

# Preaching Helps

**April through June 2025:  
Fifth Sunday in Lent through the  
Third Sunday after Pentecost**

## How Can We Preach in Such a Time?

By the time you read this it will be a little over three months since Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde preached at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. President Donald Trump and Vice-President J.D. Vance and their wives were seated in the front pews. The focus of that service was praying for unity. People from several different religious traditions shared leadership of the service. Bishop Budde chose three “h” words to frame the unity theme: **honoring** the inherent dignity of every human being; **honesty** in both private conversations and public discourse, and **humility**, which we all need because we are all fallible human beings. Those three key words probably caused a stir of suspicion or admiration across the congregation before she came to the end of her sermon. It was the last two minutes that people most remember, her direct plea to the president:

Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you. As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families who fear for their lives.

And the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in our poultry farms and meat-packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals – they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara, and temples.

Have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land.

May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the

truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world.

You probably heard at least the last portion of her sermon, so you know the bishop was respectful, soft-spoken, and direct. She did not shout or raise her voice. She quoted the President’s own words to ground her plea: “As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God.” She went on, in the name of that loving God, to plead for mercy for those who are now afraid. The response to her homily was swift and vicious.

The president called upon her to apologize:

“The so-called Bishop who spoke at the National Prayer Service on Tuesday morning was a Radical Left hard line Trump hater. She brought her church into the World of politics in a very ungracious way. She was nasty in tone, and not compelling or smart... She is not very good at her job! She and her church owe the public an apology!” (On *Truth Social* media)

Hundreds of additional comments flooded the website of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington:

“This was disgusting to see in a church and whoever allowed this needs to be gone just like that so called bishop. I hope no one ever steps foot in that demon house again.”

“This church is a fake church. Never have I heard a sermon that is so politicized. This church is an example of cults – they use the name of God and Jesus Christ for other agendas. Beware of false prophets.”

“It is a truth long-established that a liberal woman over 50 with a lesbian haircut is sure to support the most evil ideas and policies that mankind has ever conceived.” (Matt Walsh in *The Daily Wire*)

Two days after the service, Representative Josh Brecheen introduced House Resolution 59 that ends with one final “whereas” and a two-part resolution:

“Whereas the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde, the bishop leading the inaugural prayer service, used her position inappropriately, promoting political bias instead of advocating the full counsel of biblical teaching: Now, therefore, be it

*Resolved*, That—

(1) it is the sense of the House of Representatives that the sermon given at the National Prayer Service on January 21st, 2025, at the National Cathedral was a display of political activism; and

(2) the House of Representatives condemns the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde's distorted message."

This resolution was referred to the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform; as of this writing, it is not known if the resolution has moved out of committee.

Thankfully, there were also hundreds of affirmative responses on the diocesan site, on Facebook and in many personal emails. Among them was this post bearing witness to the sermon's reach beyond U.S. shores:

"I saw a post on social media last week from a Lutheran pastor in Germany. He said he'd been feeling discouraged for some time. He said after listening to Bishop Budde's sermon, it gave him courage. The ripple of this one woman's courage is going around the world. (Her courage is not without consequences—I read that Episcopal churches around the USA have had to get guards due to death threats. We do NOT bow down to tyranny...)"

If you are a preacher, you already know how hard it has been to preach since January 2025. Few of us are ever subject to condemnation by the House of Representatives and we don't preach on such a prominent, televised stage as the National Cathedral. But you may have received comments similar to the angry posts on the Episcopal website. Perhaps it was only one angry outburst, signed or anonymous — and there were thirty or forty "thank you's" posted online or spoken at the sanctuary door. But one negative response can outweigh many words of gratitude. (I may be speaking from my own experience!)

I am writing to encourage you, to pray for you and for myself, that we will have courage to preach in this difficult time. You may be preaching in a congregation with many who voted for President Trump or in a congregation with nobody who voted for him or a mix of the two. As much as many people want politics out of the sanctuary, the truth is it's impossible to close the door tightly enough. As Diana Butler Bass posted on her website *The Cottage*: "You have been politicized. You are now a target. For your good works of service. For your denominational stances on things like human rights. For welcoming those who have been marginalized. For caring about the poor.

Feeding hungry people? Political.  
Preaching about mercy? Political.  
Hosting a Spanish-speaking church service? Political.  
Hiring a pastor of color? Political.  
Having a woman preacher? Political.  
Displaying a sign or a flag welcoming everyone?  
Political.

Believing that empathy and compassion are central to Christian faith? Political.

Loving your neighbor as yourself? Political."

I will add, Preaching on the lectionary? Political.

Through these difficult days, the lectionary is our friend—even if people are suspicious that we've chosen these readings to support our political positions. A few years ago, I was invited to give a lecture on Bonhoeffer's preaching. Thankfully two books of his sermons had been published by then and I read over seventy of his sermons. I was surprised that they weren't more direct in condemning National Socialism or the Nazi party. Or perhaps they were political. Bonhoeffer called Christian people to be faithful to Jesus Christ above all else, above all earthly rulers or parties or programs. He preached the Gospel. I believe we heard the Gospel preached on January 21, 2025, a sermon that ended with this prayer: "May God grant us all the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, speak the truth in love, and walk humbly with one another and our God, for the good of all the people of this nation and the world."

Three days after the first entry in this issue of "Preaching Helps," April 9 will mark the eightieth anniversary of Bonhoeffer's death in 1945. In 1941 Eberhard Bethge received a letter from his dear friend Dietrich: "When a relative of his discovered that she might have only months to live, [Dietrich] wrote: 'What would I do if I learned that in four to six weeks it would all be over? That is running through my head. I believe I would try to teach theology as before and to preach often.'"<sup>1</sup>

Even in these challenging times, I hope you are grateful to preach often. I give thanks for those who have shared their insights on these lectionary texts, and for all who will preach on them: **Abby Ferjak** serves as the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Scarsdale, New York. She enjoys going on local adventures with her wife (also a Lutheran pastor) and their two children. **Elaine Hewes** is a retired Lutheran pastor who now serves St. Brendan Episcopal Church in Deer Isle, Maine. She has lived in the small coastal town of Sedgwick for more than forty years, where she and her husband, Michael, raised their three children. A former homiletics teacher at Bangor Theological Seminary and a lover of the arts, Elaine is passionate about finding ways of breaking open (kaleidoscoping) the biblical text using the language of music, poetry, and the "ordinary things" of our beautiful, fragile, suffering world. **Emily Meyer** creates contemplative retreats, liturgical arts, sermons, costumes, choreography, and pageants. Emily has served as liturgical movement choreographer

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English, Vol. 16: Letter of February 19, 1941 in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment, 1940 – 1945*, p. 161

and coordinator for the Lutheran World Federation *Global Assembly*. Along with contributing to *Green Blades Rising* and *Sundays and Seasons*, she also serves on the St. Paul Area Synod Care of Creation Team, the EcoFaith Summit of the Upper Midwest Planning Team, the ELCA's Indian Boarding School Initiative, and as executive director of The Ministry Lab (theministrylab.org). **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 has retired and now lives in Kingston, New York with her husband, Gregorio, across the street from her daughter, daughter-in-law and two delightful granddaughters. She is serving a congregation in Kingston on a part-time basis and writing poetry.

**John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. A retired ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John's book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Years A, B and C* is a wonderful resource for preachers. John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church.

**Jeff Sartain** is a pastor of Edina Community Lutheran Church in Minnesota. He attended Luther Seminary and earned his DMin from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Jeff was ordained and served congregations in the United Church of Christ prior to being rostered with the ELCA. He and his husband live in St. Paul, Minnesota, and enjoy getaways to their cabin in northern Wisconsin. **Susan P. Thomas** is a retired ELCA pastor living in Lebanon, New Hampshire, having served in congregational, campus, hospital, and international settings, including in Jerusalem during the Second Intifada. Since retirement, she has tried to discern what she has kept in reserve and what her call in the present moment is. One thing is helping to establish a local coalition of concerned residents to support one another and to respond by a variety of means to the clear and present danger our society is currently facing. **Bonnie Wilcox** is a 1997 graduate of Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She has served in four congregations in the Twin Cities metro area. Reimagining the church in a new day and time with congregations has been the focus of her ministry. She is currently on long term disability.

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

## Fifth Sunday in Lent April 6, 2025

**Isaiah 43:16–21**

**Psalm 126**

**Philippians 3:4b–14**

**John 12:1–8**

### Engaging the Texts

Each of today's texts contains, in different ways, a theology of active remembering (*anamnesis*), that is, bringing a powerful event from the past into the present situation to be even more salvific. To honor or recall that event from the past means to press forward with its boundary-shattering power at *this* moment in time.

#### *Isaiah 43:16–21*

The first half of this Second Isaiah passage is filled with imagery from the ancient Exodus, recalling the way through the sea that God provided out of slavery. This is followed by a startling bridge statement (“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?” vv18-19) that promises even more. The writer takes the Exodus imagery further, turning it on its head to meet the current situation of being liberated from the Babylonian Exile (597-539 BCE). Not a dry path through the sea this time, but rivers in the desert back to Jerusalem.

#### *Psalm 126*

The “waters in the desert” imagery returns again in this “Psalm of Ascent,” one of a cluster of fourteen (Psalms 120-134) presumably sung by pilgrims making their way “up to Jerusalem,” sited on a hill. These songs recall God's past mercies as they cry for help for individuals, families, and communities or as they sing their praise, thanksgiving, and trust. Specifically, Psalm 126 references that second Exodus, the return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon (“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream... Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” vv. 1-2). Now the psalmist pleads for their fortunes to be restored yet again, “like the watercourses in the Negeb” (v. 4), full of the torrential power of dry desert riverbeds flowing after the rains. The psalmist recalls to God Isaiah's upside-down Exodus imagery of return from the Babylonian Exile, effectively raising the question, “Given all that you have already done to save us, what will you do now, in your power and mercy, to restore us?”

### *Philippians 3:4b–14*

Paul passionately describes what he could claim as his own righteousness but that he knows is rubbish (a pile of “human excrement”, literally). This passage is a bit like an “inside the mind of Paul” ride, particularly interesting as Paul’s letter to the Philippians is thought to have been written by him. The push and pull of doing theology in the moment, complete with disclaimers (“Yet all this I count as loss...if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead...not that I have reached the goal...”) is fascinating. Again, the theme plays out: recalling (or forgetting) what is past for the purpose of what now needs to happen—pressing on toward the goal, the prize of God’s call in this moment and eternally.

### *John 12:1–8*

To what, at this moment, is Mary of Bethany called? She assesses the situation in her home among Jesus and his followers and presses on to anoint Jesus in advance for his burial. The powerful fragrance of that present moment lingers, pulling them and us into the cost of what lies ahead—not just the loss of expensive nard that could, as Judas points out, have been sold for a good cause, but rather the cost of a precious life. In John 10, we heard Jesus telling the story of the shepherd risking his life for the sheep. In John 11, Jesus put his own life at risk among known enemies to raise Mary’s brother Lazarus from death. In John 12, following his example, Mary risks censure, casting caution to the wind to pour out her love like precious oil, just as she knows Jesus has done and now will do again, although it will likely lead to his death. Jesus understands and affirms the deep meaning of Mary’s action.

### **Pastoral Reflections**

To what, at this critical moment, are you being called? What is your greatest fear in this time of disruption, betrayal, and major change in the United States? Or are you among those who find hope in the destruction, expecting that a better order will ultimately result?

*Anamnesis*, actively calling the power of a past divine event into the present (as we do whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, for example) means pressing forward into new territory that resembles the old, yet is changed—transformed—to meet the current situation. A new liberation, a new faithfulness, a bold new call.

The Rev. Nathan Piphon, Bishop of the New England Synod of the ELCA, in his March 2025 Bishop’s Bulletin wrote, “In his essay ‘On the Freedom of a Christian,’ Martin Luther described how [the] free gift of grace makes each of us both ‘free Lords subject to no one, and dutiful servants subject to all’....As free Lords subject to no one, a...listener need not agree with everything the preacher says....And yet

that freedom doesn’t leave us off the hook. Subject to all, each of us is bound in Christ to love and serve our neighbors. Each of us as disciples in our daily vocations, and in our vocations as citizens, are called to preach God’s love in our personal behaviors and in the public policies we support....This includes both supporting policies that reflect God’s generosity and speaking against policies that do not reflect the truth of God’s love for all people. Preaching God’s love, we must resist, reject, and work to change those policies that sow division, and which harm and injure God’s people.”

Bishop Piphon follows up by bringing his reflections into the present: “As part of that conversation between preachers and hearers, and proclaiming Christ’s love on behalf of my neighbors, I state for the record that I believe current policies seeking to erase transgender identities, prohibit DEI initiatives, allow ICE raids in houses of worship, displace Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank, and roll back initiatives to combat global climate change do not reflect the love of Jesus Christ for our neighbors....Where one is harmed—we all are harmed.”

According to the gospel of John, the raising of Lazarus from the dead has placed the religious authorities on high alert. They are afraid that if people follow this Jesus, not only will it permit an opening for the Romans to destroy the Jewish holy places but also their nation.

Was this a logical fear? I don’t know. Fear does strange things. It’s hard to say how much of a threat Jesus really was to the established order. Is John’s account an accurate portrayal of how the chief priests and pharisees perceived Jesus? We don’t know that, either. But we do know how fear creeps in and grasps our hearts; we do know how political expediency governs actions; we do know how a perceived threat can bring on a disproportionate response.

So, perched on the edge of danger, in Bethany overlooking Jerusalem, these good friends of Jesus nonetheless give a meal in his honor. As we do each Sunday. Just as we hold in common at least some of the fears for the future that they felt.

And, like them, we wonder how to respond to the situation we are in. They already have decided to respond with hospitality, welcoming Jesus’ presence among them. A photo in the New York Times on March 1, 2025, of strings of festive lights hung amid Gaza’s rubble to mark this year’s beginning of the holy month of Ramadan spoke eloquently. Just garnering the energy to go on with normal life is, in itself, an act of courage and resistance.

But the crux of the story in Bethany is not located in the ordinary action, but in the extraordinary, isn’t it? Mary understands Jesus has placed himself in danger for their sakes and is certain that this special, fleeting moment must be marked. She, of all the disciples, recognizes what time it is. It is time to pour out all that she has kept in reserve. It is time

to fill the entire house with the fragrance of love and gratitude generously poured out.

What is the proper time and proper use for what *you* have kept in reserve?

What past examples from scripture, story, and history hold *anamnetic* power to be called forth for the challenges we face?

*Susan P. Thomas*

## Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday April 13, 2025

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 31:9–16 or 118:1–2, 19–29

Luke 19:28–40 or Luke 22:15–23:56

Philippians 2:5–11

Luke would have us know that two very different kinds of music came into Jerusalem that day, each of them entering through a gate on opposite sides of the city, each of them only the overture to a larger musical work that would unfold as the week went on. It was the beginning of Passover, and so Jerusalem's population had swelled with the arrival of thousands of Jews from all the surrounding regions, come to celebrate the high holy days and to make their sacrifices in the Temple. The Temple elite, obliged to uphold and support the Empire's policies, was on-edge, watching to make sure the crowds did not disturb "Pax Romana," the "Peace of Rome," as they (the leaders in the Temple) were charged with maintaining order in their religious community.

Although Luke does not say so explicitly, **historical records** would suggest that the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, may very well have entered Jerusalem through the **west gate** of the city that day, come with "all the king's horses and all the king's men" should there be any sign of unrest or trouble. While, **according to the story passed down in the community of faith**, through the **east gate** came a societal and political "nobody" named Jesus, a Jew himself, who had become a bit of a folk-hero among those in the Jewish community and beyond; those who had heard about or experienced Jesus' teaching, preaching, healing, multiplying of loaves, raising people from the dead, and challenging of the authorities in both the religious and political halls of power.

(Some of these Jesus-admirers and Jesus-followers had high hopes that Jesus would be able, by the power of God they had sensed in him, to overturn the power of Rome and restore Jerusalem to the "Shalom of God"... a kind of peace completely counter to that of "Pax Romana" led by Jesus, the "king of Peace").

When Luke wrote his Gospel in about 80 AD, it was a

decade or so after the destruction of the Temple at the hands of Rome, and the people in his fledgling community of faith (made up of both Jews and Gentiles) were struggling with questions related to essential identity markers as they sought to shape their lives in accordance with the way of Jesus; (i.e., "Which traditions and laws from Judaism were important to adhere to? Where was the dwelling place for Yahweh if the Temple no longer existed? What place did Gentiles have in the community of faith? What were the requirements for 'belonging?' What did it mean for one's life to follow Jesus?").

Luke wrote his entire Gospel to address these questions... But the part of his narrative we will center ourselves on here are the events that unfolded in Jerusalem during Jesus' last week. And were we to listen very carefully, we might catch a sense of the music woven throughout Luke's narrative; music that sounded something like this...

### *The Week Begins...*

Through the west gate of the city  
Pilate's army proved their brawn,  
Black boots marching, strident rhythm,  
voices raised in Empire's song.  
Horses heaving, breathing power,  
riders wielding swords and shields,  
Chanting cries of strength and victory,  
death to those who would not yield.

Those who witnessed this brute power  
heard the thrill of monied might,  
Systems built for markets' interest,  
those with status rich with rights.  
Trumpets blaring, triumph glaring,  
flags held high, aloft, unfurled,  
Music set in strict accordance  
with the values of the world.

Near the east gate of the city,  
voices rang in glad accord  
Singing, ringing, bringing welcome  
to a different kind of Lord.  
Humble people lifting voices  
as angels did at Jesus' birth,  
Offering praise to God's anointed,  
come to bring true peace on earth.

With joy their music filled the morning,  
notes ascending, bright as birds  
So to greet this one who entered,  
in whose heart God's Spirit stirred.  
And in that stirring made such music  
as had never been conceived,

Reaching back before beginnings,  
Love's first loving first received.

A brief interlude to speak of the music that "was" Jesus according to Luke...The music of God that had sounded since the beginning of creation...a music that was with Jesus and in him as he entered Jerusalem that day and as he moved through the events of the week...

Jesus' lineage traced to Adam,  
his family tree back to creation,  
Showing thus an earthbound arc,  
a Sacred promise of relation  
With all the world, God's reach stretched wide,  
Jesus taking deep inside  
God's music to be glorified,  
incarnate love personified...

And so, with tones of celloed depth,  
across his heart he drew the bow  
Giving every creature voice;  
both those above and those below.  
Every note and every cadence,  
every wail and every call,  
Sounding from God's deepest passion  
in the love-rent key of "all."

("All!" God cried to Abram's offspring,  
"through you all people blest will be."  
"All!" God cried through Prophets' longings,  
"all the world embraced by me."  
"Jew and Gentile, outcast, sinner, poor,  
imprisoned, lost, alone,  
All creation at the table,  
in my loving knowing 'home.'")

Jesus was this love-strung music  
from the depths of God's deep presence,  
Reaching back through Israel's story,  
singing themes of God's true essence,  
Daring, singing songs of "all"  
where no angels dared to tread,  
Touching lepers, freeing prisoners,  
raising people from the dead.

It was this music he was bearing  
as through the gates he came that day,  
Bringing gladness to the humble;  
to those in power, fear and dismay.  
So now we hear the storm clouds rumble,  
as 'cross his body drew the bow,

Stretching "all" beyond all measure,  
and love beyond where love can go.

*The dissonance grows...*

As Jesus played of Love's beginnings  
encompassing all earth and skies,  
And echoed deep the melodies  
once heard within the prophets' cries,  
There came from those in Temple finery  
sneaky, slipp'ry sharp attacks,  
Questions meant to rattle Jesus,  
catch him in a verbal trap.

They played a kind of docile "muzac,"  
(elevator-style perfected),  
The God whose reach encompassed "all"  
firmly, squarely thus rejected,  
Propping up a God instead  
who served their dreams of restoration,  
A regal, royal, Hallmark God  
with glittered love just for their nation.

Amid this "muzac" Jesus played  
in the love-rent key of "all,"  
Melodies of wind-blown Spirit  
filling streets and squares and hall,  
Jesus turning up-side down systems,  
tables, well-made schemes  
While from their slipp'ry subtle "muzac"  
came a deadly, darker theme...

A theme with underlying plans  
or asking Rome to play along  
Temple "muzac," Empire "muzac"  
joined together in a song  
Designed to silence he who dared  
to play a music wild with love  
A music joining earth and heaven,  
all things one, below, above.

A small interlude to hear the music Jesus played in preparation for what he knew was coming...

Knowing in his prophet's heart  
the coming rise of fear-filled power  
He heard the grating sounds of death  
grinding toward his final hour.  
So, taking bread and wine in hand  
to nourish those he called his own  
He sang the ancient freedom song of lamb  
and flesh and blood and bone,

A song in which he drew the bow  
 across the sinews of his heart,  
 Taking, breaking, blessing, giving  
 of himself the love-spent part,  
 And all were fed with grace and peace,  
 despite betrayals yet to come.  
 Despite denials, failures, sins,  
 the love of Jesus made them one.

And then the music turned to blues  
 as Jesus spent the night in prayer,  
 Reaching deep inside God's absence  
 for God's presence anywhere.  
 And having reached inside before  
 to hear the Spirit ever near,  
 He heard the song from God's own heart,  
 "I am with you, do not fear."

### The Arrest and Trial...

What music then can speak of things  
 that pierce the heart and take the breath?  
 What notes can sound to tell the tale  
 of Love's arrest and scourge and death?  
 When forces come in dark of night,  
 and betrayals come by way of kiss,  
 What melody or instrument could  
 carry horrors such as this?

Only grinding sounds of gears  
 moving toward a certain end  
 In a world where fear is king  
 and truth is trumped by lies, pretend.  
 When those in power plot together,  
 fixing games and cards and dice,  
 Their notes and tempos, scales and beats  
 move deftly on toward sacrifice.

Temple leaders, Pilate, Herod,  
 people watching from the side,  
 Soldiers, henchmen, frightened Peter  
 who in shame the Lord denied...  
 Accusations, violence,  
 cacophony and dissonance,  
 This the screeching sound surrounds  
 the King who stood in innocence.

A brief pause in the musical score to encourage readers to read closely Luke 23:6-25 to get a sense of the ways in which the Temple leadership, Pilate, Herod and people in the crowd all participated in the events that led to Jesus' crucifixion... Luke tells us that there were women beating their breasts and

wailing as they witnessed what was happening to Jesus, and others perhaps who had listened to Jesus teach and preach who stood silent, because, as Fred Craddock writes in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, "they were powerless before the forces of religion and government joined in the execution of Jesus." But it seems most of the others "got caught up at that hour in the muzac of power" and joined in the cry of "crucify."

And while it is true that neither Pilate nor Herod found the accusations of the Temple leadership grounds for crucifying Jesus, they acquiesced in the end to the will of the crowd, because of course, "those whose positions and privileges are predicated on everything remaining as it is" (Craddock) could not tolerate the potential threat Jesus was to "Pax Romana."

### The crucifixion...

The "muzac" then took on the sound  
 of flesh and bone impaled by nails,  
 While lots were cast and scoffers scoffed  
 and Jesus as a "king" was hailed.  
 "If you're a king, then act a king,  
 and call upon the God you know  
 To take you down, and save your skin,  
 and give us all a magic show."

But even then he reached inside  
 from where the song of Love had come,  
 The music that had moved and stirred  
 before creation had begun,  
 Every note and every cadence,  
 every wail, and every call,  
 Sounding from God's deepest passion  
 in the love-rent key of "all."

(That love-rent key that will not bow  
 to forces steeped in hate or fear  
 But takes them in and in that taking  
 draws the bow so all can hear  
 There is no place where Love is not,  
 no place removed from Love's full being,  
 Love stretched wide in mercy's song  
 for the sake of healing, freeing).

He drew that bow for those who'd come  
 to join with others in the cry,  
 And for those who'd played a part  
 in the plot to crucify.  
 He drew that bow for thief as well,  
 just like the father in the story,  
 Taking in his arms his son,  
 home again in love's full glory.

Even stones cried out that hour,  
 and sun and moon were drained of light,  
 All the Cosmos bent in sorrow,  
 sounds of wailing filled the night.  
 The Temple veil was also torn;  
 designed for keeping separation  
 Between the Holy Holy God  
 and the flesh of God's creation.

### Jesus' death...

It seemed the music ceased to sound  
 as Jesus took his final breaths,  
 The song of God's vast love for all  
 by pow'rs of hatred put to death.  
 No music then for those who grieved,  
 for those who plotted or deceived.  
 Only Jesus' Spirit riven, into God's full presence  
 given, into Love received.

### Silence... the end...

It was finished. So they said.  
 The king of Peace was dead and gone.  
 In a tomb his body lay, no more to sing  
 God's love-rent song  
 Of Love for all of God's creation,  
 a song of peace and liberation.  
 It was finished. So they said.  
 The king of Peace was really dead.

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A poem written by one of the women who had been present at Jesus' crucifixion and burial. She wrote it on Easter evening, after hearing the news of Jesus' resurrection...

Just before the last breath,  
 Just before the final gasp and sigh,  
 Just prior to the grip of death  
 Screeching through the starless sky,  
 His stretching into the breach  
 Of retching grief  
 Was the moment  
 When the movement  
 Toward Easter began...  
 That bow drawn deep  
 Across his love-strung frame  
 A music wild,  
 Unleashed,  
 Untamed.

### Shhh... listen.

*Elaine Hewes*

## Maundy Thursday April 17, 2025

**Exodus 12:1–4, (5–10), 11–14**

**Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19**

**1 Corinthians 11:23–26**

**John 13:1–17, 31b–35**

### Questions on Maundy Thursday

**W**hat do people bring to this service? The texts for Maundy Thursday contain three themes:

1. Remembering God's Passover to save the Hebrew people who were enslaved
2. Institution of the Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace, remembering and giving thanks
3. Caring for others with humility

We must recognize that this day is an important day for very devout people, as well as a mystery for those who find themselves in church on this day with little knowledge of The Story. Maybe they're with you to attend a first communion. And yet, how well do your members know this story?

My congregation has done a Passion Play on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Written for this congregation, it is directed by staff and acted by members and friends. The cast of more than twenty members learns a deeper understanding of the story, since many have been part of it for more than ten years. It is their Bible study during the preparation. And new cast members find it an entrance into community in the church. Pr. Nathan Roberts writes a script that is faithful to the text—and even contains a place or two for humor.

This production is possible because of the staff and members of this congregation. Without people who can do the costuming, set design, music, tech production, as well as the acting, we could not have done it in this way.

What could work for *your* context? How many actors? Would a purchased drama work better? (I have included a resource in the Good Friday "Preaching Helps".)

What does your community hold dear in this story? In the history of your congregation? In the story in the part of the country where you live? Everyone who enters your church has expectations... and, I hope, questions.

There is trouble in this story, trouble that will carry us into Good Friday and Holy Saturday until we come together on Easter morning. What do people need to hear this year, based on issues facing our nation? Who feels like the Hebrew people who came to Egypt for rescue, and now are entrapped in a slave system? When has your community needed rescue from torment, whether economic, or shared tragedy, or



weather/climate events, or community conflict (whether congregational or communal)? How have you been called to the Table to receive Jesus' body and blood as a reminder of God's forgiveness, call to mission, faithfulness, and salvation?

As a nation, we don't hold parades and memorial days with large community celebrations very often anymore, or the scale of these events has been scaled back. Where do we gather to mourn and name what we have lost? Where is it safe to say that life is hard, and I'm looking for a place that knows what I'm experiencing?

Isn't that the blessedness of Christian community? To know that it is a place where you can just show up, shed a tear, or a hand to help, or find a meal to ease your burden? Where you can go for the problems of the world to be lifted up in prayer, along with the burdens of daily life? Where you can find a home when other "homes" have been closed to you?

Holy Week invites us to cast our cares on the Lord, for God is faithful. That's the story of the Last Supper: God's faithfulness even in the most difficult of times. Jesus knew what he was facing, the betrayal before him, and the Empire that would silence him. It led to great suffering and death, which he overcame on Easter. For our sake.

Preach the story so people hear it for their own lives!

*Bonnie Wilcox*

## Good Friday April 18, 2025

**Isaiah 52:13–53:12**

**Psalm 22**

**Hebrews 10:16–25**

**John 18:1–19:42**

### Questions on Good Friday

**W**hat gives you hope in the darkest of times? I had a conversation last month with a lawyer, a treasured friend who is much-admired in his field. He told me, "My comfort and assurance come from God—not government officials or politicians. I want them to listen to me when I reach out. But I do not bow to the flag of the United States. I bow before Jesus." Words for all of us to live by.

"I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Hebrews 8:10b).

My two-year-old granddaughter is very quick to say, "Sorry," when she bangs her brother on the head with a toy. It is not hard work nor very meaningful at that age. But it establishes a pattern of seeking reconciliation and building life together in her family.

We are called to be faithful and forgiving people. Forgiving hurtful words and violent actions done to others; to those who've betrayed trust; to those who have stolen property or the affection of a spouse or partner. And to those who committed these and many other acts (sins) not listed here.

It is hard work, and not easily done.

Who taught you to say you're sorry... and mean it?

### *Psalm 22*

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When have you heard these words that cry, "I'm forgotten! You are my God! Why do you pay no notice to me?"

I've faced despair many times in my life—through infertility, then through divorce, and in smaller episodes, the challenges of being a pastor, a community member, and/or friend.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I spoke these words in the backyard of my congregation on the day I learned that my brother had died in a farm accident. My mother had died unexpectedly three weeks before. I couldn't take it. Too much loss for any of my family to handle.

And yet we did. God showed up in my forsaken time. Heard my cries of despair and pain. Surrounded me and my family with people who loved us. I had to find people who would share this news with my daughter, two of my nieces, and my sister. All of them needed transportation three hours south—the Minnesota contingent of our family needed to travel to NE Iowa. Each of us was picked up and helped to pack a few items. Someone arranged for a van from a church member to drive us all to join the rest of our family.

We were carried home for a family and community reunion we couldn't have anticipated. That compassionate carrying continued for a long time. Even now, twenty years later, there are friends who reach out on the anniversary of my brother's death, reminding me I'm loved, and my wonderful farmer brother is not forgotten.

The churches who ministered to us were not linked by denomination, but by a common witness of compassion and showing up when the world had broken us.

But God did not break my family. God showed up to cry with us. To accept the shaking fist I lifted to the sky, telling God I could not do this. To steer people our way who could share news of this loss with family members and offer transportation to a family in total shock. To gather some refreshments, and a car supplied with tissues for our tears, bottled water to replenish those tears, and some sustenance if we could keep food down.

We arrived at the family farm where cars and trucks

were parked everywhere. We were carried into the farmhouse where other family members were gathered, surrounded by the community who loved my brother and all of us.

My family returned to praising God in the days that followed. We praised God for the presence of the Holy through these friends and neighbors; for the gift of Jesus' church to take on our grief, our lament, and our thanksgiving; for the public witness of a community that shows up at hard times.

That's the public witness of Christ's church. That Christ shows up through these rituals, including the ritual of the church funeral meal. At a time when eating may be the last thing we want, the community brings food, as well as companionship, hugs, and mutual tears.

Our losses are personal *and* communal. Where else does community gather for times such as these?

The psalmist reminds us that our woes and complaints are heard by God, even the most devastating losses. For the gifts given, we give thanks to God in return.

Kate Bowler's work on God's action in the midst of grief and loss has provided beautiful words for this Good Friday, as we mourn the life of our Savior, Jesus Christ:

*A blessing for when you mourn  
what could have been (and it needs  
to feel okay to say that).*

Blessed are you, friend, sitting among the shards  
of what could have been.

It is broken now, that dream you loved,  
and it has spilled out all over the ground.

Blessed are you, dear one, letting your eyes  
look around and remember  
all the hope your dream once contained.  
All the love. All the beauty.

Blessed are you, telling your tears they can flow.  
Telling your anger it can speak.

Blessed are you when mourning is the holy work  
of the moment, for it speaks of what is real.

Blessed are you, letting this loss speak all  
its terrible truth to your soul.

Blessed are we who mourn, saying let us remain in  
grief's cold winter for as long as it takes,  
that mourning might be to our hearts  
the gentlest springtime.

*(from Kate Bowler's Good Enough)*

**John 18:1–19:42**

The Gospel reading for Good Friday is the very long key story of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, suffering and death on the cross. It is worth our time to read it every single year, as heartbreaking as it can be.

Why not present it as a Readers' Theater with candles extinguished throughout worship? One example is by the Rev. Shannon E. Sullivan of the United Methodist Church. She offers some liturgical elements along with monologues by individuals in the biblical story: <https://www.shannonesullivan.com/liturgies/goodfridaymonologues>.

Rev. Sullivan has created a work that can be offered by both male and female, young and old voices. Jesus' story is heard, experienced and retold by all of them. The texts from John are noted in each section, followed by a created monologue based on the story. If you go to Rev. Sullivan's website you will find John's passion account, translated by James H. Charlesworth with sensitivity to Jews, Judaism, Jesus' Jewishness, and the Jewish origins of Christianity.

People will hear with *new* ears when the Word is spoken by people from their congregation. I often add slides with some of the key verses highlighted or use illustrations for each segment in the reading. "Ah, Holy Jesus" (ELW 349) may be used where music is indicated. Enlist the aid of your musician.

The last monologue is from Mary Magdalene: "But then I remember his teachings. I remember how he spoke of a God who loves us, who calls us by name, who offers healing for the sick, and a God who weeps when we weep. God weeps with us now."

*Bonnie Wilcox*

**Vigil of Easter  
April 19, 2025**

**A rich smorgasbord of 12 Hebrew scripture passages  
to choose from**

**Romans 6:3–11**

**John 20:1–18**

*Editorial note: We are grateful to Justin Lind-Ayres for allowing us to reprint his Easter Vigil post from 2024.*

**Reflections on Vigil Texts**

"This is the night..." This ancient refrain punctuates the Vigil of Easter liturgy as God's salvation story for the world stretches out before God's people. In the holy dark, the divine, deliberative work of resurrection mysteriously and miraculously happens. Thus, the church gathers to remember, anticipate, and proclaim that *this is the night* Love has risen so that "we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

The smorgasbord of scripture readings—and in particular the appointed twelve Hebrew texts—provide an accounting of the wondrous narratives that shape our imagination about God’s power and presence. *This is the night* to retell the creation story or Jonah’s journey into the belly of the fish, the flood story or the exodus through the Red Sea, Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones or Daniel’s fiery furnace. There are countless creative ways to read and enact these stories together as a community of faith. With movement and props and a bit of flair, the stories come to life in the telling, resulting in a liturgy often beloved by children and adults alike. And the darkness of evening hours holds it all.

For many worshipping communities, the gospel acclamation is the time to turn up the lights in the worshipping space and sing out the Easter alleluias. This preparatory moment makes way for the gathered to hear John’s telling of the resurrection. It becomes the crescendo of the word section that points, finally, to God’s salvific work in the resurrected Christ. The sacraments of baptism and holy communion will sustain the crescendo in the light of Easter joy. But I wonder: if *this is the night* of mystery and miracle, perhaps the Vigil of Easter liturgy asks those assembled to hold the darkness longer, closer? And if not the liturgy, then the gospel itself and Mary Magdalene’s journey to the tomb?

John 20:1 is clear on the details: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” These simple yet significant specifics tell us that resurrection did indeed happen under the blanket of night, for the tomb was empty upon Mary’s starlit approach. What might it mean to preach this gospel with the lights kept dimmed enabling the “still dark” to linger in the hearts of the hearers? Could the setting of Mary Magdalene’s solo venture say more about the salvation of our God at work in the darkness? The appointed Vigil readings already offered up some of the biblical stories of God’s fondness of the dark: the darkness of the deep at creation (Genesis 1), the stormy cloud-cover during the forty days of the flood (Genesis 7—9), the divine cloud of darkness that enabled the Israelites’ water-crossing (Exodus 14), and Jonah’s God-moment whilst three-days in the inky gut of a fish. Perhaps *this is the night* the church experiences the truth of God’s holy darkness most clearly? And a sermon that speaks into the “still dark” of Mary Magdalene’s journey may help us to know more fully the beautiful mystery of resurrection promise.

I offer a few ideas for your consideration that may assist in this sermon angle.

First, the gospel acclamation, though anticipatory of the Easter proclamation, may provide a more subdued moment with its celebratory song. Namely, with lights kept low, the moment may call for less organ and brass and more antiphon

and acapella. For *this is the night* to savor the “still dark” of God’s working out our salvation. Some musical ideas include simple chants from the resource *Singing our Prayer*, including “In Silence We Wait” (17), “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful” (18), “Laudate Omnes Gentes” (22), or “Light and Darkness” (24). These sorts of pieces or others like them of your choosing will provide an acclamation of quiet praise that honors the quiet dark.

Another idea involves candles. With a preaching focus on the resurrection of Jesus that is discovered in the darkness, one may seek to kindle the light of Christ while extending the shadows of night. Traditionally, the Vigil of Easter liturgy begins with the lighting of the new fire and the blessing of a new pascal candle amid the declaration that Jesus is the one who gives the light of life to all the world. In the midst of the sermon, the light from the pascal candle could be passed among worshipers as Jesus is revealed to Mary Magdalene and, through her testimony, to us. Once the candles are lit, the assembly sings together then moves (carefully) to the baptismal font for a baptism or an affirmation of baptism. There the light of Christ burns bright, and Romans 6 is experienced in real time for *this is the night* the waters of promise shimmer in shadow and light.

And finally, the hymn of the day following the sermon can provide an emphasis on God’s work in the darkness experienced in the stories of faith. Brian Wren’s text in “Joyful is the Dark” (*All Creation Sings*, 1096) is an exemplary iteration on the theme. Imagine the flickering of the handheld candles as the assembly sings, “Joyful is the dark, coolness of the tomb, waiting for the wonder of the morning; never was that midnight touched by dread and gloom: darkness was the cradle of the dawning” (stanza 4). These words together with whole liturgy of the Vigil of Easter preach God’s salvation for us, for indeed *this is the night*.

*Justin Lind-Ayres*

## Easter April 20, 2025

**Acts 10:34–43 or Isaiah 65:17–25**

**Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24**

**1 Corinthians 15:19–26**

**Luke 24:1–12 or John 20:1–18**

### Engaging the Easter Gospel

I’m particularly grateful for Luke’s account of Easter this year. These days the world seems more topsy turvy than ever. Up is down. Truth is fiction. Lies are facts. Love is weakness and “empathy is a sin.” A bishop preaches on Jesus’ teaching about mercy and is called “a snake” who “hates God and His people”

and deserves hatred in return. Lutherans serving neighbors in need are accused of “money laundering.” The Greek word in Luke’s Easter account that comes to mind is *leros*, (24:11) the root of our English word “delirious.” In the face of increasing perversion, Luke gives us the delirium of Easter.

How so? The Easter morning scene at the tomb begins and ends with a group of women. We don’t know precisely who they all are, except that they are the ones who were present at the crucifixion, who followed to see where Jesus was buried, who prepared burial spices and who rested on the sabbath. These women go to the tomb at the break of day with spices to complete the burial. We don’t know their exact number, but it was more than Mary Magdalene who appears alone in John and with one other companion in Matthew and Mark. Luke names a few of them at the end of his account: “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them.”

Their first emotion at the tomb is not grief as in John or fear as in Mark and Matthew. They do not approach the tomb with anxiety about how the stone will be removed as in Mark. There is no terrifying earthquake as in Matthew. By contrast, the women in Luke arrive undramatically to discover that the tomb is open, and Jesus’ body is absent. Their response is perplexity. What they find does not make sense to them. The fact that the stone is rolled away and Jesus’ body is missing does not indicate to them that he is risen. The empty tomb does not bring them to faith.

Easter begins to dawn for them when two men in dazzling clothes suddenly appear. Later, on the road to Emmaus, we are told that the two are angels. Rather than telling the women not to be afraid as the shining messengers at the tomb do in Mark and Matthew, these angels offer no assurance. Instead, they chide the women: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you... the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again?” Now, the women remember Jesus’ words. We see that it is not the empty tomb, but the Word remembered that breaks through. “The Word of God, whenever it comes, comes to change and renew the world,” said Martin Luther<sup>2</sup> and here we see that Word at work, bringing the women to faith and sending them forth in witness. Unlike in Mark and Matthew, the women are not commanded to go and tell disciples. As Fred Craddock notes: “The women are not errand runners for disciples. They are disciples.”<sup>3</sup>

The women’s perplexity has lifted, but not so for others who do not believe what the women have to say and take

it as *leros*, variously translated as an idle tale, foolishness, nonsense, delusion, insanity, a mere fancy. The women must be out of their minds, delirious. The preacher who wishes can likely come up with many examples of gaslighting another’s truth, of dismissing or demonizing what a woman has to say by labeling it as insanity or evil as occurred with Bishop Budde, women labeled and burned as witches, Jesus himself considered out of his mind by his own family. The film “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” where Jack Nicholson plays a Christ figure is a compelling example where the inmates of an insane asylum demonstrate kindness and compassion while those in charge are cruel and heartless. It even ends with baptismal imagery when Nicholson’s sacrifice leads one inmate to break free by pulling a water fountain out of the floor, sending water gushing everywhere as he crashes through the bars of a window and runs free.

Luke ends this part of Easter with verse 12 as Peter arrives at the empty tomb and ends up going home still wondering rather than sharing the women’s faith. There is controversy over whether verse 12 was a later addition that does not properly belong to the text. I like it because it may speak to where many in our pews find themselves—going home genuinely perplexed and wondering like the women at the start and Peter at the end of this story. Luke allows room for our uncertainty and confusion. The women need to hear Jesus’ words again as do we, perhaps, again and again.

The world-renewing Word that propels the women forth reminds us that Easter is a verb, too. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins gets it perfectly: “Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us.”<sup>4</sup> If we bring Easter to the dimness and actual insanity around us, perhaps some who continue to wonder may yet be moved to join the delirium of Easter.

I have chosen to focus on Luke, but John remains an ever-gorgeous choice. The beginning, “While it was still dark,” is not only appropriate for an Easter vigil. It may be even more significant for those arriving to bright sanctuaries filled with lilies and alleluias while it is deeply gloomy in their hearts. John opens space for Easter grief for those who feel life has taken away what they most loved and/or longed for. Some may identify with Mary who remains weeping at the tomb, refusing to diminish her sense of loss, and unable to see clearly through her tears, taking Jesus for a gardener. Easter then comes in being seen and known and named with love.

*Heidi Neumark*

2. *Luther’s Werke, Weimar Ausgabe*, vol. 18: 626.

3. Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*.

4. From Hopkins’ poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland.”

## Second Sunday of Easter

### April 27, 2025

Acts 5:27–32

Psalms 118:14–29

Revelation 1:4–8

John 20:19–31

#### Engaging the Texts

All four passages for this day highlight the transformative power of God that moves us from **fear to faith, doubt to testimony, and death to life**. In **Acts 5**, the apostles boldly witness despite opposition, just as **Thomas moves from doubt to proclamation in John 20**. **Psalm 118** and **Revelation 1** celebrate God's victory over death, echoing Jesus' presence among his fearful disciples, bringing **peace, assurance, and new life**. Together, these texts affirm that Christ meets us **where we are**, overcomes barriers of fear and doubt, and empowers us to go forth as witnesses to the resurrection.

Most preachers will settle in on the Gospel. You've heard this before, but we've done Thomas dirty. Year after year, the lectionary hands us this story, and Thomas gets saddled with the nickname Doubting Thomas—as if doubt were some spiritual failure. But let's set the record straight. Thomas wasn't asking for anything more than what the other disciples had already received. They got to see Jesus' wounds, so why should he be expected to believe without the same experience?

The real problem isn't doubt; it's that we've misunderstood faith. Many of our people have been taught that faith is about accepting resurrection as historical fact, that belief is a tidy intellectual assent. But scripture—and our actual lived experiences show us something else. Faith isn't about certainty; it's about trust.

Paul Tillich puts it this way: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." (*Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, p 116.) If faith were certainty, it wouldn't be faith at all. The disciples weren't exactly radiating confidence in the resurrection. They weren't out in the streets proclaiming good news. They were locked away in fear. And yet, Jesus shows up—wounded, still bearing the marks of crucifixion—and speaks peace to them. Not certainty. Not explanations. Just peace.

And that's what he offers Thomas, too. He doesn't shame him. He invites him: *Here, put your hands in my wounds*. And that's where faith is born—not in airtight theological arguments, but in the raw, wounded places of life where Christ still shows up.

We want a faith that floats above suffering, but the gospel gives us a faith that dives straight into it. That's why, centuries later, we still find Jesus—not in easy answers—but in the

places where wounds are deep. Where hope seems impossible. Where people, against all odds, rise.

Thomas isn't the exemplar of faith's failure; he's faith's model. He shows us that doubt and faith are woven together, and that Jesus isn't afraid of our uncertainty. The miracle of resurrection isn't diminished because the first witnesses doubt it. The miracle is made even more glorious when even in their doubt, Jesus still comes to them. And to us.

#### Pastoral Reflections

Almost every year, someone sneaks up to me after Easter Sunday, lowers their voice, and asks: "Do you really believe all this stuff?" They want to know if they're the only ones who say "*Christ is risen indeed*" in the morning but by brunch start wondering if they really meant it.

Here's the truth: belief isn't static. It shifts, it falters, it deepens. And if we're honest, most of us, like the character Woody Nickel in *West with Giraffes*, (a novel by Lynda Rutledge) live in that space between belief and doubt. "*I've lived long enough*," Woody says, "*to believe, then not believe, then believe and not believe more times than I can count*." About faith, Woody reflects, "*Denying it never got in the way of relying on it*."

As preachers, we do a disservice when we treat faith as a possession rather than a process. We can assure people that we can expect to doubt. We can expect to struggle to "believe all this stuff." That's why we strive to preach a faith that can hold up under real life—a faith that doesn't require blind certainty, but a deep, gut-level trust.

Jesus doesn't demand that Thomas get his theology straight before he shows up for him. He doesn't require the disciples to have an ironclad belief system before breathing peace into their fear. Instead, Jesus meets them where they are—wounds and all. And if that's how Jesus treats doubt, maybe we should too.

We preach to people who are looking for faith in the middle of their wounds. People who are desperate for a resurrection that means something—because life is hard, and the world is a mess, and hope is no small thing. Our job isn't to convince them of a set of facts. It's to proclaim that Jesus shows up, even behind locked doors. Even in the deepest wounds. Even in our doubt.

Because, in the end, Thomas didn't just doubt—he also touched. He reached out, put his hands in the wounds, and found Christ waiting there. And maybe that's the kind of faith we all need.

Not certainty. Just enough trust to reach out—and discover that we're not alone.

Jeff Sartain

## Third Sunday of Easter

### May 4, 2025

Acts 9:1–6, (7–20)

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11–14

John 21:1–19

### Engaging the Texts

These passages together affirm that resurrection is not just about believing—it's about being changed. Saul and Peter both fail but are called again. The disciples' empty nets are filled. Mourning is turned into joy. Worship of the risen Christ moves us into mission. Jesus meets us in our failures, restores us in love, and calls us to follow—again and again.

The disciples in John 21 are not triumphant. They are not bold evangelists, spreading resurrection joy to the world. They are back to square one—back to fishing, back to the lives they had before Jesus called them. And they aren't even good at that anymore—because after an entire night of labor, they have caught nothing.

Then, just as morning breaks, a stranger on the shore calls out: "Try the other side."

They do. And suddenly, their nets are overflowing.

It's a moment of recognition. John, the beloved disciple, is the first to put it together: "It's the Lord." And Peter—impulsive, passionate, messy Peter—doesn't hesitate. He throws himself into the water, desperate to get to Jesus.

But when he arrives, Jesus isn't waiting with rebuke or disappointment. Jesus is making breakfast. He already has fish and bread on the fire. He doesn't need their catch, but he invites them to add to the meal anyway: "*Bring what you have. Let's eat together.*"

Then, after they are fed, Jesus turns to Peter—the same Peter who denied him three times—and gives him another set of three: "Do you love me? Feed my sheep."

Not as a punishment. Not as a guilt trip. But as restoration. Peter denied him, and yet Peter is still called. Peter failed, and yet Peter is still chosen. This story isn't just about fish. It's about what resurrection actually means. The risen Christ does not erase the wounds of the past, but he redeems them. He does not pretend failure didn't happen, but he offers a new future anyway. This is the gospel of one more try.

When we are exhausted, when we think it's over, when we're ready to give up—Jesus meets us on the shore with grace and nourishment and purpose. Try again. Love again. Serve again. And maybe most importantly—Jesus does not ask Peter to prove his love through words or emotion. He asks him to show it through action: "Feed my sheep. Care for my people. Keep going."

We know what it's like to feel like nothing is working. We know what it is like to do the same things over and over, hoping for a different result. And yet, in those moments, the gospel calls:

Try again. Cast the nets one more time. See what grace can do.

### Pastoral Reflections

There are days when faith feels like an empty net.

We show up. We do the work. We love, advocate, speak out, serve, protest, pray—and some days, it feels like nothing changes. We haul in the nets, and they come up empty. And we wonder: "*Why am I still doing this?*"

The church, at its best, is a people who persist. Who keep showing up. Who keep casting the nets, even when the night has been long and fruitless. But let's be honest—sometimes, we're just tired. The disciples were tired, too.

They had seen the risen Jesus with their own eyes, felt his breath on their faces (John 20:19-29), and yet they still didn't know what to do next. So, they went back to what was familiar. They went back to the boats, the nets, the old routines. And yet, even in their exhaustion, Jesus met them there. This is what we need to remind our people—Jesus meets us where we are. He meets us in our weariness. He meets us in our confusion. He meets us in the in-between, when we're not sure what's next. And he doesn't come with shame or disappointment—he comes with breakfast.

This is a word preachers need, too. Because let's be real—sometimes we are the ones hauling in empty nets. We preach and wonder if anyone is listening. We pour ourselves into ministry and still see systems of injustice grinding on. We show up for people who don't always show up for us. And yet, Jesus still stands on the shore, still calls us forward, still says: "I know you're tired. But try again."

That's not to say there aren't times to rest. The work of faith is long-haul work, and part of perseverance is knowing when to step back and let someone else row the boat for a while. But this story reminds us that when the time comes to move forward, Jesus doesn't send us out alone. He feeds us first. He meets our needs before asking us to meet the needs of others.

So, to those who are tired, wondering if it's worth it...

- To the preacher who wonders if their words still matter—preach one more time.
- To the activist who is tired of writing letters that seem to go nowhere—write one more time.
- To the people who have prayed and prayed and still don't have answers—pray one more time.

And for those who simply need to rest—Jesus makes room for that, too. Because this is not about our relentless effort. It is about God’s relentless grace.

The nets will fill. The table will be set. And Jesus will say once again: Follow me.

*Jeff Sartain*

## Fourth Sunday of Easter May 11, 2025

**Acts 9:36–43**

**Psalm 23**

**Revelation 7:9–17**

**John 10:22–30**

### Engaging the Texts

Themes of hope and assurance run through the texts on this “Good Shepherd” Sunday. In Acts, we meet Tabitha, a dedicated disciple who falls ill and dies. Of note, this is the only time the female form of ‘disciple’ is used in the whole of the New Testament. Presumably, the disciples in Joppa hear that Peter healed a bed-ridden man in nearby Lydda (9:32-35) and ask him to come to Tabitha’s bedside. The request is made in a way that implies they are hopeful Peter can do something about the illness or death of Tabitha. She is beloved by the widows she served, who surround her body and display the material items she made for them. Reminiscent of Jesus’ raising of Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:49-56), which Peter witnessed first-hand, Peter directs everyone to leave the room before praying. His prayer reminds the hearers of the story that Peter does not act alone. Like Jesus in Luke 8, Peter then commands the dead one to “get up” (v. 40). This miracle leads many to believe.

Psalm 23’s vivid imagery inspires calm and comfort. A lush meadow. Still waters. A protective and providing shepherd. The poet does not deny that times of threat, sadness, and distress are part of life in the shepherd’s herd (v. 4). The promise comes in the protection and comfort of the shepherd’s rod—keeping evildoers at bay, and the staff—keeping the sheep close at hand. The image of goodness and mercy “following” the author is not one of a passive meandering (v. 6). Rather, the Hebrew word *radaph* evokes active pursuit. The Lord’s goodness and mercy/kindness will chase after the sheep.

The Revelation text is an interlude before the opening of the seventh seal. In this book of unveiling, the author writes to believers trying to survive under intense oppression by the Roman empire, urging them to resist and refuse to succumb to the empire’s ways of death. In this scene, we see a

diverse multitude praising the Lamb. This group of heavenly worshipers experienced the “great ordeal” (v. 14) and now are sheltered by the Lamb, lacking in nothing, finding complete safety in the presence of their shepherd.

In this section of John, Jesus calls himself the “good shepherd” (10:11). Jesus’ challengers ask him to speak plainly about his identity. Jesus’ response, “I have told you” (v. 25), isn’t exactly true. He hasn’t told them he is the Messiah directly (John’s messianic secret). Jesus doesn’t state his identity at this time either, but he does describe his relationship to the sheep and that relationship, given by the Father, is something that no one can “snatch” away (vv. 28-29).

### Pastoral Reflections

Hope and assurance are always needed, and certainly more so for many after months of a new administration bringing chaos, fear, and disillusionment to many people’s lives. There is certainly hope in the revivification of Tabitha, though it can feel too good to be true to those who have lost loved ones, jobs, or even their identities in the last few months. Preachers may find more interest in the person of Tabitha—the only woman labeled a “disciple” in the New Testament. Presumably a woman of wealth and means, she chose to use her resources to aid the widows. The ones who could give nothing in return, except for community.

Preachers serving communities who have been in particular distress can find rich possibilities in Psalm 23. Has your community been through “the valley of the shadow of death” recently? Are you in it right now? What does it feel like? Speaking this promise of the shepherd’s protection and comfort, even when one can’t see it can be powerful. Like this psalmist, the preacher can recall times when the community has been brought through the valley. Holy memory provides comfort and promise.

The preacher who chooses to tackle Revelation must of course be careful to provide plenty of historical context and education on the apocalypse genre. This text has excellent preaching possibilities for our time. The image of the multitude that crosses earthly lines and boundaries is a witness to God’s radical inclusion. The note that this multitude has been through a great ordeal speaks to the great trials listeners experience in their lives. The image of God wiping away every tear is comforting and hopeful in a time when countless tears have been shed.

In John, the hope and assurance are found in Jesus’ description of his relationship with the sheep. Jesus knows his sheep. Jesus is the doer, the actor. The giver of eternal life. We listen, we follow, we receive life. The vivid image of someone trying to “snatch” (vv. 28-29) the sheep away from Jesus is striking. Jesus fiercely protects his sheep. What or who is attempting to snatch us away from the source of life? People

in our communities may very well be threatened with being snatched away from their families and lives because of a lack of proper documentation. Or, if that is not your community's experience, hopelessness, despair, and complacency threaten to snatch us away. How does Jesus hold on to us? Through community? Through the renewal found in the Lord's Supper? Through worship?

*Abby Ferjak*

## Fifth Sunday of Easter May 18, 2025

**Acts 11:1–18**

**Psalm 148**

**Revelation 21:1–6**

**John 13:31–35**

### Engaging the Texts

**A**cts brings the expansion of God's community to the forefront. We hear a retelling of Peter's vision and experience with Cornelius from chapter 10. The church in Jerusalem takes issue with Peter on two points: kosher dietary practices and circumcision. Must Gentiles adhere to Jewish ritual practices first before joining the believers? Peter defends himself by carefully recounting everything, noting that he received a vision but also that the Gentile man had received an angelic message (v. 13). This new revelation, then, is from God, not simply a whim or opinion of Peter. Peter's critics in Jerusalem are compelled by the story and the action of the Holy Spirit. After a brief silence, they enthusiastically endorse the full inclusion of Gentiles in God's plan (v. 18).

Psalm 148 presents a far-reaching hymn of praise. All beings and creation are prompted to praise the Lord. The creation of the sky, sun, moon, and those things even above the heavens are to praise God for God's creative power (v. 5). Then, the psalmist launches into a long and extensive list of earthly creatures and creations ranging from sea monsters to hail to princes and rulers—all prompted to praise the Lord for the Lord's splendor and strength (vv. 13-14).

In the concluding chapters of Revelation, the final judgment has taken place and God has destroyed evil. Now, God renews creation. This new creation comes to earth, and God tabernacles with mortals (v. 3). Once again, we hear of God wiping away tears (7:17, 21:4), a compassionate image. Death, mourning, and crying are no more in the new creation, which is ongoing (v. 5).

The John passage takes place in the context of the Last Supper, at the beginning of the "Book of Glory." This is the beginning of the farewell discourse. At this point, Judas' betrayal has been predicted (v. 21) and he has fled the room

(v. 30), but not before Jesus washed his feet and fed him. Immediately after this, Jesus will predict Peter's denial (v. 38). Now that God has been glorified, Jesus' time to leave his disciples is close. Jesus speaks tenderly, calling them "little children" (v. 33). He tries to prepare them for his absence and his new commandment is to love one another as he has loved them: by washing feet, by laying down his life (13:13-15, 15:12-14). The command is specific, to love one another. In John 3:16 Jesus' love is widened to embrace the world; here Jesus calls his disciples to love those around the table. Though Jesus must leave them, they will not be abandoned. This kind of love is how the world will identify them as Jesus' disciples (v. 35).

### Pastoral Reflections

Themes of God's ongoing creation and love run through today's readings. Acts provides the preacher with not only an interesting story that congregants may never have heard, but also an important message for our world. At a time when lines that separate and keep people apart are bigger and bolder than recent memory, Peter's vision of a radically inclusive community preaches. The preacher should be careful not to dismiss the importance of certain rituals for Jewish culture and faith. Rather, in a time when the most powerful people in our world are actually shutting people out, denying people's identities, erasing historical and present atrocities, and insisting on alignment with an exclusivist ideology, Peter's witness to God's radical inclusion and God's ever-expanding creation is more than needed.

Psalm 148 lifts up all of God's creation, reminding us that all of creation—not just humans—are part of God's redemption and renewal. We are reminded of the power of creation—to bring life and to destroy. All this power comes from God. The psalm provides a beautiful display of images for a sermon on caring for creation. God's love for creation is apparent as seen all around us, and as stewards we have an important role in caring for—and being renewers of—creation.

Revelation gives the preacher a beautiful image of renewal to explore. A poignant moment could be the acknowledgment that to get to this new creation, destruction first took place. However, destruction is not the end. God's love is displayed in the renewal of all things, and in God's dwelling with and among the people. This text provides one of the most hopeful lines in all scripture: "See, I am making all things new" (v. 5). In a time when many can only see destruction all around, this is a needed promise: of renewal, of a God that is, in fact, *right now*, making all things new.

Those who attended any Maundy Thursday worship events heard this text from John only a few weeks ago. We can never be reminded too often of this command. Taken out of its larger context, Jesus' new command is... nice. Be



not mistaken, this is a command about *real* love. Hard love. The kind of love we don't actually want to embody. Consider how Jesus loved his disciples: washing feet, feeding the ones who will betray and deny – and knowing it the whole time. Jesus loved his disciples by laying down his life for them. Who would we truly love like that? Most of us, if we are honest, would name maybe one or two people—a spouse, a child, a parent. What is the challenge for your community in this command to love in uncomfortable and risky ways?

*Abby Ferjak*

## Sixth Sunday of Easter May 25, 2025

**Acts 16:9–15**

**Psalm 67**

**Revelation 21:10, 22–22:5**

**John 14:23–29**

### Engaging the Texts

There are three compelling texts this Sunday, all worthy of a sermon. But I am turning my attention to the Acts text about Lydia, knowing you may decide to choose Revelation or John. It's distressing that the women who were so prominent in the resurrection accounts in all four gospels disappear in the book of Acts, except for a brief mention of Jesus' mother in Acts 1:14. So whenever a woman appears, I hope we'll pay attention. Many commentators over the centuries, most of them men, have described Lydia. She was so moved by Paul's testimony that she and her whole household were baptized. It's clear that Lydia was a woman of means for she was a seller of purple cloth, a sign of her wealth. Not only that, but she was head of a household. Thus, it's clear that the first convert to Christianity on European soil was a wealthy businesswoman who owned a home large enough to become Paul's headquarters in Philippi. Lydia's story paves the way for the expansion of Christianity (and an affirmation of global capitalism!)

Or perhaps this interpretation is the result of *faulty intelligence*. What happens when we question some of the assumptions that have shaped Lydia's story? Ivoni Richter Reimer, a Brazilian New Testament scholar, asks that question in her book *Women in the Acts of the Apostles*. So, let's go down to the river with Paul:

On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. (16:13)

What was this place of prayer (*proseuche*)? Many men have seen this as an outdoor place where women gather, a sort of ecclesiastical picnic, waiting for real worship to begin somewhere else. Yet, within the New Testament and in many inscriptions outside the Bible, *proseuche* is translated as “synagogue.” (Reimer, 89) Even the footnote in the Oxford Study Bible says the place was “probably a synagogue.” Probably, then, it was a real worship service, even though no men are mentioned. Whatever it was, Paul spoke to the women—he didn't wait for more authentic worshippers to show up!

“A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening...” *Lydia*. She came from Thyatira, a city in the province of Lydia. Had she once been a slave, named after the province itself? Wherever she got her name, Lydia was a “god-fearer,” a Gentile woman drawn to the Jewish religion. We don't know what Paul said, only that God opened Lydia's heart when she heard him. We strain to hear more, but the text takes a big leap: “When she and her household were baptized...” Had she and her household made a confession of faith or studied the Catechism? Some things we will never know.

But we *do* know Lydia had a “household.” There is no mention of a man. If she had a husband, surely the text would have noted that. Perhaps she was a widow who lived with her children. Or, as Reimer suggests, her household may have included some of the women gathered at the place of prayer. (Reimer, 110) I'm not suggesting this was a feminist commune but it's not far-fetched to see a group of women working together in a trade, living together in a household. Whoever was in her house, she made room for more, saying to Paul, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” Lydia is one of very few women who speak in the book of Acts. Isn't it true that poor people are often the most generous in hospitality?

But wasn't Lydia a woman of wealth? Maybe. Maybe not. Most interpreters have been certain because a dealer in purple cloth would have to be rich. After all, purple was the color of royal robes, a luxury fabric. Yet, Matthew 27:28 refers to “soldier's purple”—a cheaper variety of purple made from vegetable dyes rather than the costly *purpura* made from a certain sea snail. (Reimer, 1021) Remember: the Roman soldiers mocked Jesus by dressing him in cheap purple or scarlet. Does anyone imagine that Pilate would have given the soldiers his royal robe to mock Jesus?

Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth. Most likely she also dyed the cloth that she sold. It's not impossible to believe that Lydia and other women came from Thyatira to sell their dyed goods in Philippi—like immigrant women selling Guatemalan sweaters in a New York City street fair, several of them living together in a small walk-up apartment. From her

painstaking research Reimer concludes: these were women who had done hard and difficult work. Even before the arrival of Paul, these women had shared work and religious life in common.

### Pastoral Reflections

When women gather at the river strange things often happen. Like that time when an Egyptian princess and two Hebrew slave women crossed the boundaries of race and class and religion to save the life of a Hebrew baby. Strange things happen when women gather (even if there isn't a river).

It happened during the civil war in Liberia. In April 2003 Christian and Muslim women crossed religious boundaries and said, "enough is enough." They formed the Peace-builders Network. A young Lutheran woman named Leymah Gbowee was one of the courageous leaders. These women laid on their bellies on the runway at Monrovia airport for all who passed by to see. Finally, they pushed for a meeting with President Charles Taylor. He offered them chairs; they sat on the floor. He offered them \$5000; they refused money, asking instead for a place at the negotiating table.<sup>5</sup> One Lutheran missionary reported, "Of course things are bad in Liberia, but there is hope. The Liberian women are protesting for peace." (Eva Jensen, "Lutheran Liberian Women Unify for Peace," *Lutheran Women Today* [January/February 2004])

Long ago, at a place beside the river, Lydia and her household became leaders of the Jesus movement in Philippi. An immigrant from Thyatira welcomed a traveling preacher named Paul into her home. From that day on, *proseuche* would never be the same. That's what happens when women gather beside the river, praying in their own words and daring to proclaim the good news beyond the gates.

Barbara K. Lundblad

## Ascension of the Lord May 29, 2025

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47 or Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

### Engaging the Texts

Ascension Day always falls on a Thursday on the fortieth day after Easter. The timing is based on Acts 1:3 which tells us that the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples

"during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." Congregations that do not have Ascension Day services often move the commemoration to the following Sunday. Whether Thursday or Sunday, the Acts account is too important to miss. The disciples' question is urgent: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" The question indicates that the disciples are still confused about Jesus' mission. Throughout his life, Jesus kept saying, "The kingdom of God has come near"—and it was quite clear Jesus didn't mean a nation-state. After telling the disciples they cannot know the time, we hear one of the biggest little words in scripture: "**But.**" That word usually marks an important shift, an alternative way of thinking. Here, that little word changes the focus from speculative time to present-tense time. The focus also shifts away from Jesus to the disciples: "But *you* will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon *you*; and *you* will be my witnesses" (italics added). Don't spend your time trying to discern God's mind; rather, believe that you are called to carry on the ministry of Jesus, empowered by the same Holy Spirit that anointed him back in Luke 4.

The Gospel reading from Luke 24 also tells the ascension story with a slightly different emphasis. In this ending to the resurrection story, Jesus "opened [the disciples'] minds to understand the scriptures." He had done the same thing as he walked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Would they have recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread if they hadn't heard him open the scriptures? Part of the disciples' call is to continue this work, opening the scriptures. That call has been passed down through a long chain of disciples to you and me.

After he said this, "Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." (1:8) The disciples stood there watching and suddenly two men in white robes appeared. They asked what must have seemed a silly question: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Wouldn't YOU stand looking up toward heaven if you had seen Jesus rising up? There was another time when two men in dazzling clothes appeared to the women at the empty tomb. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they asked the women. Their question must have seemed absurd, for the women had not come looking for the living, but to pay respects to the dead.

Jesus doesn't seem to be where he's supposed to be. He was not in the tomb, but risen and gone to Galilee. In today's story, Jesus was no longer on earth, but risen beyond human sight. We might begin to believe that to be with Jesus means to be somewhere other than where we are now. We, too, are left wondering.

### Pastoral Reflections

We might think that the message of this story is: "What

5. The activism of the Liberian women is featured in the documentary film "Pray the Devil Back to Hell." Leymah Gbowee was one of three women to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

goes up must come down.” **But** – ah, remember what Jesus said? “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” You will be my witnesses here and now in Jerusalem...and “to the ends of the earth.” Which may be where you are now. So rather than staring up at the clouds, we are called to believe a down-to-earth word: “The One who went up is still around.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a deep sense of Christ’s presence here on the ground. “The body of Christ takes up space on the earth,” he wrote in *Cost of Discipleship*. That is, we do not have to leave this earth to be with Christ, but Christ continues to be present with us in the power of the Spirit. Bonhoeffer goes on, “A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities... that is all. But the incarnate Christ needs not only ears or hearts, but living people who will follow him.” The body of Christ takes up space on the earth.

Sometimes, it’s still easier to keep looking up there or somewhere other than where we are – especially if we think of the Church as the body of Christ. We see so many blemishes, so many things wrong. Perhaps you’ve heard people say, “Show me a church where ministers aren’t self-serving, where people aren’t hypocritical, where love is genuine, and I’ll join that church.” Maybe you’ve said that yourself. **But**, we’ll have to wait a long time for this perfect church. Such a church takes up no space on this earth.

Bonhoeffer’s last written sermon was “preached” from prison for the baptism of his namesake Dietrich Bethge, son of his dear friends Eberhard and Renata Bethge. Bonhoeffer was in prison so he couldn’t be at that service, but sent a sermon 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...we can be Christians today in only two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action...

Prayer and action, taking space here on the earth. And remember: the One who went up is still around.

*Barbara K. Lundblad*

## Seventh Sunday of Easter June 1, 2025

**Acts 16:16–34**

**Psalm 97**

**Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21**

**John 17:20–26**

All worshippers of images are put to shame ... For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods.

—Psalm 97:7a, 9

### Completely One

The setting for Jesus’ words in John 17 is the upper room in Jerusalem on the last night of his life. Following a simple last supper with his friends, he had taken up a bowl of water and a towel and, to the mingled bafflement and embarrassment of his disciples, had begun to wash their feet. This, he said, was a token of the new commandment he had given them to love one another. What follows, in this most poignant moment just before departing for the garden in which he would be handed over by one of his own, is Jesus leading them in a chapter-long prayer, traditionally called his “high priestly prayer.” It’s been suggested that it might better be thought of as his “shepherd’s prayer” since Jesus is not praying for himself but for the ones God has entrusted to him—the “little flock” of the appropriate and beautifully simple hymn, “Have No Fear, Little Flock” (*ELW* #764).

Three times in these few closing verses of Jesus’ shepherd’s prayer he is found praying for something we might not have expected and for which we likely do not find ourselves praying all that often: oneness or unity. His prayer to his *abba* on behalf of his followers is that “they may all be one...so that they may be one as we are one,” and finally, “that they may become completely one” (vv. 21–23). According to Robert Smith, “Oneness is a central symbol in John’s great storehouse of images,” and he goes on to note how in various passages in John’s Gospel “one” and “oneness” are held up by Jesus as a mark of the salvation he has come to bestow. Here in this moment of leave-taking from his disciples, Smith believes, Jesus—in praying “that the disciples may be ‘one’ is asking that the love binding the Father and the Son may spill over onto the disciples. ... Being a disciple therefore means embodying the love of God. It means being filled with the life of Jesus Christ (v. 26) and taking up the corrosive, divisive forces of the world. ... Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead to make all people ‘one,’ to bind all to divine, life-giving love” (Smith, *Wounded Lord*, [Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2009], 158-159).

What's more, from the perspective of redaction criticism, it's good to be aware that the Johannine churches likely needed to hear such a message of unity from Jesus in the face of the chronic divisiveness they were experiencing. Here Fr. Raymond Brown's work is suggestive, when, for example, he refers frankly to their "one-upman-ship" as it centered on their high Christology that they likely found missing in other apostolic Christian communities that, in comparison, did not proclaim the "preexistence of Jesus and his origins from above" in quite the same fashion. The fact that Brown chose to sub-title his influential book *The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979) says it all in highlighting the contentiousness and quasi-sectarian milieu in which the Johannine community itself grew up amid a church often at odds with itself. For the Jesus of John's Gospel to so fervently pray for the oneness of his followers lent magisterial force to the efforts to hold together an already fissiparous "community of the beloved disciple" (Brown's book's title, see pp. 84-85) on Jesus' own authority.

It's not surprising that Jesus' rhetorically redundant prayer for unity finds itself both inspiration for and proof text of the modern ecumenical movement for more visible unity especially since Vatican II. Here the focus on the unity of the church as both God's gift and our responsibility in the power of the Spirit is in part to complete Jesus' full petition "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me. ..." (v. 23). Churches committed to the ecumenical movement have taken this to mean that embracing the God-given unity of the church for which Jesus prayed is one way of reducing the scandal of a divided church's witness in the world.

I have been a long-time laborer in the trenches of ecumenical work: leading a local Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogue for many years, serving on the national Lutheran/Reformed Coordinating Committee leading to full communion, living as a resident fellow at a Benedictine abbey's ecumenical institute, serving various ecumenical and interfaith agencies, but most of all being pastor to congregations that embraced their own sense of the "catholicity of the parish" as full participants in the breadth and depth of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church historically, liturgically, and globally. Over these many years, Jesus' shepherd's prayer has been answered in my own ecumenical pilgrimage. It has served to quicken my own faith in the one who promises in today's reading from the closing verses of the Bible, "Surely I am coming soon" and who enables me to pray with enthusiasm and confidence, "Maranatha,"—"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

Marty Haugen's "Soli Deo Gloria" (*ELW* #878) is a rousing, non-triumphalistic melodic gift to church universal.

*John Rollefson*

## Day of Pentecost June 8, 2025

**Genesis 11:1–9**

**Psalm 104:24–34, 35b**

**Acts 2:1–21**

**John 14:8–17, [25–27]**

O Lord, how manifold are your works!...  
In wisdom you have made them all...  
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
And you renew the face of the ground.

—Psalm 104:24, 30

### Beyond Babel: God's DEI?

For those of us who grew up Lutheran and were made to study Luther's *Small Catechism*, we may have a residual affection for the phrase "What does this mean?" For following every commandment, every article of the creed, each petition of the Lord's prayer we would encounter, regular as clockwork, Luther's catechizing question, "*Was ist das?*" Maybe you noticed how in our reading from Acts, following Luke's vivid description of the "rush of violent wind," and the "tongues of fire," and the miraculous hearing of the gospel spoken by unlettered Galilean fisher folk in one's own language—whether a Jew from Parthia or Pamphylia, Libya or Rome—how Luke, says, understandably enough, "all were amazed and perplexed" (2:4–12a). I bet they were! And so, they began murmuring to one another in their confusion, "What does this mean?" (2:12b) — Luther's question and ours. So, we ask today, "What does Pentecost mean?"

The initial answer, Luke reports, was naturally and funny enough a sneering dismissal from some wit among the crowd, "They're filled with new wine." But if the first answer to "what does this mean?" was "They're drunk as skunks," the second answer is Peter's. He dismisses the sneers with a curt, no-nonsense, "Indeed these aren't drunk as you suppose, for it is only nine in the morning" (2:13, 15), a peculiar kind of self-defense, akin to "the bars aren't even open yet." At any rate, Peter's riposte supplies him with a pretext for launching into one of his long sermons of which Acts gives us several examples. "What does this Pentecost experience mean?" Peter asks rhetorically. It means, quoting the prophet Joel that God, as promised, will pour out the Spirit on all flesh, young and old, slave and free, men and women. The meaning of Pentecost, Peter is saying, is the ever-widening, inclusive mission of the good news of Jesus Christ rippling outward from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth where people of every race and tribe and language, gender and sexual condition, slave and free, rich and poor, young and old are all recipients

of the largesse of God's Spirit so that, as Peter says, quoting the prophet, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32).

This is the meaning of Pentecost according to Luke, and yet he crafts the story in such an artful way as to remind us of yet another story from scripture that he doesn't need to quote. It's a fascinating tale from Genesis' primeval history which we hear as today's First Reading. It's an "etiological" story—meaning a tale told to explain the origin or purpose of something, like the old fairy tale of how the bear lost its tail. Only here the etiology is the origin of the diversity of languages and the dispersion of such a wide variety of peoples and cultures around the world. "Why?" the people of Israel wondered. Why the Hittites and Egyptians and Babylonians? Genesis' primeval history concludes with the story of Babel before moving on to introduce Abram and Sarai who will become the father and mother of the people Israel.

The Hebrew scripture scholar Terence Fretheim claims that the story of Babel is, in effect, the corporate or social counterpart of the Adam, Eve and serpent story of Genesis 3—the myth of humankind's communal fall (or "leap") into sin. As in Genesis 3, so in Genesis 11, humankind is not content with its lot as God's creatures. In today's reading, the people say, "Come let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (v 4). This first motive, what we might call the sin of pride—wanting to "make a name for ourselves"—is a particularly apposite jibe at every nation's, every people's, native chauvinism. Of course, the people of Babel is a thinly veiled allusion to Babylon, Israel's age-old enemy who had destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple, carting many of the people off into exile into an advanced civilization which had built their beautiful ziggurats that to the Jews looked like supernatural sky scrapers intended to scale heaven's gates (Fretheim, *God and the World in the OT* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2005], 89).

But the second motive of the people of Babel for building their tower we usually don't pay sufficient attention to: "otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (v 4b). Fretheim notes how normally unity is seen to be God's will (as in John 17 last week) but here in this story unity stands over against the divine will to spread abroad and "So God must resist it. The right kind of unity is present only when the community manifests a concern for the entire creation" (Fretheim, 89). This subtler point stands as a warning of what can threaten to become a totalitarian quest for unity which can become a matter of religious idolatry. Even our innate spirituality, our native religiosity and our desire to make a unified effort in a good cause can become prideful, an effort to storm heaven and displace

the diversity which marks God's creation with a spurious, humanly mandated uniformity. The wonder of Pentecost is that God has sent us the Holy Spirit to be an advocate for that unity within our diversity which lies at the heart of the very trinity of God which we celebrate next week. Don't forget to deck the church with *Pfingstenrosen* ("Pentecost roses") better known as "peonies."

*John Rollefson*

## Trinity Sunday June 15, 2025

**Proverbs 8:1–4, 22–31**

**Psalm 8**

**Romans 5:1–5**

**John 16:12–15**

### Listening to Woman Wisdom for Preaching

Life is a lot these days.

I wrote this reflection in late February 2025, in the midst of a constitutional crisis, a governmental coup, and perhaps the brink of World War III. I hope and pray that by Trinity Sunday, we have not realized the worst of those possibilities.

Even without the worst, there are overwhelming reasons to be deeply concerned about every human and all of creation.

As a colleague recently quipped, it feels as if we are swept up in a "No Lives Matter" campaign, for which none of us volunteered.

Into this morass sings Woman Wisdom.

Proverbs 8 grants us access to the full Trinity as it affirms Wisdom's partnership with God in creating "the heavens and the earth"; "presents Wisdom as God's child in ways similar to Jesus, God's only son"; and identifies Wisdom's shared "similarities with the Spirit of Truth referenced in John 16:13-14."<sup>6</sup>

Proverbs 8 begins by locating Woman Wisdom all over the public sphere: "She is on the heights," to "see and be seen." She is with travelers on the street. She is in the public gate, amid business and justice transactions (see also Ruth 4 and Deuteronomy 21:19, 2 Samuel 15:1–5, Job 29:7–25; Amos 5:10–15, etc.). She is in doorways, where "thresholds are crossed. In all these places, she raises her voice to call and cry out, and her message is inclusive for all humans (Proverbs 8:4). Proverbs 8:1–4 reiterates that it is not hard to find

6. Sara M. Koenig, Commentary on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Working Preacher, June 12, 2022; <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity-3/commentary-on-proverbs-81-4-22-31-5>; access 02.28.25.

Woman Wisdom, nor is it difficult to hear her voice.”<sup>7</sup>

Woman Wisdom is everywhere, co-creating, crying out, whispering truth. She is, within herself, an unavoidable chorus.

And she really wants us to listen.

Her tune is timely. Necessary even.

What does she sing? Let’s not skip a single treasured note!<sup>8</sup>

- Vs 5: Wisdom calls us to “prudence.” “Urgency” is a supremacy culture value – let’s let it go in favor of intentionality and discernment.<sup>9</sup>
- Vs 6-7: Wisdom promises to speak noble truths. Wickedness is everywhere – but will never come from her lips. “Cling to truth: speak yours; listen for others.”<sup>10</sup>
- Vs 8-9: Wisdom calls us to straighten out our relationship with God (righteousness) and practice truth-telling with others.<sup>11</sup>
- Vs 10-11: Wisdom’s FREE instruction is far more valuable than mineral rights<sup>12</sup> or blood diamonds<sup>13</sup>, or anything else we rip out of God’s beautiful creation. Alternatives to extraction culture exist!<sup>14</sup>
- Vs. 12: Wisdom role-models “prudence,” “knowledge,” and “discretion.” Rash, overwhelming, merciless chaos is not of God.<sup>15</sup>
- Vs. 13: Wisdom says, “Hate evil.” “Fear God.” Unpack

those phrases. Wisdom “hates”: “ego, arrogance, and perverted speech.”<sup>16</sup>

- Vs. 14: Wisdom equates “good advice and sound wisdom” with insight and strength.<sup>17</sup>
- Vs. 15-16: Wisdom advises rulers to “decree what is just.”<sup>18</sup>
- Vs. 17: Wisdom loves those who love her and is easily accessible for those who seek her.<sup>19</sup>
- Vs. 18-19: Wisdom redefines “riches and honor,” “wealth and prosperity” offering a luscious, sustainably harvested fruit that far surpasses anything a brittle, extractive economy can pull from the ground.<sup>20</sup>
- V. 20: Wisdom walks in partnership with Creator God and follows paths of justice.<sup>21</sup>
- V. 21: Wisdom’s ways are endowed with abundance for all.<sup>22</sup>

Why is Wisdom so hard to hear; so hard to heed?

Woman Wisdom builds up and creates in partnership with God; walks with Jesus in justice-making and peace-making bodies; spreads truth in whispers and songs; she is antithetical to current-culture thinking, to dominance and extraction; exploitation, division, and manipulation.

What internalized narratives—as individuals and as church—make us deaf and hard-hearted to Woman Wisdom, as she shouts from the rafters, calls in the public square, sings a new way, stands in opposition to evil?

What powers silence or muffle Wisdom’s creative, justice-embodiment, truth-telling presence among us?

Let’s practice listening for Woman Wisdom by listening to wise, creative, justice-embodiment, truth-speaking women.

Let’s counter silencing assumptions and muffling narratives with the truth-telling of Woman Wisdom, crying, calling, and singing in our streets.

7. Koenig, Commentary on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31.

8. Each verse is paired with a woman- or queer-led organization or resource. Please choose one or two, learn more, share stories, and get engaged as Wisdom leads! Many are nationally available. Minnesota-based offerings are illustrative.

9. See Tema Okun, (divorcing) White Supremacy Culture website; <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/>; accessed 03.02.25.

10. I recommend Diana Butler Bass Substack, The Cottage: <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/>.

11. Lutheran Advocacy-Minnesota director Tammy Walhof and I created “Graceful Conversations: Building Arcs across Divided Perspectives” for this purpose access it (it’s free) here: [https://unitedseminary.libguides.com/Graceful\\_Conversations](https://unitedseminary.libguides.com/Graceful_Conversations).

12. Ian Aikman & James Gregory, “What we know about US-Ukraine minerals deal,” BBC, 02.28.25; <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn527pz54neo>, accessed 03.02.25.

13. See Laube-Alvarez Taylor, “The Misattribution of Africa’s Natural Resource Wealth: An Examination of the Diamond Industry,” Africa Up Close, October 1, 2022; <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/examination-of-the-diamond-industry>; accessed 02.28.25.

14. See Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Building a Moral Economy: Pathways for People of Courage* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2024).

15. See Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde call for mercy in her National Day of Prayer Sermon; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwwaEuDeqM8>; accessed 03.01.25.

16. Rev. Dr. Jia Starr-Brown created ACTION Project: A Commitment to Inclusion in Our Neighborhoods; <https://jiastarrbrown.com/action-project-1>.

17. Mental Health Connect offers both. <https://www.mhconnect.org>

18. Discover Resilient Indigenous Sisters Engaging (R.I.S.E.) Coalition who speak truth to power. <https://rise-coalition.org>

19. OutFront Minnesota’s organizing, advocacy, education, and support create justice and belonging. <https://www.outfront.org/about-us#overview>

20. Harvest Nation, an Indigenous woman-led aeroponics CSA on Minnesota’s Iron Range, creates abundant, fruitful life! <https://www.harvestnationinc.com>

21. Every generation can learn the beautiful ways of The Water Walker by Joanne Robertson, (Second Story Press, 2017).

22. As Jesus walked the earth, we too are invited to walk the talk with Nibi Walks; <https://www.nibiwalk.org>.

1. *A woman in the streets is powerless.*

Meet Amanda Polchies, who held off armed police with a feather and a prayer.<sup>23</sup>

“[Her] community’s fierce determination to protect their land, water, and their people eventually won them an indefinite moratorium on fracking in the province.”

2. *A woman in the streets is probably a prostitute or a criminal.*

Learn about trafficking and Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirits.<sup>24</sup>

3. *A woman in the streets is probably a beggar and a vagrant.*

Meet the women of the Shaheen Bagh Protest, the longest and largest protest in contemporary global history.<sup>25</sup>

4. *A woman in the streets is beneath our contempt.*

Meet the Madres de Plaza de Mayo<sup>26</sup>

5. *A woman in the streets is just after some “woke virtue signaling.”*

Meet the leaders of the 1929 Nigerian Women’s War.<sup>27</sup>

6. *A woman in the streets is probably just looking for attention.*

Meet the women behind the #MeToo Movement.<sup>28</sup>

7. *A woman in the street is probably just mumbling nonsense.*

Meet Fannie Lou Hamer, who sang the way to voting rights for black citizens.<sup>29</sup>

23. Amanda Polchies, Elsipogtog First Nation, “The Day I Held a Feather to Power: A Personal Account of Resistance to Fracking,” *Ecologos*, 2018; <https://www.waterdocs.ca/water-talk/2018/3/21/ssh1z5g4jtrrgstvwu0ua138uexrn>, accessed 03.01.25.

24. See Native Women’s Wilderness; <https://www.nativewomenswilderness.org/mmiw>.

25. Farida Nabourema, “In India, Women Propel World’s Largest Protest Movement,” United States Institute of Peace, website, 03.03.21; <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/03/india-women-propel-worlds-largest-protest-movement>, accessed 03.01.25.

26. Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Learning for Justice Staff, Learning for Justice; <https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/texts/madres-de-plaza-de-mayo>, accessed 03.01.25.

27. Marissa Evans, ABA Women’s Riots (November–December, 1929), Black Past website, 03.27.09; <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/aba-womens-riots-november-december-1929/>, accessed 03.01.25.

28. #MeToo website; <https://metoomvmt.org/>, accessed 03.01.25.

29. Fannie Lou Hamer and the Fight for Voting Rights; Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum, 10.03.24; <https://womenshistory.si.edu/blog/fannie-lou-hamer-and-fight-voting-rights>, accessed 03.01.25.

Woman Wisdom sings from the heights about the glories of God’s creation. Her song sanctifies all life.

Woman Wisdom calls in the city centers for justice and equity. She embodies belonging and community.

Woman Wisdom cries from the streets for the sake of her children’s and her neighbors’ needs. Her Truth nourishes generations.

Meet the Holy Trinity.

Emily Meyer

## Second Sunday after Pentecost June 22, 2025

**Isaiah 65:1–9**

**Psalm 22:19–28**

**Galatians 3:23–29**

**Luke 8:26–39**

### Engaging the Gospel for Preaching

Scapegoating, in both its empirical and biblical applications, has become tragically normalized; a default mechanism for problems—real or perceived: find some group of people who aren’t attached to the “in” or the “powerful” circles, lay the blame on their backs, run them out of town, and avoid solving anything.

Richard Rohr sums the practice up, writing,

In Leviticus 16 we see the brilliant ritualization of...scapegoating, and we should indeed feel sorry for the demonized goat. On the Day of Atonement, a priest laid hands on an “escaping” goat, placing all the sins of the Jewish people from the previous year onto the animal. Then the goat was beaten with reeds and thorns, and driven out into the desert. And the people went home rejoicing, just as European Christians did after burning a supposed heretic at the stake or as American whites did after the lynching of black men. Whenever the “sinner” is excluded, our ego is delighted and feels relieved and safe. It sort of works, but only for a while. Usually the illusion only deepens and becomes catatonic, blind, and repetitive—because of course, scapegoating did not really work to eliminate the evil in the first place.<sup>30</sup>

Scapegoating works—communally and ecclesiastically—through the evil of exclusion: by demonizing others rather

30. Richard Rohr, “Jesus Reveals the Lie of Scapegoating,” Daily Meditations, 10.13.16; <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/jesus-reveals-lie-scapegoating-2016-10-13/>; accessed 03.01.25.

than exorcising demons.

There is no shortage of examples of this in recent months:

- Immigrants<sup>31</sup>
- Lutheran Social Services<sup>32</sup>
- Federal Workers<sup>33</sup>
- National Parks<sup>34</sup>
- Ukraine/Zelensky<sup>35</sup>
- Gaza<sup>36</sup>

The list grows longer.

Scapegoat artists weaken social systems by driving wedges between neighbors, sowing distrust between communities, and avoiding relationships reflective of Galatians, “no longer Jew or Greek; slave or free; male and female.” Indeed, if we are all “one in Christ Jesus,” then scapegoating anyone is scapegoating ourselves; scapegoating an “other” means throwing ourselves over a cliff.

The evil of exclusion results in demonizing ourselves to ourselves.

Enter – the pigs.

The pigs alert readers that this “wartime Gospel full of anticipation that God would intervene in history,” is not set just anywhere.<sup>37</sup>

No. Luke’s only healing story outside of Israel is set in, “the Decapolis, east of the Sea of Galilee,” a place known for, “acculturation to Greek and Roman culture. Hellenized

culture. Roman imperialism. Temples, foreign gods.”<sup>38</sup>

This is not just any, “outpost of empire.”<sup>39</sup>

Gerasa was the site of a brutal 66 CE<sup>40</sup> slaughter by the Roman Legio X Fretensis, which “killed a thousand young men, imprisoned their families, burned the city, and then attacked villages throughout the region. Many of those buried in Gerasene tombs had been slaughtered by Roman legions.”<sup>41</sup>

Rome’s demonic legions filled Gerasa with death’s “evil exclusion.”

And there’s that term:

Legion.

Ched Myers writes, “The Latin word ‘legion’ meant [only] one thing ... a Roman legion, a large division of imperial soldiers.”

Additional military terms lead John Dominic Crossan to argue that this story, “openly mocks ‘Roman imperialism as demonic possession,’ and reveals what colonial domination does to those it subjects to political cruelty...”<sup>42</sup>

Also: The emblem of the Roman Legio X Fretensis was a boar.

Caesar considered the Tenth Legion his personal bodyguard.<sup>43</sup>

And pork was a staple in the diet of imperial troops.

***Legion + Pigs = “political” or “resistance” satire.***<sup>44</sup>

With what do we resist?

While the pigs add levity, Jesus’ work is anything but trite.

Jesus resisted with the stubborn mystery of whole-self healing and communal salvation.

Jesus barely set foot on the eastern shore of Galilee and, without request or invitation or promise of discipleship, healed the Gerasene, a not-fully-observant-Jewish man possessed by demons in a not-exactly-kosher backwater of the empire. Jesus’ expansive expression of Divine favor is stunning: the outer margin is centered. In the universality of Christ’s healing, all are made whole in the One Body.

The core of this story is the demon of evil exclusion: the whole region of Gerasa is excluded from the rest of the

31. Irving Washington and Hagere Yilma, “Politicians Incorrectly Link Fentanyl to Migration to Garner Support for Immigration Policy,” *The Monitor*; 09.26.24; <https://www.kff.org/the-monitor/political-rhetoric-spreads-misinformation-about-fentanyl/#fentanyl-migration>; accessed 03.02.25.

32. Presiding Bishop Eliabeth Eaton, “ELCA Responds to False Allegations” on X: 02.02.25; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, facebook post; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1509133893383609>; accessed 03.02.25.

33. Meg Kinnard, “A comprehensive look at DOGE’s firings and layoffs so far,” *Associated Press*, 02.21.25; <https://apnews.com/article/doge-firings-layoffs-federal-government-workers-musk-d33cdd7872d64d2bdd8fe70c28652654>; accessed 03.02.25.

34. John Garder, Angela Gonzales, “How the New Administration’s Actions Will Affect National Parks,” *National Parks Conservation Association*; 02.04.25; <https://www.npca.org/articles/6680-how-the-new-administration-s-actions-will-affect-national-parks>; accessed 03.02.25.

35. Ashleigh Fields, “Zelensky posts slew of thanks after Vance accuses him of being ungrateful for support,” *The Hill*, 03.01.25; <https://thehill.com/policy/international/5171270-zelensky-posts-slew-of-thanks-after-vance-accuses-him-of-being-ungrateful-for-support/>, accessed 03.02.25.

36. Diana Butt, “Blaming the Victims,” *Institute for Palestine Studies*, 08.24.14; <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/186740>, accessed 03.02.25. See also, Mohammed El-Kurd, “Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal,” *Haymarket*; 02.25.

37. Diana Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings: The Demons of Empire*; The Cottage, Substack, [https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-834?utm\\_source=publication-search](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-834?utm_source=publication-search); access 03.01.25.

38. Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings: The Demons of Empire*.

39. Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings: The Demons of Empire*.

40. This is prior to Mark recording the story of the Gerasene Demoniac c. 70 CE; the author’s placement of the story is intentional. See Butler Bass.

41. Judith Jones, *Commentary on Luke 8:26-39*; *Working Preacher*, June 23, 2019; <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-luke-826-39-4>; accessed 03.01.25.

42. Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings: The Demons of Empire*.

43. Donald Wasson, *Legio X Fretensis*, *World History Encyclopedia*, 08.20.21; [https://www.worldhistory.org/Legio\\_X\\_Fretensis/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Legio_X_Fretensis/); accessed 03.02.25.

44. Butler Bass, *Sunday Musings: The Demons of Empire*.



empire; the Gerasene is excluded from his whole self and from community; the demons – while numerous – are an exclusive group unto themselves; and the singularly uncreative name of “Legion” foreshadows that the demons are already cut off from life.

The Gerasene’s healing begins the work of salvation:<sup>45</sup> and is fully engaged when the healed man wants to follow Jesus, and Jesus says, “No.”

Because there is more salvific work unfolding. Wholeness comes through the Body of Christ; the healed man must be reconciled and reintegrated with his community.

And they’re not interested.

The first people to hear about the healing do not celebrate.<sup>46</sup> They’re not thrilled.

- Has the healed man’s lengthy demon possession rendered him a source of fear, strain, uncertainty, and derision?
- Has his healing, i.e., the local herd’s porcicide, created a significant strain on the local economy?

It is not hard to believe that the healed man may be scapegoated (again?) for the inevitable economic slump.

Judith Jones observes that, “After hearing how he has been freed, the people do not celebrate his good news. Instead, overwhelming fear hems them in and holds them captive.”<sup>47</sup>

The healed man is not invited to follow Jesus because he is called and sent (a forerunner to the apostles, commissioned in Luke 9:1?) as a “little Christ,” to share the good medicine of healing stories. Stories spread like a balm, a salve to draw out demons of fear.

In the face of the demonic evil of exclusion and division, stories heal.

Stories are salvific.

As his story spreads, healing spreads, and the community is bound together. The healed man will become known as “one in Christ” with the whole community, making it impossible to scapegoat him – or anyone.

The evil demons of exclusion and scapegoating will be exorcised through the sharing of stories. Shared stories will empower the community to be and enact salvation for the healed man and one another.

Emily Meyer

45. For a discussion of translations of “heal” and “save” in vs. 36, see: Sarah Henrich, Commentary on Luke 8:26-39; Working Preacher, June 20, 2010; <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-luke-826-39>; accessed 03.02.25.

46. Judith Jones, Commentary on Luke 8:26-39. Jones notes, “The verb here is *syniecho*, used in Luke 19:43 of armies and in Luke 22:63 of the men guarding Jesus.”

47. Jones, Commentary on Luke 8:26-39.

## Third Sunday after Pentecost June 29, 2025

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1,13–25

Luke 9:51–62

### Engaging Luke’s Gospel on Pride Weekend

Today we come to a critical junction in Luke’s gospel. There will be no going back—Jesus has *set his face* to go to Jerusalem. What did that look like? I see Ruby Bridges, small and brave in her braids and pretty dress, walking the gauntlet of white people outside the Frantz School in New Orleans in 1961. She set her six-year-old face to enter that school where no black child had ever been allowed. She set her face on a power her enemies could not see because her mother told her it was right and said, “Jesus will be with you.”

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem and the rest of Luke’s gospel moves us ever closer to the city. When the Samaritans refuse to let Jesus enter their village, James and John ask Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and consume them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. “No,” said Jesus. This is not the commonwealth of God.

As Bruce Bawer wrote in his book *Stealing Jesus*, “The question is not *whether* God will be worshipped in our time, but *which* God will be worshipped.” Theologian Delores Williams asked this question in a different way. She said her mother once asked her great-grandmother – who had been a slave – this question: “How could you believe the same thing as the slave masters?” Her great-grandmother replied, “Them and us both Christian, but we ain’t got the same religion.”

Delores’ great-grandmother had come to trust in the God who would set her free rather than the God interpreted by her white master. Though she couldn’t read, she had heard stories from the Bible: two Africans, Hagar and her son Ishmael, saved from death in the wilderness, slaves led out of Egypt to freedom, and Mary singing about the mighty thrown down and the lowly lifted up. She didn’t know where the slave master’s God came from, but she believed the God she heard speaking in the Bible.

This is Pride Weekend in many communities. LGBTQ people have heard the Bible used to condemn and oppress. God was portrayed as a hateful God who calls down the fires of hell – especially on gay people. We went to the Bible. We heard Jesus talking about a new kind of family not defined by bloodline or tradition. We saw Jesus sitting at table with those who were outcasts and heard him tell parables about a great banquet open to people waiting on the highways and hedges. We listened as Jesus rebuked James and John for wanting to

call down the fires of hell.

“Them and us both Christian, but we ain’t got the same religion.”

We must decide whether to follow Jesus or someone else. Jesus has *set his face* to go to Jerusalem. He will not abide arguments about greatness. He rebukes all who are eager to call down the fires of judgment and condemnation. What keeps us from following him? Good reasons. Good, responsible, rational reasons keep people from following Jesus:

- “I must bury my father.” (not only a respectful act, but an obligation of the law)
- “I must say farewell to those at home” (who could deny such a loving request?)

There are so many good reasons for not following Jesus to Jerusalem. There are many good reasons for setting aside Jesus’ expansive vision of the commonwealth of God. And we know there are many good reasons for not fully affirming the lives and ministries of LGBTQ people. Lutheran Christians heard lots of good reasons before the human sexuality social statement was passed by the ELCA in 2009:

- this issue threatens to divide the ELCA and our congregation;
- important ministries will be diminished if people get so angry they withhold financial support;
- it’s not fair for the minority to decide for the majority.

Many of us added our own personal good reasons: we don’t want to hurt our families, lose our ordination, disrupt our congregations, become “one issue” people. You can fill in the blank with your own good reasons. **We are trapped by the tyranny of good reasons.**

At the end of Mark Twain’s book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, there’s a story I had overlooked.<sup>48</sup> You may remember that the white boy Huck had helped Jim, a black slave, escape from his owner, Miss Watson. Huck began to be troubled by what he’d done – indeed, he was convinced he’d go to hell for it because he knew that stealing someone’s property was wrong. So, he decides to do the right thing “in order to get right with God and avoid everlasting fire.” He writes a letter to Miss Watson confessing that he stole her slave and telling where Jim is. He says he feels good and all washed clean of sin. But then, before sending the letter, Huck starts thinking about Jim. “I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time... we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing.” Huck thinks about how sweet

48. Percival Everett recently wrote a novel *James*, published in 2024. His book reimagines Mark Twain’s book from the perspective of Jim, the slave. This book interrogates the racism of Twain’s time and in our own. A very important companion to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

and good and gentle Jim is and what a good friend he’s been. Then he catches sight of the letter he just wrote:

I took it up and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself, “*All right, then, I’ll go to hell*” – and I tore it up.

Huck Finn set his face in a new direction that day, choosing to honor his friendship with Jim against the threats of hell. Young Ruby Bridges set her face to go to school though the forces lined up day after day against her. Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. He knows all our good reasons, but still he asks us to come along.

Barbara K. Lundblad

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