Preaching Helps

January through March 2025:
Epiphany through Lent, 2025

A Drop in the Bucket

This issue of *Preaching Helps* begins with the Second Sunday of Christmas and moves quickly to Epiphany on January 6. For many people that date is also a reminder of the attack on the U.S. Capitol in 2021. Later this month, on January 20, Donald Trump will be inaugurated as forty-seventh president of the United States. Hopefully both January dates will be peaceful in our country this year. For 76,931,783 Americans, the inauguration will be a joyful day of making America great again. For 74,450,945 others, the inauguration will be a day of mourning and dread. (Those vote totals have, no doubt, changed since I wrote those words.) You may be preaching to both those who are rejoicing and those who are mourning. It's also possible that the congregation you serve isn't politically diverse: you may be preaching primarily to winners or primarily to losers.

The congregation I belong to in Minneapolis is almost 100% losers. I don't mean to belittle myself or other members, but almost all of us voted for the candidate who lost the presidential election. In a city with so many Lutheran churches it's possible to choose a congregation that shares your worldview including your politics. As I was wondering what to say (as a loser) at the beginning of this new year, I turned to the calendar sent out by the Equal Justice Initiative founded by Brian Stevenson. Each calendar square describes an event in Black, Latiné or indigenous history that happened on that date. The square for December 1 said this: "Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama." The year was 1955, seventy years ago in 2025. For Rosa Parks this wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment decision. She was a life-long activist, secretary of the NAACP, and outraged over the recent acquittal of the men who murdered young Emmett Till. She was prepared to go to jail for her actions. In many ways her refusal to give up her seat was a small action, but it had huge consequences. Because she was such a respected woman and a tireless worker for racial justice in Montgomery, women and men believed they had to stand with her. "Let's boycott the buses," they said, not knowing how they'd get to work. The boycott began on December 5, the day of her trial. Optimistically, they thought the boycott would last a couple days, perhaps a week. But it went on for over a year—382 days. Martin Luther King Jr. was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to oversee the boycott, but it was women who took the lead to keep the boycott going. People with cars gave rides to others; Black cab drivers picked people up and charged only 15 cents a ride (same as bus fare). Many rode bicycles, others walked—some as far as twenty miles each way. White women chauffeured their domestic workers, a combination of self-interest and perhaps some genuine support.

On November 13, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. The bus boycott ended on December 20, 1956. Rosa Parks, a seamstress, and her husband, Raymond, a barber, both lost their jobs because of participating in the boycott. Not long after that they moved to Virginia, then settled in Detroit. Both continued their work for racial justice in that northern city. Interviewed many times over the years, Parks had heard people say that she refused to give up her seat because she was tired. "But that isn't true," she said. "I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Refusing to give up her seat may have seemed like a drop in the bucket against the deadly forces of Jim Crow Alabama. But it was a drop that catalyzed a movement far beyond the Cleveland Avenue bus. Years ago I felt that my own work for justice—whatever the cause—seemed like just a drop in the bucket. That's when a friend said to me, "Well, that's how a bucket gets filled. One drop at a time."

This issue of *Preaching Helps* ends on the last Sunday in March. The Second Reading for that day is from 2 Corinthians 5: "All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation…" That work of reconciliation will not be easy in our congregations or in our country. Will winners gloat? Will losers cast blame? Our congregation of losers is planning to work with Braver Angels to meet with a congregation with lots of winners. Maybe that will seem like a drop in the bucket. But that's how a bucket gets filled. And reconciliation is the work God has called us to do.

Many thanks to the writers of this first issue of 2025. They are parish pastors, campus pastors and seminary professors; some are retired pastors who keep pastoring. I'm grateful to each of them: **Liv Larson Andrews** is a Lutheran pastor living in Spokane, Washington, with her spouse and two sons. She serves the Northwest Intermountain Synod as the Director for Evangelical Mission. When she is not on the road visiting congregations, she can be found hiking, painting, or baking bread. **Mary Halvorson** retired in 2021 after thirty-five years of ministry. She lives in Roseville, Minnesota, with her husband and two dogs. She gardens, quilts and plays with color, and consults with congregations and pastors in

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Barbara K. Lundblad

Editor, Preaching Helps

The Second Sunday of Christmas January 5, 2025

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

Engaging the Texts

The lessons for the Second Sunday of Christmas are teeming with goodness, with abundance, with plenty, with bounty, with the extraordinary extravagance of the God of salvation. In describing the joy of the exiles returning to Jerusalem, the prophet promises an abundance of grain, wine, oil, flocks, and herds. And there will be a bounty of God's people returning, a great company that will include everyone, even those not equipped to travel—the blind, the lame, and those with child. Beyond all this, there will be an abundance of celebration, with mourning turned into joy and sorrow into gladness.

The appointed psalm fortifies the language of celebration. The saving God is also the powerful God, by whose hand comes the snow, the frost, the hail, the wind, and the waters. These powers of the natural world are the harbingers of the goodness God gives to God's people in the saving and powerful word, the statutes and ordinances given to place and keep God's people on the path of life.

The second reading shifts the language from the abundance of the earth to the abundance of the spiritual gifts given in Jesus, the newborn king whom the church continues to celebrate. In one long, run-on sentence—almost as if the author is on a roll and can't stop and has forgotten how to end a sentence—the exuberance of the gifts of salvation are extolled, extolled, and extolled yet again.

With each reading, the assembly has heard a crescendo of the goodness of God, the manifold wonders of the God of covenant, the God of salvation. Now in language too beautiful to ignore, too profound to be merely spoken, this God is placed in cosmic perspective. The one who looks so humble and human in the quaint story from Luke, the one with Mary's breastmilk dripping down his cheek, the one fussing when he can't quite get comfortable atop the straw of the manger, is none other than the Eternal Word, the One present from creation, the One who spoke and worlds came into being. And the language of abundance and exuberance keeps coming at us. In him we have seen the Father's glory, shorthand for the Father's presence and above all the Father's grace and truth. Not grace and truth doled out as if it had to be rationed—grace and truth in pleroma, in fullness, in abundance too good to be true.

Pastoral Reflections

In planning worship for the two Sundays of Christmas, my worship planning team often thinks about including music that is quieter and more subdued, fitting for the expected lower attendance during the lull between Christmas and the mid-January ramping up of activity. In addition, we end up going through the Christmas section of the hymnal to make sure we include the favorites that haven't yet been sung during the all-too-short Christmas season. Inevitably, the hymnic version of Christina Rossetti's poem, "In the Bleak Midwinter" gets assigned to one of the "quiet" Sundays. Yet, as beautiful as it is, it doesn't fit the exuberance of celebration that this week's lessons shower on us. This is the Sunday for the exuberance of "Joy to the World" and "Angels We Have Heard on High," maybe even the "Hallelujah Chorus."

Admittedly, it's a challenge to sustain a heightened level of celebration when the sanctuary is emptier than it was on Christmas Eve, not to mention the fact that even most church members will have taken down their home Christmas trees and put the decorations away for another year. Yet the challenge is meant to be addressed head on. What will the worship planner(s) do to bring the celebratory language and images of today's lessons to the experience of the worshiper? How will the preacher use the sermon to bring to the hearts of the faithful on this Sunday morning the joy and celebration embedded in the lessons?

To start with, the preacher might simply go through the lessons and jot down all the words that have to do with celebration, abundance, exuberance. Then she might jot down another list of similar words from the preacher's own context that will speak to her congregation of celebration, abundance, and exuberance. These words are the language of preaching this week.

Then he might think of the celebrations of the congregation in the past year, or celebrations within families in the congregation. In my own congregation, people are still talking about the potluck dinner that accompanied the celebration of the burning of the mortgage. I'd sure want them to recall that celebration, what it feels like to celebrate, what pure unadulterated joy is like.

As the succession of the lessons crescendo to the gospel lesson, so the preacher leads the congregation not only to the height of celebration, but to the pinnacle of that worth celebrating. The very Creator of the universe has come and has come to us. The One who spoke worlds into being came as a baby unable to say anything except the cry of hunger and the cooing of contentment. All of it was for the sake of restoring a fallen humanity to life with God, to see God not as angry judge but as an inviting and welcoming God full of grace and truth. We cannot help but celebrate that good news with great joy.

James Honig

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2025

(may be transferred to Sunday, January 5)

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

Engaging the Texts

It's easy to see why the creators of the lectionary paired this text from Isaiah with the story of the Magi in the gospel lesson. The story has an international flair to it, not to mention a reference to the gold and frankincense that the Magi brought to the newborn king. The lesson also introduces the light and darkness theme that will be so prominent in the gospel lesson, though the preacher will want to take care not to characterize all things dark as evil and all things light as good. The darkness the prophet describes is more like a shroud, a heaviness, a burden that God's people have been carrying even though they have by now returned from exile. The promise is that the burden will be lifted, not only for the chosen people, but for all people.

While Psalm 72 obviously wasn't written with Christ in mind, it's again easy to see why Christian tradition has retroactively inserted him into this vivid royal psalm. The one whose birth the church has just celebrated was sent to bring God's justice and righteousness; in his ministry, he would defend and care for the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. The Epiphany celebration in the church marks the coming of the nations to the newborn king in the persons of the Magi. And the church believes that eschatologically, the nations will come to him; "so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).

The reading from Ephesians brings yet another facet of the universality of the Christ gift; in him the Gentiles also have been brought into the family of God.

Is the story of the Magi a story of ancient travelers who come to worship the newborn king, or a story of political intrigue, featuring a ruler with a shallow ego and a vengeful heart? The answer, of course, is yes. The political intrigue is an important feature that not only sets the context and ramps up the tension for the visit of the Magi, but also foreshadows a theme that will run through Jesus' entire ministry up to and including his crucifixion. The preacher may even want to push ahead and bring to mind the tragic consequences of a ruler so worried about maintaining his own power that he is unable to see the humanity of the babies and families of

Bethlehem. His evil edict sets into motion the refugee status of Mary, Joseph, and the young Jesus.

And in the midst of it, God is present and God is at work. God is at work, not in the flowery sense that everything will turn out okay in the end. The holy family forced to flee to Egypt probably did not feel like everything was turning out okay. God is at work accompanying them in their exile, as God accompanies us in every hardship and challenge. And God is at work moving history inexorably toward the fulfillment of God's purpose for us and for all creation.

Another theme that could be explored on this Epiphany celebration is the streaming of the nations to ancient Jerusalem and to the Christ child in the persons of the Magi and their entourage. Oh, if it were only true that the nations would come flocking to the church! Maybe in some places around the world they are, but not for the most part in North America. Despite the promise, it wasn't exactly true that the nations came streaming to the ancient city either, nor did the wealth of the nations fill the coffers of the Judean treasury managed under the watchful eye of occupiers.

Certainly, part of the mission of the church is to create an inviting and welcoming atmosphere so that when people do come, they experience the hospitality of a living, loving, and gracious God. There will be times when the nations will come to the church, and the best iteration of the church will be agile enough to know the best way to receive them when they come.

And the story of Jesus includes Jesus going to the nation. So, the church also goes to where the nations are—to the neighborhood celebrations, the soccer fields, the hospital beds and nursing homes, the community roundtables convened to address the most pressing needs of the neighborhood surrounding the church. In this sense, the mission of the church is like breathing—it includes both inhaling and exhaling. No one can live long by exclusively inhaling nor by exclusively exhaling. Breathing demands both. Similarly, the church cannot live long by focusing only on creating an inviting and welcoming community to receive its visitors. Nor can it ignore hospitality and focus exclusively on moving out into the world. God's mission to which God has called the church demands both.

James Honig

Baptism of Our Lord
January 12, 2025

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Engaging the Texts

As a new year begins, along with the changes and disruptions of a new government, these texts are reminders of our true identity. Isaiah 43 offers comfort and reassurance to the Israelites living in exile, their future unknown, their lives disrupted and unmoored: *I have called you by name, you are mine. When you go through struggle and pain and sorrow, I am there. Don't be afraid.* For centuries these words have been a life preserver on tumultuous waters. They are so for us today. Luke's telling of Jesus' baptism is sparse and lacks the details of his gospel cohorts. Luke seems more interested in what happens after, when Jesus is praying. A dove shows up. The water along with heaven-sent words, are Jesus' blessing, his inauguration. You are my Son, and howdy doody, I'm well pleased with you. Carry this in your back pocket as you go and tend broken bodies, places, and systems.

Belovedness is the theme of these texts. It's the starting point for Jesus' ministry, and it's our starting point. Creation gets the same blessing when it is formed. In the very beginning the Spirit moved over the waters; God declares this is good. Goodness and belovedness are integral to creation.

Preachers know well the antithesis of belovedness in their own contexts: cruelty, shame, abuse, belittling, denigration, denial of human rights, etc. The way of no belovedness is very real. No institution or even each of us is immune from these actions and thoughts. Jesus lives and dies and rises to overturn this too well-traveled path. Jesus comes to saturate with belovedness.

The preacher could paint what this looks like: a God who gives holiness and belovedness away. No more ascending, excluding, proving. Only a descending God who approaches us in this newly baptized Jesus, takes hold of our face, like my 100-year-old aunt always does, and looks us in the eyes. If God had a thesaurus God might have also said to us—my adored, cherished, favorite, darling, treasured, dearly beloved.

There are so many ways the church can pass along belovedness. Make it plain and remind people how we do so—passing the peace, greeting the stranger, risking care. Jesus' baptism wasn't a private affair. It has public consequences. He is empowered by the Spirit for ministry and empowers the likes of us as well.

A quote from the late Scottish pastor George MacLeod:

"Only with a fellowship of very ordinary people, can God do anything at all. Our congregations miss the zest of the early Christian Church because we have forgotten the glorious emancipation of our true humanity that was the incarnation. Jesus the carpenter, the friend of shepherds and fisherpeople, showed us God by being human—and in three days set at naught the complex temple that was forty years in building. God made risen humanity God's temple. We must be human."[1]

Mary Halvorson

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January. 19, 2025

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 36:5-10
1 Corinthians12:1-11
John 2: 1-11

Engaging the Texts

The season of Epiphany can get lost between Christmas and Lent. Any teaching about the season—its colors, its mystery, its images,—is helpful in these days of less light. The hymns and texts about light and God made manifest, are gifts.

The gospel has us sitting in the balcony watching a wedding celebration unfold. Preachers have oodles of wedding mishap stories. Expectations are high and something always goes awry; the organist doesn't show, the sick ring bearer vomits walking down the aisle, the wanna-be comedian pleads the fifth when asked to declare his vows.

In John's gospel, the wine runs out. Wine is symbolic of joy, celebration, and life. This is a disaster for a party with a crowd and more days to go. Jesus is an invited guest, hanging out with the others. He has no formal role, only there to celebrate and enjoy the party. But when the wine runs out, his mother steps in and recruits her son to handle the situation. He isn't ready and he says so. But she knows what he is capable of and challenges him to step up. He does and water is turned into spectacular wine.

It's curious that the first of Jesus' signs revealing him as the promised Messiah takes place at a party in a backward town, off the beaten path. It happens where people are having a good time, and Jesus is in the midst of it all. This is a picture of a celebratory Word made flesh; a laughing, playful, partying, incarnated Word. What does the preacher make of this?

A connection can be made here with the Eucharist. Most congregations celebrate a weekly banquet. This is the foretaste of the feast to come, in which there will be plenty for all, and no one will be left uninvited, no one will leave hungry. In the bread and wine, Jesus shows up, bringing life. Do we celebrate this enough? A colleague once said, "We should be doing the Snoopy dance after receiving communion." I remember a high schooler's response one Sunday. "This is the body of Christ given for you." "***Fantastic***!" she loudly proclaimed. This is the same worshipper who, whenever I said, "Do this in remembrance of me," treated it as a call and response. "***Okay***!" She was keen on worship; her pores open for the holy. Her gift, as a person living with Downs' syndrome, was her contagion to celebrate.

The church is not great at celebrating. We have serious work to do, and serious celebrating to practice. Maybe Jesus' ministry begins with a party because the Gospel work is for the long haul. It's never done, so why not build up the community with some good fun?

What sign do we want to reveal, what light do we want to shine so others can see the Kingdom of God here and now? In times of war and trouble, when the light is less, when the needs are great, we call upon Jesus to be with us for the long haul, to bring life to the party.

Mary Halvorson

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 26, 2025

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Engaging the Texts

The First Reading from Nehemiah appears only once in the three-year lectionary cycle. It recounts the return of exiles from Babylon, with Nehemiah organizing families to repair Jerusalem's broken walls. After completing the repairs, the people gather at the Water Gate to celebrate the new moon.

Ezra is asked to read from the five books of Moses, the Torah. From early morning until noon, they read, listened, and discussed the scriptures, covering potentially comprehensive passages from creation to exodus, including the covenant's making and law's giving.

The Second Readings during this Epiphany season are from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The previous week explored spiritual gifts distributed among Jesus' disciples. This week's text focuses on the unified body of Christ, emphasizing that despite diverse backgrounds—Jews and Greeks, enslaved

1. George MacLeod, *Daily Readings with George MacLeod, Founder of the Iona Community*, Ron Ferguson, ed. (Wild Goose Publications, 1991).

and free—all are given the same Spirit.

Paul addresses the Corinthian community's internal dynamics, highlighting their interconnectedness as a spiritual family. He cautions members to respect one another, particularly those marginalized or wounded by societal structures. The letter reveals significant tension within the congregation, with some members displaying spiritual arrogance, believing their insights surpassed those of others.

The Gospel passage presents Jesus' first recorded sermon in Luke's account. Following his baptism and wilderness testing, Jesus begins his teaching ministry in Galilee. Returning to his hometown synagogue, he receives the scroll of Isaiah and reads from chapter 61:1-2a, notably stopping before the phrase "and the day of vengeance of our God." This selective reading might reflect a variant scroll or intentional theological emphasis.

After reading, Jesus sits to teach, delivering a concise sermon. The lectionary reading concludes at this point, with the subsequent passage revealing how his message provokes the congregation to rage.

Pastoral Reflections

As we approach these texts in 2025, President Donald Trump will have just delivered his Second Inaugural Address on Martin Luther King Jr. Day—a stark backdrop against which to hear Jesus' inaugural proclamation of liberation and divine favor. Our gospel lesson today could be called Jesus' inaugural address. When he reads from the prophet Isaiah and gives his one sentence sermon, Jesus unfurls his identity and mission for us and for our salvation.

It's a stunning proclamation, yet seemingly incongruous with reality. Jesus doesn't unfurl God's mission in a national capitol surrounded by power brokers, but in a small, unremarkable hometown with a dubious reputation.

How could Jesus claim Isaiah's promise was fulfilled when Nazareth and Galilee showed stark evidence of suffering: pervasive poverty, infant mortality, Roman violence, community members marginalized by disabilities, and widespread hypocrisy and self-justifications?

What is exactly fulfilled in our hearing? How does the revelation of Jesus' identity and mission affect us? Some will immediately experience liberation—freed from forces that estrange, lifted from paralysis, called to new adventures. Others will resist, uncomfortable with the comprehensive nature of Jesus' mission. Imagine being called to forgive enemies, release prisoners, give away half your savings, or remove the log from your own eye.

The power of this proclamation echoes the Torah reading among returning exiles in Nehemiah. The story of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls has inspired community organizers worldwide, representing a model of shared responsibility, courage, and generosity. Interestingly the reading of the Torah comes between the rebuilding of the walls and the repopulation of Jerusalem. At the heart of the reformation is this reading of the Torah, the revelation of God's abiding and steadfast promised life with God's people.

Like the returning exiles in Nehemiah, you and your community may be weary. You've worked hard to shore up walls, stay connected, discern future paths. You may be mourning the ways you and your community have forgotten God's covenant and commands.

Yet, Nehemiah and Ezra told the people not to weep and mourn, for this day is holy to the Lord your God. This day, after your hard work and before you get to it again, this day when you hear the promise and the teaching of God is a feast day. Go and prepare good food and drink—and share with those who don't have anything. For the joy of the LORD is your strength.

Mike Wilker

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 2, 2025

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Luke 4:21-30

Engaging the Texts

The first reading describes Jeremiah's call to be "a prophet among the nations." The preceding verses 1-3, indicate that Jeremiah preached before the fall of Jerusalem—and that this collection is being read by people in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah resists the call, but God promises to be with Jeremiah and to give him words to speak: to pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow, build, and plant. These are words of judgment, justice, equity, and renewal. God's presence and inspiration don't make Jeremiah's vocation any easier, though, as we can see through the rest of the book.

The second reading is the excerpt from Paul that we often read at weddings about love being patient and kind, not envious, boastful, or rude. It's a beautiful text for marriages, but originally Paul wrote it to a Christian congregation that was fighting with itself—many members thinking their individual work as leaders, teachers, prophets, interpreters, generous donors, and healers was the most valuable while other members of the body were not even being seen and heard—and some, like the day-laborers who couldn't get to the community worship, were literally left hungry and cold.

Paul writes to encourage them in their diversity to seek and receive the greater *gifts* of faith, hope, and love. Paul's

letter is an exhortation to practice lovingkindness in our relationships. Paul wants the Corinthian congregation members to have all their practices and relationships infused with faith, hope, and love.

In last week's gospel, we heard Jesus' first recorded sermon in Luke. This week we hear the response. When Jesus was in his hometown of Nazareth, he challenged their comfortable, domesticated religion. It appears the people of Jesus' hometown wanted to keep God's love all for themselves, or at least keep everyone else at the margins. Jesus pushes them to remember that for all of history God's loving, liberating actions have also been given to people beyond the borders of their own towns—to people like the widow of Zarephath and even to the leaders of enemy nations—like the Syrian general Naaman. Jesus' dialog with the sermon audience members provokes their rage. "But he passed through their midst and went on his way" (Luke 4:30). He continued to teach in synagogues, cast out demons, raise people to service, and call people to follow.

Pastoral Reflections

Frankly, my reflections on these texts were inspired by reading a sermon by Barbara Lundblad, the editor of *Preaching Helps*. In that sermon [the citation of which I can't find], Pastor Lundblad said, "Religion can be like a hometown: familiar, traditional, unchanging, a constant in a chaotic, fast-moving world. We want religion to stay the same, to look as it looked when we were children. We want to sing hymns with tunes we know: this is the faith of our childhood. We can wrap religion around us like a homemade quilt, assured that God is in heaven and all's right with the world."

In our vocations as preachers, we can challenge the temptation of "comfortable religion"—a faith that becomes static, familiar, and confined to ourselves. Like Jesus challenging his hometown congregation, preachers are called to expand our understanding of God's love beyond narrow boundaries.

One problem is when we make religion or doctrine ***the*** thing, rather than an expression or description of the experience of God's love for us. My household has many handmade quilts given to us by our grandmothers. Those actual quilts are results of grandmothers' loving words and deeds. The quilts are signs and expressions of a grandma's love. Indeed, they are a sign and expression that can continue to encourage and comfort even after a grandmother has died, but its effectiveness is tied to the grandmother and her loving actions.

Another danger of comfortable religion is that it can become ***my*** thing, and *only my* thing, or just our thing and nobody else's thing. This happens when religion becomes a possession and loses its character as a gift given from people who love us and who gave it to us for our spiritual growth, nourishment, and healing.

When I was a child, my Grandma Dolly crocheted two blankets—one for my younger brother and one for me. Somehow, my brother's blanket got mangled up, tattered, and torn. My mom repaired it, but it ended up being much smaller. I was snug and smug under my larger blanket. But my mom helped me eventually see how my blanket was big enough to share with my brother and make up for some of the reduced size of his blanket. Our two blankets shared together were better than either one separately. Grandma's gift of love, with a little repair and reform by our mom, was expansive enough for both of us.

Mike Wilker

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
February 9, 2025

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13]
Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Luke 5:1-11

Engaging the Texts

We are never up to the task.

In our North American context, we spend much of our lives preparing to take up responsibilities. Whether we are training for a vocational field or assuming a role of leadership in the public or private arenas, we prize expertise and expect competency from ourselves and one another. Academic programs, self-help books, vocational training, and continuing education seminars provide a road map to our desired destination.

Today's readings chart a different course into Christian discipleship. We see this most clearly in the life of Simon Peter, to whom we are introduced for the first time in the appointed gospel text. Peter is washing his nets after a long night of fishing. He and his companions have caught nothing. For those who depend on fishing for their livelihood, this is the worst kind of night, to have nothing to show for one's toil and labor.

Jesus asks Peter to put out the boat into deep water and let down the nets for a catch. Peter seems skeptical, to say the least. Jesus is asking Peter to go against his experience, his fruitless night of fishing and his lifetime as a fisherman, and instead to trust in Jesus' word. Peter fulfills Jesus' request, and much to his surprise, he and his companions catch enough fish to sink two boats.

In this moment, Peter realizes that he is not up to the task. Preachers would do well to pause here and help their listeners understand the impact of this encounter upon Peter. While the other fishermen strain to draw in their nets, Peter falls to

his knees and asks Jesus to go away from him. Why does this experience elicit such a dramatic response from Peter? In the presence of such a miracle, Peter feels a sense of inadequacy, a sense that he is unworthy to receive such a gift, to even be in the presence of the Lord because of his own sinfulness. Rather than ask for mercy and forgiveness for whatever shortcomings he perceives, he would rather have Jesus just walk away.

Jesus has a bigger vision for Peter's life, a vision that Peter has scarcely begun to grasp. Instead of fear, Jesus envisions fruitfulness for Peter, declaring, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." With these words, Jesus sets Peter on a new trajectory. This new trajectory is hardly based on Peter's qualifications; rather, it is based on who Peter will become as he follows in Jesus' footsteps.

Preachers may want to map the trajectory of Peter's life for their audience. This would require preachers to step outside the appointed texts for this Sunday, but I believe that this is an instance where a canonical perspective is warranted to illustrate a larger point about Christian discipleship. Preachers could point to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, his sense of belonging when he encounters the risen Lord at the Sea of Tiberias, and his prominent role in the early church, particularly in bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. All these experiences illustrate remarkable growth in Peter, as he becomes more than he could ever imagine for himself.

By his own qualifications, Peter is not up to any of these tasks, but Jesus makes him up to the task. Jesus makes *all of us* up to the task. Such is the story of Christian discipleship. Where we see inadequacies and shortcomings, Jesus sees the raw potential to become his faithful followers. Peter is not the first, nor is he the last, to be drafted into the Lord's service despite his lack of expertise and competency.

Scripture is filled with stories of God elevating people beyond their qualifications to serve a higher purpose. Consider the story of Isaiah's prophetic commission in the appointed Old Testament reading. Isaiah can scarcely believe that he has received a vision of God in the temple. "Woe is me!" Isaiah says. "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." But God purifies Isaiah by blotting out his sin. The Lord is less interested in who Isaiah was and more interested in who Isaiah will become. "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" asks the Lord. Sensing that God has something greater for his life, Isaiah obediently responds, "Here am I; send me!" The book of Isaiah is a testimony to Isaiah's transformation, as he lives into his calling as a chosen messenger of God.

The apostle Paul is similarly called and transformed, despite his apparent lack of qualification. In the epistle reading, Paul places himself at the bottom of the apostolic depth chart. "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God," Paul says. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." What has made the difference for Paul? In a single word: grace. By grace, Jesus paves a new way for Paul. The apostle's life, ministry, and writings testify to the Lord's gracious commitment to qualify the unqualified.

We are never up to the task, but by grace, Jesus makes us up to the task of following him. By grace, we become something more. By grace, we become faithful participants in the Lord's mission, despite our meager résumés and our lackluster performance reviews. Grace for Isaiah, grace for Peter, grace for Paul, grace for you and me.

Matthew Stuhlmuller

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 16, 2025

Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

Engaging the Texts

This is not what we thought it would be.

Jesus has been impressing people in the early days of his ministry. He has continued to assemble a close group of twelve disciples, and together, this rag-tag band is teaching and healing its way through the countryside. With every miraculous encounter, Jesus' popularity is growing, and the grateful crowds are glorifying and praising God for the ministry of Jesus and his disciples.

These early days have been a mountaintop experience, literally and figuratively. On the mountain, Jesus chooses his twelve disciples. The mountain is an auspicious place to receive the Lord's call. Standing high above the plain, Jesus delegates his authority to these apostles. Such a lofty setting magnifies the loftiness of the call, but as is often the case in Luke's gospel, a dramatic reversal is about to occur. As they come down to a level place, the disciples' expectations are quickly turned upside down.

This is not what the disciples thought it would be. As Jesus gathers a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon, he delivers the so-called Sermon on the Plain, leveling people's expectations about what it really means to follow him. This is not going to be an easy road; the way of righteousness will not pass through earthly markers of success. It is quite the opposite, really; the way of righteousness will pass through the experience of the outcast. "Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus says, "for yours is the kingdom of God." Despite what they may have thought, the reign of God will be given and embodied

most fully in the outcast: those who are poor, hungry, and sorrowful; those who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed on account of their association with Jesus.

If this is true, then all who would presume to follow Jesus must recognize that their claims and aspirations to worldly fortune are penultimate. "But woe to you who are rich," Jesus says, "for you have received your consolation." Woe, too, to those whose bellies are full of food and laughter. People of high reputation will be surprised to see whom God favors in the age to come. All who would presume to follow Jesus must understand that Jesus abides by an alternative vision of human community. Jesus gives a place of prominence to the outcast, and through his life and ministry, he is inaugurating this new reality among us.

Many contemporary Christians still do not get this. I am amazed by the hermeneutical gymnastics of the human heart and mind when we are faced with Jesus' difficult, radical teachings like the blessings and woes. I suppose that this is an indictment of the general state of the church's ministry in North America. The church has accommodated the gospel to a comfortable, bourgeois standard of living. People find any number of ways to soften Jesus' words, so that they do not offend the sensibilities of the American dream.

As preachers, we do not escape this indictment. We must recognize where and when we have accommodated the gospel to the middle-class aspirations of ourselves and our people. No matter our preaching context, we bear responsibility for proclaiming the gospel in all of its world-turning power. As you step into the pulpit this week, I implore you not to soften Jesus' words. This does not mean that you must cast out the materially comfortable parishioners in your midst, but we need to be honest and tell many of our people that following Jesus is not what they thought it would be. The way of righteousness, for Jesus and for us, does not celebrate the usual markers of glory; rather, it lifts high the cross, where Jesus most fully identified himself with the outcast of the earth.

The apostle Paul gets it: cross and resurrection are central to Jesus' ministry and any ministry that aspires to be faithful to Jesus. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died," Paul says. Jesus knew that his ministry would offend the sensibilities of the religious and political establishment. He knew that his chosen path would end on a cross. By the power of his resurrection, he is the first to show that the way of the cross is God's chosen way of life.

But not even Jesus can do this by his own power. Rather than soften the radical truth he was sent to proclaim, he gave himself in radical trust to God. As the prophet Jeremiah says: "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength…Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." Jesus found his strength in God, the God who brings life out of death. In radical trust, he assumed the identity of the scorned and despised, committing himself to God's chosen way of life.

We, too, find our strength in God, as preachers and parishioners, to faithfully follow Jesus' radical teachings. This is not what we thought it would be, but for those with ears to hear and eyes to see, this is even better than we could ever imagine. God is turning the world around through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Jesus inaugurates a new age marked by the leveling values of the gospel, we finally experience life as God intends: with mutuality, justice, and peace, for the outcast and all who recognize Christ's face in the outcast of the earth.

Matthew Stuhlmuller

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 23, 2025

Genesis 43:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
Luke 6:27-38

Engaging the Texts

To provoke you, which these texts ought to do, I have in mind to share a few places I feel conflicted, trusting that more fruit is borne by writing into what feels hard than from brushing over it.

I imagine the lectionary planning team joined the Genesis and Luke passages together because of their shared theme of forgiveness of those who harm you. Yet how dangerous is it to blithely encourage people to "pray for those who abuse you," and to offer mercy to those who left you for dead? Eight of ten women have experienced sexual harassment or abuse, including those sitting in the congregation for worship.[2] Once as a seminarian, I listened to Douglas John Hall lecture on the Joseph story in Genesis to say something about providence. I recall his bottom line is that we only know God's providence in hindsight. To demand that suffering endure because God will make good of it in the end is just cruel.

A more careful reader of the Genesis text can see how Joseph was savvy and sought strategies of self-protection in a hostile setting. The Psalm might offer some of that faithful savviness Joseph employed: don't be provoked by those who follow evil schemes, for they will meet their comeuppance. As for you, seek safe pastures and place your trust in the one whose promise is deeper and truer than any bully. Yet still pray that the bully, too, may be transformed for they are God's beloved just as you are, and as we know, hate destroys

2. https://www.nsvrc.org/questions/how-common-sexual-harassment?question=856

the hateful one just as the one who is hated.

You may be preaching through 1 Corinthians as the lectionary here marches week by week through Paul's letter. Again, tread carefully here. In answer to a fair question, Paul first calls the asker a "fool" drawing on the Greek word *aphrōn*—literally "without a mind," senseless, unwise. Not a good entry to an admittedly speculative topic. And then, one of my pet peeves—the lectionary committee excerpting verses as if they know better than Paul (or another writer in Scripture) that we don't need to hear those verses. I encourage you: read them all. There, you will find a cosmic element in Paul's description of our embodiment, something that could be mined for ecological significance seeing how we share matter with all creatures and even the stars.

I worry about how Paul's binaries might be heard as disparaging of actual bodies (see my worry about sexual harassment and violence above). Here, he claims the natural body is perishable, sown in dishonor, sown in weakness; whereas the spiritual body is imperishable, raised in glory, raised in power. Worst of all here he claims, as he concludes this section, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Might our hearers simply be confused here? Are they not, to a person, flesh and blood? And was not Jesus the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us?" This is not a claim that Paul is incoherent or even heretical; it is simply to say his subtle arguments often need careful treatment by preachers so that their hearers might not despair or worse, simply reject Scripture and perhaps the church all together. After all Elizabeth Drescher's research shows the top reasons for people leaving church are that church is 1) boring, 2) hurtful, or 3) simply unbelievable.[3]

One could, I suppose, do a series of sermons based on these passages of 1 Corinthians 15, focusing in on what Christians mean when they confess belief in "the resurrection of the body." That would, however, likely mean YOU grappling with what you believe and how you might best communicate it. Here, some critical examination of the history of this doctrine is relevant. I recently finished Vítor Westhelle's book *After Heresy: Colonial Practices and Anti-Colonial Theologies* where he writes "The true criticism of dogma is its history," quoting Strauss.[4] Here, I take him to mean that in most things, Christians have debated and disagreed.

At one point in my life, I would pick a phrase from the creed that felt hard to believe, find some resources to read about it, and spend the season of Lent in discernment and exploration. The year I focused on the resurrection of the body, I read a slim, profound, poetic text by the Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves titled *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*.[5] Drawing on the horrific violence of the authoritarian regimes who reigned by torture and violence in the 1960s and 1970s, the book is a ringing affirmation of the body. Indeed, the consequences of belief in the resurrection of the body connect directly to the body mattering ultimately to God, so much so that God would become body for our sake. "For," Alves writes, "if God is found beyond the body, anything can be done to the body."[6]

Christian Scheren

Trans/figuration of Our Lord
March 2, 2025

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2
Luke 9:28-36[37-43a]

Engaging the Texts

As a parent of a transgender child, I find myself wondering why this vulnerable and ultimately quite small demographic have become political fodder for the Republican party in recent years. On the face of it, it doesn't make sense to target a group which makes up only about 0.6% of the U.S. population.[7] Yet as renowned religion scholar Randall Balmer says, "They [MAGA Republicans] have an interest in keeping the base riled up about one thing or another, and when one issue fades, as with same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage, they've got to find something else. It's almost frantic."[8] This harassment has consequences: according to the Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, one of the most respected research institutes on LGBTQIA+ issues, "81% of transgender adults in the U.S. have thought about suicide, 42% of transgender adults have attempted it, and 56% have engaged in non-suicidal self-injury over their lifetimes."[9]

I start with this social and political reality echoing the practice of my confirmation teacher, the Rev. Herbert Strom, campus pastor at Montana State University in Bozeman,

3. Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), see chapter 2.

4. Vítor Westhelle, *After Heresy: Colonial Practices and Anti-Colonial Theologies*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 87.

5. Rubem Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

6. Alves, *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body*, 9.

7. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states/

8. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/why-is-the-gop-escalating-attacks-on-trans-rights-experts-say-the-goal-is-to-make-sure-evangelicalsvote#:~:text

9. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/transpop-suicide-press-release/

Montana. Each week on Wednesday night after school, we'd trek up to Christus Collegium just off campus where Herb had his office. He always started with the New York Times on his desk, right next to the Bible. God, through the Word, speaks into the circumstances of our daily lives, he taught us. I might go a bit further to say with Vítor Westhelle that being a theologian (as all preachers are) means that we must "call a thing for what it is." Echoing Martin Luther's teaching on being a theologian of the cross, Westhelle says this is no "theology among others," but a "way of doing theology" that recognizes "the hidden side of history, the margins, the excluded, the stranded ones, the 'crucified people' (Ignacio Ellacuría), the 'nonpersons' (Gustavo Gutierrez) *as the privileged space of God's self-revelation*.[10] God reveals Godself amid, in our context, the suffering of transgender folks, among others.

Starting from this cultural reality, it is no surprise that one of the overwhelming themes in these texts is trans/formation. Moses' encounter with God trans/forms his face into a shining light so striking people turn away from him. Hope trans/forms us in Second Corinthians so that we might act with great boldness. And in the Gospel, not only is Jesus' face trans/formed, but his whole being shines radiantly. Let's take each of these in turn, seeing what they might yield given my opening acknowledgement of one aspect of our contemporary culture: transphobia.

The Exodus passage is surrounded by both troubling and encouraging material. On the one hand, God shows up to Moses on the mountain basically promising genocide: "I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles." To our Indigenous siblings, this likely sounds a lot like Christian Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery (which, by the way, churches like the ELCA and Episcopal Church USA have repudiated).[11] On the other hand, the first "ask" Moses communicates to the people from God is that they rest. Admittedly it is still communicated in the "destroy" register. "Moses assembled the whole Israelite community and said to them, "These are the things the Lord has commanded you to do: "For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a day of sabbath rest to the Lord. Whoever does any work on it is to be put to death." Ahem. Is not putting the non-observant to death "work"? Let's not do that part. If we take this admonition at its fundamental level, it means a rest from exploitation, from bullying, from hatred and violence. It is an admonition to pause and regard the gifts we all have—soil, plants, water, creatures, life.

The Second Corinthians passage offers an image of those of marginal position taking a stand. The Greek word for acting with great boldness is *parrēsia,* a term the queer French philosopher Michel Foucault studied in-depth during the later part of his life.[12] The *parēsiast*, the one who speaks boldly or freely, speaks from a position of marginality, not from a position of power. Immersed in the details rather than from some gods-eye view, the *parrēsiast* reveals at some risk to themselves the possibilities of the present that history—and we might add here—the hegemonic powers—occlude.[13] This feels like what Austen Hartke risked when writing, now six years ago, the book: *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgendered Christians*.[14] I wonder if this is what it feels like for transgender Lutheran pastors who speak up like Asher O'Callaghan, Drew Stever, or Nicole Garcia.[15]

The gospel text from Luke includes the theme of being changed, transformed, in the presence of God, but adds an element: God themselves saying 'you are my chosen." In Matthew's version, God says "this is my beloved," the same affirmation as at Jesus' baptism. This changed and changing one is God's chosen, God's beloved. And (if you ignore the lectionary committee's brackets) the designation is not for remaining on the mountain to feel all glory and might, but instead for going down the mountain into the midst of need, to see the one who is hurting, and to offer healing. Here is the final word of the transfiguration: the one called beloved empties that love into the work of healing for others who are suffering.

Christian Scheran

10. Vítor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 112.

11. https://www.episcopalchurch.org/indigenousministries/repudiation-of-the-doctrine-of-discovery/; https://www.elca.org/our-work/congregations-and-synods/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/indigenous-ministries-and-tribal-relations/repudiation.

12. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. (Los Angels: Simiotext(e), 2001).

13. [13] Foucault, *Fearless Speech,* 84.

14. Austen Hartke, *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgendered Christians.* (Louisville: Westminster/JohnKnox, 2018).

15. https://www.elm.org/asher-ocallaghans-workin-essay/; https://www.advocate.com/news/transgender-lutheran-pastor-california; https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/06/a-conversation-with-rev-nicole-garcia/

Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Engaging the Texts

What shall we preach on Ash Wednesday? The gospel reading from Matthew seems to contradict wearing ashes on our foreheads: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven…when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret…" (Matt 6:1, 17) Yet the ashes on our foreheads are visible to others. If we receive ashes early in the day, co-workers or subway riders will see them. Most of us won't wash our faces until it's time for bed. Perhaps a sermon for this day will explore the meaning of ashes since none of the texts talk about this sign. I remember that when our son and his friend were sitting together at an Ash Wednesday service, they were poking each other to get in line because they thought the ashes were human cremains.

There are two options for the First Reading, one from Joel, the other from Isaiah. Both options offer meaningful themes for preaching. I will focus on the reading from Joel:

> Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious
> and merciful,
> slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love
> (Joel 2:13b).

In many congregations, these words from the prophet Joel replace "Alleluia" on the Sundays in Lent. We may have sung these words so often we no longer think much about them. Some may have never sung them at all. "Return to the Lord your God for…" *For? For what?* The prophet could have followed that word *for* with many different endings…

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

…*for* you might die tonight

…*for* you've messed up and need to repent and seek forgiveness

…*for* if you don't, you'll be sorry

But the prophet didn't choose any of these. What the prophet said was different: "Return to the Lord your God, *for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."*

One Lent several years ago when I was a pastor in New York City, our seminary intern led a Lenten series on prayer. The first night we were divided into small groups, each group talking about a different petition of the Lord's Prayer. In the open discussion that followed, one of the boys—I think he was about 11 or 12 at the time—talked openly about praying in the middle of the night, and about his fear of going to hell. Now, I knew his family well and I couldn't imagine that his parents had threatened him with the fires of hell to get him to behave or to come to Lenten services. I also knew he didn't hear much about hell from the pulpit. Yet, there it was inside him—that fear that he wasn't good enough, that he'd done things too terrible to be forgiven, that he was going to hell. Perhaps classmates in school talked about hell. Maybe he heard about hell on television or in a movie. Perhaps it was the easy way some people said, "Go to hell." While Jesus hardly ever talked about hell, others—especially preachers—have talked about hell quite a bit. We wouldn't have been surprised if the prophet had said, "Return to the Lord your God for if you don't, you'll go to hell."

Perhaps the fear of hell is in our genes. I don't know. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said that human beings go through life with one of two basic outlooks:

- Other people are looking at me with a suspicious stare, or
- Other people are looking at me with a loving glance

How do we feel about our relationship with God? Is God fundamentally suspicious, judging my every thought and action? Or is God looking at me with a loving glance? I'm thinking about that young boy from many Lents ago who spoke so honestly about his fear of going to hell. Where did it come from? The culture, perhaps, or something inside him. It may have been false guilt.

> False guilt lures us from a focus on what we have done to an absorption with how bad we are. The mood moves from "I have failed here" to "I am a failure." I lose sight of the particular behaviors that I can and should change. I even lose sight of the relationship that I have injured. Increasingly, the focus is on me—my wretchedness, my failure, my pain.[16]

When this deep guilt overwhelms us, we can't even begin to imagine that God wants us to come back. All we can do is try to hide.

But on this Ash Wednesday, as we begin Lent together, the prophet comes to us with a far different message. The fear in our genes is overcome by the love in God's heart. Whatever

16. Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James Whitehead, cited by George Johnson in *Beyond Guilt: Christian Responses to Suffering,* 58.

we've taken into ourselves from the culture, from childhood's putdowns or adulthood's failures—none of this can separate us from God's abounding, steadfast love. The sign we wear on our foreheads is not only the stark reality of dust and death, but the promise of Jesus on the cross that NOTHING can separate us from the abiding love of God.

"Return to the Lord your God, *for…*

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Barbara K. Lundblad

First Sunday in Lent
March 9, 2025

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Engaging the Texts

"Until an opportune time." Though this phrase sounds foreboding as the concluding line of the temptation scene, it is a useful doorway into proclamation on the first Sunday in Lent.

The church saw the six weeks leading up to the Paschal Feast as another kind of opportune time—not for facing off with the Accuser, but for engaging spiritual practices together centered on repentance and preparation for baptism. This is a good day to welcome your people to the season and practices of Lent. A word that simply means "springtime," Lent still suffers from associations of sadness, guilt, and shame. In fact, Lent is a gift that readies us for resurrection. How is this an opportune time for your congregation or ministry? The texts for Lent 1, year C can help us explore the gift of this intentional season.

Deuteronomy offers a liturgy of gratitude that almost feels more fitting for autumn with its focus on the first fruits of the harvest. Perhaps "first fruits" is a more helpful, healing approach to the Lenten practice of fasting. Fasting need not be based in punishment or experiencing the lack of something good. Fasting can cultivate a posture of gratitude when set in the context of community. Grateful for all good things that come from God, we simplify our lives so that others have enough. Here in Deuteronomy, the description of this liturgy moves from ritual action to storytelling. The people give thanks, bring items to the priest, and then recite the sacred story of how they got there, recalling the "mighty acts" of God that brought the people to this time of security and harvest. If we read on through v. 15, we learn about the mission of God's people and the purpose of these offerings: care for the orphans, the strangers, and the widows in our midst. Lent is an opportune time to turn our gaze toward the needs of others, to recall our place in God's story by practicing generosity and gratitude.

Psalm 91 is sometimes characterized as an "amulet psalm" for the way Jesus uses it here in Luke to rebuke the devil's questions. We trace the sign of the cross over our bodies to call on the presence of Jesus, rebuking those voices that would harm or tempt us. It is always an opportune time to call upon the help of the Lord and to seek refuge in God. Preaching that centers the psalm could explore the specific things that assail us in 2025 and in your community. Offering Psalm 91 as a kind of amulet or worry stone scripture—something to hold tight and come back to when we're fearful—would be a fitting practice to introduce on the first Sunday in Lent.

I wonder if Paul thought about the psalms as conferring protective power when he wrote in Romans 10 that the word is near, on our lips and in our heart. The verses that follow have been parsed to pieces in theological debates about who is justified. But the section begins with this profound affirmation about the closeness of Christ to the believer's own body. (And to the Body as a whole?) What a word of comfort to begin a season of repentance. Jesus embodies this nearness of scripture when he duels verbally with the tempter. We embody the nearness of the Living Word by recognizing the presence of the Risen Christ in one another. A preacher could ask her congregation to remember a time when scripture or prayer was used to give comfort, kindle hope, or resist evil.

In the narrative sweep of Luke, chapter 4 starts right on the heels of the scene of Jesus' baptism. Perhaps his heels are still wet as he is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit which has filled him. And what follows right after this scene is his return to the temple and unrolling of the scroll of Isaiah, announcing his ministry of jubilee fulfillment. For now, he is in the wilderness and full of the Holy Spirit. What is it about this experience that takes Jesus from baptism into prophetic ministry? Here we are reading it as we begin Lent. With Jesus, we are exploring the way baptism sets us apart, even sets us against certain forces in the world. Lent is an opportune time for renewing our baptismal commitments to justice and peace on earth.

And though Lent begins relatively late in the calendar year, this time includes a handful of commemorations that lift up those who lived as though called "for such a time as this." March 10 is the day to honor Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Both born into slavery, these faithful women renewed the society they lived in by standing up for themselves and others. On March 17, another saint born a slave is lifted up as we remember Patrick of Ireland. Patrick's hymn to the Trinity

is another amulet-like meditation that can help us all remember how it is always an opportune time to kindle our faith and live out our baptism.

Liv Larson Andrews

Second Sunday in Lent
March 16, 2025

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

> *Behold the beauty of the Lord. Ever, and always.*
> (Psalm 27:4)

Much in these readings for the second Sunday in Lent doesn't evoke beauty, at least at first. Death threats from a puppet king, cut-in-half animals bleeding as a pot of smoke floats past them, and Paul's bleak description of what awaits the "enemies of the cross." Yet right beside these hard words are glimpses of holy love, faithful yearning, and mysterious promise. The way difficult truths are held side by side with beauty and awe is a contrast and tension that preachers this Lent can call upon for inspiration. Is that tension a hallmark of the season itself?

In a narrative fraught with patriarchy, racism, and colonialism, it can be hard to open our eyes to beauty. Abram and Sarai's legacy, partly told here in Genesis 15, has been misused to bless the taking of land and the taking of people as property. One way of preaching this week would be to open up all that history and lay it bare for us to reckon with. Why was it that indigenous citizens of the United States were called "Red Canaanites"? Part of it is this story. But holding such tension is faithful and can bear good fruits. What does God actually promise in this covenant made over the bodies of slain animals? What isn't promised? Naming the ways we distort these stories can also give us life and freedom. Beauty is hidden here for us to find, if we trust it.

On the second Sunday in Lent, it is heartening to pray with the psalmist, "the Lord is my light and my salvation." Light is coming back in these weeks anticipating spring. Behold the beauty of the Lord, springing up from the ground in plant life and budding out in the leafing trees. In these natural signs, we seek God's face. We are encouraged by the psalmist to wait. Several more weeks of this preparation, these disciplines, this journey. So, we do wait. And I wonder what it means for our specific communities to "be strong, take heart." I appreciate the call to courage. If God is our light and our salvation, our courage is worth the energy and will to muster it. Such courage is beautiful.

> *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* (Luke 13:34).

Wendell Berry writes in his Mad Farmer Manifesto, "Be like the fox, who makes more tracks than necessary. Some in the wrong direction." Jesus calls Herod a fox, and it's not a positive association. But foxes are pretty amazing. Masters of survival, even if by way of being sneaky. Making tracks in the wrong direction is a strategy to fool predators. Perhaps, in these times of tyranny and fear, we need to be a little foxy. Not like Herod. True foxiness works against the powers that be. But here in Luke 13 the fox is the figure of the chicken-stealer, the thief, the strong. Hens are at his mercy. And Jesus picks the hen as his metaphor, her wings stretching out in lament with yearning to gather, gather, gather in her beloved.

The final section of Dorothy Sayers' novel *The Nine Tailors* is a scene of in-gathering. I read this story at the height of Covid-19 related isolation, when gathering with others was not just impossible but could be deadly. The country priest in this lovely novel must gather up every family in the parish inside the local cathedral because there's a terrible flood and the church is built on the highest land. My heart ached for the chance to run around town and gather up my people, ensuring they were safe and well. Count each of their heads. That's what a mother hen would do.

> *Jerusalem, Jerusalem.*

Enemies of the cross of Christ can be found just about anywhere. Wherever humanity is disregarded, wherever the needs of others are sacrificed for profit or gain. When Paul preaches that "their end is destruction," he may not be conferring his own judgment. This could also be read as a descriptive statement. Whenever Christ's self-giving love is rejected in favor of self-serving practices, life is denied, and suffering multiplies. Destruction looms. And yet, it never gets the last word.

Jesus declares that he is about his work: healing, saving, granting love and life. And it earns him enmity, opposition, hate, and death threats. Are we aware of this when we sign up for the communal life of the baptized? Most likely not. Can Lent be a season of becoming more prepared for the costs of truth-telling and prophetic action?

At the end of the day, our house is *not* left to us. Our house, every house, every dwelling place becomes a home for the Risen Savior. Christ's incarnation declared all matter to be capable of bearing divine presence. Christ's resurrection announces that this whole world is knit together with tremendous, mysterious beauty and that beauty can be healing and life-saving for us, once again bearing the life of our Risen Savior into our daily lives.

Behold, the beauty of the Lord. In our own bodies, among our neighbors, alive in creation. For the healing of the nations.

Liv Larson Andrews

Third Sunday in Lent
March 23, 2025

Isaiah 55:1-9
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Engaging the Texts

Who is privileged in the kingdom of God? Who is sought out and welcomed? These lessons lift up some shocking answers to these questions.

In Isaiah 55, the call goes out to the hungry, the thirsty, the broke. Not the righteous or educated or those who have followed God's law. It doesn't specifically go out to the sinner until verse 7. The call in verse 1 is to **everyone** who is thirsty, whatever they've been doing, to come eat and drink, free of charge. And what a banquet: rich food (v. 2) and a call to be the center of God's transformation (v. 5)! Israel will no longer be shamed, shunted to the margins, but will be the very center of God's redemption of the nations. "You shall call the nations that you do not know… (who) shall run to you." (v. 5). The essence of God's call is abundance and restoration. Before repentance, before amendment of our ways, we are treated to a feast!

As a poet, I am always on the lookout for "the turn" in a poem, where an emotional and visual shift takes us in a new direction. That happens at verse 7. Here, we hear the call to repentance, the literal turning of our lives. Those who do turn, who repent, face not more punishment, not shaming, but abundant pardon. God seems to be having great fun in restoring the people: a great feast, an everlasting covenant, abundant pardon.

But, so we don't think we understand everything about God, comes the beautiful turn in v. 8-9. It's as if God is saying: you don't know Jack! My thoughts are so high above your thoughts, you can only imagine them. And imagination, to a people returning to their devastated homeland, may be the most important tool they have been given.

Psalm 63 continues the theme of the thirsty being called to God. Here, the psalmist admits their soul thirsts, their body faints, as if they were in a desert (v. 1-2). But the action is not one of defeat or lament, but a turn to beautiful words of praise. "I will bless you as long as I live" (v. 4), "my mouth praises you with joyful lips" (v.5), "my soul clings to you" (v. 8). The broken one who is restored by God is not passive, but actively seeks what they know from past trials: "for you have been my help" (v. 7).

The passage from 1 Corinthians reminds us that God's abundant redemption is not to be taken for granted, let alone a license to turn the gift into evil. We are called to be watchful (v. 12), and to be ready both for testing, and for God's strength to endure it (v.13).

And then there is this troubling passage from Luke 13. What are we to make of this? On the surface, it seems as if God has turned into a wrathful, punishing puppet master, who blames suffering on the people who suffer. Look out, repent, or you will get what these poor people got.

Maybe that's what we need as a society, as a people in these times. A reminder that our wealth, our progress, even our "goodness" will lead us to perishing if we don't change radically. We're already seeing how our actions are causing the earth to perish. Can we afford to not listen to God's call to repent? And thanks be to God, can we listen to the parable of the fig tree: that God's desire is for an abundance that bears great fruit? Maybe we have more than a year to change, but maybe the crisis is now so immediate, we better radically change right now, trusting with the prophet and psalmist that God will provide.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 30, 2025

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Engaging the Texts

If you've preached maybe dozens of times on the Prodigal Son—the Prodigal Father—is there anything you can say that you haven't said before?

Sometimes when I get stuck, I draw a map of the story. I'm not a good drawer, but the act of drawing helps me envision the story in new ways. I drew a long, twisted road for the younger son coming home. He had plenty of time to reflect. *Did I make the right decision to return? How will my father react?* He encountered checkpoints along the way, run by governments, or bandits. He can't have been that secure; he has no money for customs or a bribe. Plus, he's a double foreigner. He is still a foreigner in the far country where he has sojourned, and in some ways a foreigner to the land where he is returning. Who will recognize him in his dirty, wretched state? Maybe on his long trip home, he wondered if he would

ever see his father's house again. I imagine he is covered with as much doubt as dust from the journey.

There are undoubtedly people in our congregations that have walked that long road, and maybe they don't look so good as they slide into the last pew at the last minute.

There are undoubtedly many more people in our congregations like the older brother. His trip home is much shorter and more direct. No bandits, no one doubting his right to be there. He can see the house from where he is. He hears what is going on. Worse, he **knows** what is going on, and he refuses to walk the last little bit of that short road.

The elder son has an abundance of knowing. He knows that he is right. He knows that he has never disobeyed his father, and he is certain he deserves a reward, not the sinful brother.

In the movie "Conclave," the cardinal in charge of the process to elect a new pope says: "There is one sin I have come to fear above all else: certainty. If there was only certainty and no doubt, there would be no mystery; and therefore no need for faith."

The older son is certain, and I fear that this sin is what has infected our life together—in the church, in politics, even, I confess, in my relationships with those I love. Some of the worst harm I have caused came when I knew I was right.

Remember, the story Jesus tells is in response to the religious leaders, who are certain about who deserves to dine at God's table (v. 1-2). Thank God, Jesus offers us a vision of God's kingdom where abundant grace is not earned, but given widely, even to those deemed unworthy.

The other lessons amplify this amazing benevolence. Joshua recounts how God rolls away the disgrace of slavery (v. 9) and the people delight in the produce of the land (v. 11-12). Psalm 32 connects confession with rejoicing. When the speaker trades her righteousness for honesty, she is freed of pain (v. 3-5) and is able to offer others counsel (v. 6, 8-11).

Paul offers a startling promise: we can now know Christ—and by extension, all creation—from a vision far beyond our limited human scope. Radical change—a new creation—is no longer a far off hope but has "come into being" (v. 17). For anyone! How long have we hoped for a radical change, the old gone, the new come? And how wonderful that this change does not come by violence, but by reconciliation. To top it off, we are now ambassadors of Christ, sent into any far country, with God using us to do God's work. Certainly, we will doubt our mission, but we have God's Word on its fruitfulness.

Patrick Cabello Hansel