for the second.

**Ezekiel**, an Israelite priest, was part of the brain drain that occurred in 597 B.C.E. when King Jehoiachin and other religious and political leaders were taken into exile in Babylon. Several years later, he began his prophetic ministry.

Preaching this text on Pentecost provides rich and dramatic possibilities of revival when the ravages of death and destruction are all around. We can easily picture Ezekiel's vision as he recounts the hand of the Lord picking him up, putting him down in a valley of very dry bones, and then escorting him all around so he can take in the magnitude of these exceedingly desiccated bones. God's question, "Mortal, can these bones live?" could readily be answered, "No way!" Instead, it is met with an ambiguous response that could variously be interpreted as *conviction*, "It's your call, not mine," or *hesitation*, "You know better than I do... but 'maybe'?" Regardless, God gives Ezekiel prophetic work to do. "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

Ezekiel prophesies as commanded. Suddenly there is a rattling and the bones come together, bone to its bone. Sinews and flesh connect the bones and skin covers them, but there is still no breath in them. So once more, God tells Ezekiel, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live." Although God accomplished the reconnecting and resuscitation of the bones, Ezekiel was called to participate.

He was called to do a bold thing: to prophesy to the breath, to call from the four corners of the earth the wind of God's spirit so it could revive the hope and life of God's people. I think we are called to do the same.

Nearly 100 years ago (1928 was the first recorded version of the song by the Fisk Jubilee Singers), James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, the duo who years before had written "Lift Every Voice and Sing," wrote "Dem Bones" based on this text from Ezekiel 37.<sup>8</sup>

When they were growing up, they had heard sermons by Black preachers who often proclaimed, amid the post-Civil War despair, destruction, and death, that hope was on the horizon. God had not forsaken them. May 25 will be the fourth remembrance of the murder of George Floyd. In what ways might we proclaim hope to those who continue to live in the valley of dry bones? What words will we speak to those who still mourn the death and destruction of Black and Brown bodies in a country that is hesitant and even recalcitrant about recognizing the ravages of White supremacy?

**Acts 2** is probably the most popular text preached on Pentecost. I have read many descriptions of that first Pentecost over the years. But one of my favorites is from Frank Crouch, retired Vice President and Dean of Moravian Seminary. He writes: "English translations underplay the fear-inducing, adrenalin-pumping, wind-tossed, fire-singed, smoke-filled turmoil of that experience."<sup>9</sup> Crouch didn't even mention the accompanying cacophony of sounds that were heard!

Given the sensational nature of that first Spirit-filled gathering, the reactions of those present is completely understandable. Four different adjectives describe their responses: bewildered, amazed, astonished, and perplexed. I think my reaction would have been similar had I been in a foreign land ("devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem") and heard my native language spoken by people who seemed to be Galilean. What's more, to hear them speaking about God's deeds of power while gathered with all these other believers would have been absolutely mind-blowing!

Even more awesome however, would have been the sermon that Peter preached that day, especially when he quoted Joel and talked about God's Spirit being poured out on all flesh. **Poured out on all flesh**--that's a pretty powerful image for preaching! One can't help but think of the Thanksgiving at the Font during the Sacrament of Holy Baptism: "Pour out your Holy Spirit, the power of your living

8. Making Multicultural Music: The Story Behind The "Dry Bones" Song by Daria Marmaluk-Hajioannou. <https://makingmulticulturalmusic.wordpress.com/2015/10/25/the-story-behind-the-dry-bones-song/>

9. Frank Crouch, "Working Preacher Commentary on Acts 2:1-21," May 24, 2015.

Word, that those who are washed in the waters of baptism may be given new life...<sup>10</sup> The Pentecost witness is that God's Spirit is abundant, flowing, not trickled down. It's a baptismal image of Spirit-water freely and mightily showered over a beloved's head and life, not a few drops carefully dribbled out.

And **all flesh...** In this increasingly polarized yet pluralistic world, we must wrestle with the reality that God pours out the Spirit not on *some* flesh, but on *all* flesh: old flesh, young flesh, white flesh, and melanin-rich flesh, LGBTQIA2S+ flesh, undocumented flesh, unhoused flesh, incarcerated flesh, etc. How shall we proclaim this amazingly good news and "flesh it out" in our twenty-first century lives and congregations?

The gospel for Pentecost comes from **John** and is part of Jesus' farewell discourse in which he shares with his disciples what life will be like after he is gone. He will not leave them to face their trials alone. Rather, he promises to send the Advocate (Helper/Comforter) to help them. That Advocate, the Holy Spirit, will testify or bear witness to the truth of Jesus' lordship and that he is the one who reveals God and God's love to the world (John 3:16-17). The Spirit will also serve as a guide to this divine truth for Jesus' followers. It is important to remember, however, that in spite of what we might want to believe, none of Jesus' followers has a sole market on the truth.

The Greek word for Advocate is *Paraclete* which literally means, "to come alongside another." This can be either by helping us or by encouraging and supporting us. Viewing the Holy Spirit on this Pentecost Sunday as the one who comes alongside us to equip us for ministry and keep us focused on God's saving and healing mission can certainly be beneficial.

In what ways might we need to be kept on track as we move into this season of the Spirit? Do we need an Advocate to guide us in discerning the truth about how to lead amid the increasingly frightening direction that some in our country would have us go? Perhaps a Helper to assist us in cultivating hope in situations in which hope seems tenuous? A Comforter to bind up relationships broken by differing priorities and values, whether personal or professional? Then let us give thanks that on Pentecost, we can continue to trust Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples. For it is indeed, as Luther says in the Small Catechism, the Holy Spirit who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common true faith."

*Gladys Moore*

10. ELCA, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, "Holy Baptism," (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 230.

## Trinity Sunday May 26, 2024

**Isaiah 6:1–8**

**Psalm 29**

**Romans 8:12–17**

**John 3:1–17**

### Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

*John 3:1–17*

Three things intrigue me about the texts appointed for Trinity Sunday. The first is in the John text where Nicodemus goes to see Jesus at night. Does visiting Jesus in the dark of night impress me as a vote of confidence in Jesus or uncertain commitment? As the conversation unfolds, Nicodemus' questions of Jesus are primarily about "how" the future will happen. Jesus' answers are rooted in the witness of the past. "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony" (vv. 10-11).

My take on this text is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus as a leader who exhibits lukewarm commitment. The challenge is less about his lack of commitment than his flakey leadership and the system that has nurtured it. Central to Jesus is the testimony of God's love and how it is extended to the world, inclusive of everyone, with no exceptions.

*Isaiah 6:1–8*

Isaiah's call provides a powerful picture of the Lord sitting on a lofty throne and the hem of the Lord's robe filling the entire temple. This is a majestic picture greater than "Star Wars," "Black Panther," and even "Barbie" could begin to match. Hovering over Isaiah were seraphs, with eight wings, covering their feet and flying, calling to one another, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." I think about how, in the text, a seraph takes hot coal off the altar, flies over to Isaiah, and puts the hot coal on his mouth. I ask myself, when have I felt the hot temple coals? When have I been emboldened to say, "Here am I, send me"?

*Trinity Sunday*

I am a Black male clergyman, and my pronouns are he/him/his. I was trained and ordained in a predominantly White denomination. My seminary training was primarily influenced by systematic theology. It was later in my career that I was introduced to narrative theology. When I think of Trinity Sunday, I wonder if my understanding of the Trinity might have served me better had I invited people into the narrative of God more than the cognitive complexity of one



God in three persons. Narrative theology invites us into the story of God. I think of the third chapter of John as narrative theology.

During seminary, I volunteered at a prison where the ministry included spending time with unhoused people. I worked with people who became unhoused when the Reagan Administration deinstitutionalized funding for people with mental illness. I recall sitting in my seminary class. My professor was a renowned systematics scholar. As I listened to my professor, I wondered how the inmates might have received the brilliance of his teaching. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony”(vv. 10-11). I caution that in the scholarly pursuit of understanding, I do not make the church distant from the people central to God’s story.

*Kelly Chatman*

## Second Sunday after Pentecost June 2, 2024

**Deuteronomy 5:12–15**

**Psalm 81:1–10**

**2 Corinthians 4:5–12**

**Mark 2:23–3:6**

### Good Trouble Invites Adaptive Leadership

#### *Reflections on the Gospel for Preaching*

**M**ark’s gospel meets at the intersection of good trouble and adaptive leadership. Jesus is traveling with his disciples on the Sabbath. They are being observed by religious leaders who are in the position of gatekeeping and their sights are clearly set on Jesus and his disciples as they stop to grab grain from the field to nourish themselves. Jesus and his disciples, knowingly or unknowingly, find themselves in good trouble with the religious authorities. The established law was, “You don’t eat grain from the field on the sabbath.” The result is Jesus and the disciples find themselves in “good trouble.” Now I suppose a thousand years later, the “good trouble” might have been drinking from the wrong water fountain, nonbinary identity(s), or speaking in public what is often said in private. You get the idea. There are “rules” established to ensure that things remain the same and people stay in their place. There are gatekeepers to ensure those rules or laws remain in place. As long as there have been synagogues, churches, denominations, organizations, and systems, there have been gatekeepers. In fact, there have been times when it was me.

In Mark’s gospel text, a team of gatekeepers confronts Jesus for not fulfilling the role of gatekeeper. Religious authorities challenge Jesus for not upholding the sabbath rule and Jesus applies adaptive leadership.

It grieves me when the church invests in rules and practices that perpetuate results that do not feed or liberate people. I served a multicultural congregation for twenty years in a wonderfully diverse neighborhood. There were a number of people who stated that they were members of the church but they had never been inside the sanctuary.

The congregation had a young member from a family line of four consecutive pastors. He was potentially in line to be the fifth. The young man was devoted to hip-hop music. While there was the celebration that he might become a pastor, there was resistance to hip-hop music in the church. Hip-hop was not perceived to be Sunday morning music. Even less was their acceptance of the young people for whom hip-hop represented cultural identity.

The young hip-hop leader translated our church’s entire liturgy into hip-hop, from the opening Kyrie to the benediction. Hundreds of young people have worshiped God in their own vernacular. “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”

*Kelly Chatman*

## Third Sunday after Pentecost June 9, 2024

**Genesis 3:8–15**

**Psalm 130**

**2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1**

**Mark 3:20–35**

### Engaging the Gospel for Preaching

**T**his week’s gospel from Mark names realities of division and demonization that are all too familiar. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we may prefer to hide from such harsh truths and avoid responsibility for any complicity in them.

The gospel begins and ends with Jesus’ encounters with the crowds and with his family. These frame his conflict with religious authorities and with evil itself. First, we meet the crowd pressing in and preventing Jesus and his disciples from essential self-care, like eating. His family hears about this and likely imagines Jesus is going to continue his disturbing and dangerous behavior, doing what he has been doing among the crowds, casting out unclean spirits and demons, healing and forgiving, defying religious purity rules that have become contrary to the law of love. His family seeks to “restrain” him, the same word used when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus. His family is likely trying to save him from those who wish

him harm, a plot already in place in the beginning of chapter 3 (v. 6) where the religious and political authorities conspire “how to destroy him” because he has defied religious rules when they prove inhumane. His family agrees with those who think he is out of his mind. Why else would he take such risks?

Unlike Jesus’ family, the religious authorities not only wish to restrain Jesus, they wish to eliminate him. They believe, or promote the belief, that Jesus’ work in casting out demons is demonic in itself. The work of the Holy Spirit is the work of Satan. This may be the unforgivable sin. According to Juan Luis Segundo, “What is not pardonable is using theology to turn real human liberation into something odious. The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognize, with “theological” joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one’s very eyes.”<sup>11</sup> Bad theology kills.

Jesus points out the absurdity of Satan casting out Satan and the ruinous divisions caused by demonizing liberation work. Jesus has rejected some of the binding religious and family values of his time. The strongman that needs to be bound up is any power that seizes God’s children and plunders the treasure of their humanity. The crowds bring their troubled humanity to Jesus for liberation. We might additionally imagine the strongman to be unchecked capitalism and poverty, racism, homophobia or transphobia vested in the stolen robes of righteousness. The preacher can think of other names for the strongman, but in every case, Jesus comes to bind up all such imposters and liberate God’s children.

When Jesus returns to a scene with his family, they are still trying to restrain him, only now, they are on the outside of the house and the crowds are on the inside. Positions have shifted. Social and religious structures are dismantled. Family is redefined. Jesus looks at the crowd sitting around him--the sick and demonized, those who don’t belong or fit in, the poor, the disciples often confused in their own minds. He sees them and claims them as his true family.

It may be worth noting that Jesus was not completely against families. At the end of his life when he is suffering on the cross, Jesus cares for the needs of the dying thief beside him and he equally cares for the needs of his mother. She will go home with one of the disciples and they will be family to each other. However, if one’s family sides with those who would plunder one’s soul and restrain one from being who God has created one to be, then there’s a problem. In this gospel, Jesus’ family wanted him to sacrifice his identity and his calling in order to make them feel more comfortable. In Mark’s day, many would have resonated with the division created by following the way of Jesus in opposition to family

and social norms. Many families today know such division as well which is only heightened during this election season.

There are many paths for the preacher of this text. Division in families and nations, demonizing love’s liberating work and using religion to promote hate, speaking the uncomfortable and even incriminating truth rather than hiding from it, religious regulations that pervert the rule of love, authentic community with queer beloveds of God who have met with condemnation at home and/or church seeking a loving, chosen family, could all be fruitful approaches.

When Hurricane Sandy approached New York City, the church-based Trinity Place Shelter (for LGBTQIA+ youth rejected by their families of origin) stocked up on water, flashlights and extra food. Derrick excitedly told our staff that his grandmother had invited him to stay in her home with his siblings because she felt that family should be together during the storm. Derrick was thrilled that she included him. It was going to be his first family event since his abusive father kicked him out in the middle of high school for being gay. According to Derrick, his father was away and so he would be safe.

Everyone else hunkered down at the shelter and enjoyed board games, movies, and extra snacks while winds and rain pounded outside. I went to bed and our social worker Wendy settled in for the night. At eleven o’clock, when the whole city was shut down by the storm, Wendy got a phone call from Derrick. His father had showed up at the grandmother’s house in the Bronx, beaten him, and thrown him outside in the middle of the hurricane. Wendy told him we’d pay for the car service to pick him up and to sit tight. When Derrick arrived, soaked and shaking, Wendy ushered him in and paid the driver. Derrick stepped inside and said with relief, “I’m so glad to be home!”

The storm raged on, but that night, the strong man was bound.

Heidi Neumark

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11. Ched Myers. *Binding the Strong Man*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 167.

## Fourth Sunday after Pentecost June 16, 2024

Ezekiel 17:22–24

Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15

2 Corinthians 5:6–10 [11–13] 14–17

Mark 4:26–34

### Engaging the Texts for Preaching

Three of our four readings include trees or plantings. Ezekiel writes of taking a small spring from a tall cedar tree and planting it on a “high and lofty” mountain where it will bear fruit and provide shelter for birds as a “noble cedar.” Earlier in chapter 17, we hear about two eagles who represent the rulers Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the Pharaoh of Egypt. They have broken off branches and transplanted them on their own soil, the consequence of Israel’s faithless leadership. The sprig stands for the Davidic monarchy replanted and becoming “a noble cedar,” returned to glory on Mount Zion.

Psalm 92 echoes this imagery, only now it is extended to all of God’s righteous people who will flourish like stately palm trees or noble cedars. They will experience God’s goodness, fresh and green and even bearing fruit in old age, pointing beyond botanical reality toward a new creation. Although there are no trees in this Sunday’s epistle from 2 Corinthians: “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

By contrast, in Mark’s parable, the mustard seed produces a shrub. Or perhaps a weed. Matthew and Luke, writing after Mark, were disturbed by the shrub image. They preferred the noble tree from Ezekiel. Thus, Matthew and Luke write about a mustard seed tree which isn’t even a thing since mustard seeds do not become trees.

Pliny wrote a natural history of the time that says: “The mustard plant is a hardy plant that tends to germinate rapidly and take over a garden.” In other words, it grows like a weed. It goes where you might not want it to go, out of control, including Roman control. Very unlike a tree that stays rooted in one place with one trunk. You can take an axe to a tree and that’s the end of it. But you can’t get rid of a mustard plant, a scruffy, scrappy shrub that spreads. It does not respect borders meant to keep it out. That’s what my kingdom is like, says Jesus. Like a weed, someone may pull it out and throw it away, but it will keep coming back. Good news to those the Roman empire would like to whack down.

Jesus tells this parable to a small group of followers who could identify with the mustard seed. They not only knew what a tiny mustard seed looked like. They knew what it felt like to be small and powerless in the face of empire. The church

in Mark’s day had no hope of becoming a majority religion in the empire or a great cathedral with a big endowment, or even a return to the 1950s with full Sunday schools and pews, and budget to support full-time clergy. They were a poor church on the margins of the empire that sought to crush them. Their main hope was to survive--and mustard shrubs happen to be really good at that.

Jesus didn’t have delusions of grandeur. He didn’t offer up fake truth or promote promises of growing numbers and size. But don’t discount the shrub, says Jesus. The shrub can do better than simply surviving. This scrappy, weedy shrub of God’s kingdom can put forth branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. It can be a welcoming refuge for all in need. When Jesus speaks of the “birds of the air,” he is likely referencing the Hebrew Scriptures where these birds can represent gentiles and foreigners.<sup>12</sup>

For Christians, the image of a tree will rightly invite a connection to the tree of the cross.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true of the mustard seed. Like the cross, it does not produce a tree of note. Like the cross, it reverses expectations. Something small and unpromising becomes the source of life for all, even, and most especially, those who find no refuge elsewhere.

Since growing numbers of congregations today are more like shrubs than noble cedars, this parable can be preached as both encouragement and challenge to re-imagine possibilities. Large congregations may also find challenge and be drawn closer to the cross and the mission it compels. Who in the community needs sanctuary and support? Immigrants? The unhoused?

Jesus himself did not title his parables, but over the years, people have. I have never heard today’s parable called anything other than the Parable of the Mustard Seed--until one night at dinner. This was a meal shared at what my congregation called a Community Table, a weekly dinner for any and all seeking nourishment, be that physical, spiritual, or emotional. After the meal, we read the parable and discussed it. One man spoke of being harassed where he lives and feeling unsafe. I don’t know his full story but he is somewhat mentally fragile and trying to survive in a world that doesn’t have much room for him. For this man, the Community Table served as a place where he felt safe and free from attack, a refuge. In our Bible study, he said: “I like the part about the birds in the branches being safe in a nest. I think it should be called the Parable of the Nest. The seed only matters because it ends up making a

12. Kelly Latimore <https://kellylatimoreicons.com/products/the-parable-of-the-mustard-seed#:~:text=In%20the%20Hebrew%20Scriptures%20the,the%20significance%20in%20the%20insignificant.>

13. One of the best representations of the cross as the “Tree of Life” is the twelfth century mosaic in the Basilica of San Clemente, Rome: [https://thecatholictalks.com/artspeaks\\_post.asp?id=11](https://thecatholictalks.com/artspeaks_post.asp?id=11).

nest.” So true! Why not name the story for the end rather than the beginning, a true vision of kingdom sanctuary. “In [our] end, is [our] beginning,” says T.S. Eliot,<sup>14</sup> a refuge already present in the tiny seed. Wisdom from the margins.

Heidi Neumark

## Fifth Sunday after Pentecost June 23, 2024

Job 38:1–11

Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

Mark 4:35–41

### Engaging the Texts

Our texts for this Sunday cast the listener onto stormy seas and in our helplessness, invite new recognition of the power, mystery, and creative movement of our God. They offer us a difficult, life-giving reminder: we are human, and God is God.

Our first reading opens toward the end of the book of **Job**. By this point, Job has finally run out of his storied patience. Like so many who have experienced suffering for no discernable reason, Job wants answers from God. What kind of divine architect would build such a faulty, unfair world?!? Job quickly discovers that God is not in fact a logical architect, but the primordial *creator*. Appearing out of the whirlwind, God reminds Job of the divine power to bring forth life amid, and out of, chaos. God doesn't conquer the violent seas, but nurtures and shapes them so that they serve life rather than destroy it. In the face of the world's chaos, the preacher might encourage listeners to focus less on figuring it all out and more on trusting in God's infinite capacity for and commitment to midwifing us and all creation into *life*. The preacher would do well to remind listeners that even in the most violent whirlwind, we have a God who *shows up* with us.

**Psalm 107** continues our voyage on a stormy sea. The text offers us a vivid narrative that invites the listener to identify with the emotions and physical peril of the seafarers. At the start of their journey, these sailors are in happy awe of the powerful sea, but the storm quickly escalates beyond anything they can control. In such a situation, human limitations are laid bare, and they discover their profound reliance on God. The story here is so like the one in Mark that a preacher focusing on the Gospel text could bring in the Psalm to help the listener more fully access the intense experience of the disciples on the stormy sea.

14. T.S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Four Quartets*. “In my end is my beginning.”

**2 Corinthians** reminds us that to follow Jesus is to follow him into the stormy seas of communities riven by conflict. While listeners are (hopefully) unlikely to connect to the intensity of suffering that Paul describes, most will know all too well that discipleship takes courage. Having a wide open heart takes courage. To seek reconciliation, to build relationships across difference, to take a stand for justice – these movements unmoor us from safety and set us out onto the stormy seas of uncertainty, risk, and judgment. In these moments, Paul reminds us that our identity and security are to be found in God, not the vicissitudes of others' opinion of us or our situation in any given moment.

Our pericope from **Mark** sets us out to sea with Jesus. The centrality of rest, quiet, and stillness in this story deserves attention. Jesus invites the disciples to leave the boisterous crowd behind, falls into a deep sleep in the boat, then he tells the storm to be still and brings about a “dead calm.” In a society obsessed with productivity and *doing*, we may need to be not just invited, but *commanded* to slow down and just be. What if discipleship also meant rest and stillness? While some situations truly are life or death, most of the time our frantic anxiety mistakes the stakes. Jesus reminds us that we can take a break – God's got it.

### Pastoral Reflections

I recently read David Grann's fabulous book, *The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny and Murder*. Grann tells the story of the HMS *Wager*, an eighteenth century British naval vessel that was shipwrecked off the Patagonian coast after an ill-fated attempt to round Cape Horn. The high seas and powerful gales that accosted the ship led to its separation from the fleet and a life-or-death struggle that lasted weeks in a storm that seemed like it would never end. Even the most seasoned sailors found themselves powerless to do anything except hold on tight and pray that the winds would go down before the boat did. Like the sailors in the Psalm and in Mark, the crew found themselves pushed hard up against the limits of their own power. In their extremity, they discovered the uncomfortable truth that to be human is to be smaller and more dependent than we had imagined. So often we try to maintain the illusion of independence and control and it works--until it doesn't. If not at sea, where else do folks encounter their own human limits? Perhaps when struggling to conquer anxiety, addiction, or illness? While no one wishes for these experiences, they come to most of us at one time or another. The preacher has the opportunity here to name the Gospel flip side: yes, we are human and helpless but also, God is God. And God is by our side. When helplessness forces us to throw ourselves on the mercy of others and of God, we become more fully human. Our hearts are pried open to receive the gift of interdependence, real relationship, and



God's unfailing love.

Finally, I encourage all of us who preach to recognize that Jesus' command to be still and calm down is not just for the sailors, or the storm, or our parishioners, but also for us. In the whirlwind of pastoral ministry, we too often ignore our own need to spend time resting with God. In his wonderful book, *Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers*, the Rev. Dr. Kirk Byron Jones writes powerfully about following the example of Jesus and heading to the back of the boat. When ministry too often feels like a never-ending storm, pastoral leaders simply cannot be constantly at the helm or in the crow's nest. The world will not end if we take a much-needed snooze in the stern. In fact, stepping back might just make room for Jesus to do his thing.

*Becca Seely*

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost June 30, 2024

**Lamentations 3:22–33**

[or **Wisdom 1:13–15; 2:23–24**]

**Psalm 30**

**2 Corinthians 8:7–15**

**Mark 5:21–43**

### Engaging the Texts

The lectionary texts for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost encourage both boldness and vulnerability in our dealings with God and one another.

Our first reading takes us into **Lamentations**, a biblical book with which listeners may not be very familiar. It's important to remind them that what is being lamented here is not just any old misfortune, but the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 586 B.C.E. What sheer force of will it must take for the speaker in the text to gaze upon the destruction and proclaim that "the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases!" (v. 22) This text gives space for deep mourning, fear, and doubt to coexist right alongside the speaker's daring trust in God's ultimate goodness and faithfulness. Might this text invite the preacher and listeners to boldly name and honor this tension in their own lives and our world?

Lamentations placed the reader at the Temple ruins. **Psalm 30**, on the other hand, is a text intended for the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple, most likely when it was rebuilt after the exiles returned from Babylon. Mourning has indeed turned to dancing! Of course, such worship and praise come on the heels of a very profound experience of suffering and loss. Indeed, this song of joy is, perhaps, sung in a minor key. God's people have suffered, and they will, no doubt, suffer again. Joy and prosperity cannot last forever; nor

has the darkest night ever outlasted the rising sun. Ultimately, God is faithful.

Talk about boldness! In **2 Corinthians**, Paul is unabashed in his encouragement to the Corinthian church to collect an offering for the community in Jerusalem. This more affluent community of Gentiles has been dragging their feet on sending money to support the poor among the Jewish followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. The distance between these communities geographically, economically, and culturally matters. What do we owe to people we will never meet? Especially people who are tremendously different from us or with whom we might disagree on a variety of important issues? In line with his Body of Christ metaphor, Paul emphasizes the interconnectedness of followers of Christ and the reciprocity that we owe to one another, just as Christ entered into a reciprocal relationship with us.

Today in **Mark's Gospel**, we read about the healing of two people – an unnamed woman suffering from a flow of blood and the daughter of Jairus. Bodies take center stage in these stories: a woman bleeds and suffers. A child dies and comes back to life ravenously hungry. Jesus is pressed in on by a crowd and yet feels one single touch. In a culture where there is so much body shame, it is never a bad time to remind listeners of the gospel truth that God loves and cares about all our bodies, even the bodies that may be dismissed as unappealing or unimportant. It is noteworthy, too, that Jesus is not in much of a hurry here. He knows that Jairus' daughter is sick, but he still takes the time to heal and speak with the unnamed woman. Perhaps in our own hurrying, Jesus invites us to recognize that there is, in fact, always enough time to love and serve our neighbors.

### Pastoral Reflections

Every Mother's Day a congregation where I was once a member celebrated what they called "Bold Women of Faith Sunday." Today in Mark, we meet a bold woman of faith if there ever was one! After years of suffering and false promises by those in authority, this unnamed woman is no longer content to sit back and wait for her healing to come. The preacher might consider who else in our world today is often dismissed or not given adequate care by our medical establishment, including trans people, Black women, and people struggling with mental illness. Notably, this pericope comes immediately after the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac. The "demoniac" is another child of God who has been written off by his community as being beyond help. Jesus not only heals those who have been given up on or relegated to the back of the line, but he also affirms their boldness in insisting on getting what they need to flourish. Too often, Christian voices have claimed that patience and humility are the primary virtues that believers (and women in particular) must embody to

please God. But, of course, arrogance and over-confidence are not the besetting sins of all, especially not of those who have been long conditioned to doubt themselves or suffer quietly. In this story, we see a countermodel. The unnamed woman approaches Jesus in boldness and vulnerability and is not only healed but praised for her faith. I think that this encouragement to boldness, however, is not limited to those who are in need of help or healing, but also to those of us who have the power to speak up or reach out on behalf of others in need. Paul shows us what such bold advocacy might look like in the epistle today as he seeks funds to help those in economic distress. Moreover, he reminds us that God provides abundantly for us through one another and that no giving is ever a one-way street. May we be bold in our asking and our giving!

Becca Seely



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