

Preaching Helps

Fifth Sunday in Lent—Third Sunday after Pentecost

Must All Our Sermons Now Be Political?

I opened our local newspaper one morning this winter, surprised by the front-page photo. “That looks like my friend Jeff,” I said. It *was* Jeff, a Minneapolis pastor, talking with a Muslim man. They were standing in front of a life-size mural of Jesus on trial, his hands bound, a crown of thorns on his head. At quick glance, it looked like Jeff and the Muslim man were part of the tableaux, standing beside Jesus. “That’ll preach,” I wrote when I posted that photograph on my Facebook page. What did I mean? Are we all on trial with Jesus? Are we accusing Jesus? Will those who defend immigrants and Muslims be arrested and put on trial?

Since the inauguration of a new president in January, many pastors have been asking this question: “Must all my sermons now be political?” Every week seems to bring another pressing concern: immigrants, refugees, transgender youth, women’s health, truth telling, threats against Jews, access to health care, and deep divisions within the United States. On the Sundays after the inauguration, we heard Jesus’ “inaugural address” in Matthew—four Sundays listening to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “You are salt and light for the world,” Jesus told his followers. Then he went on to describe what that means. Be reconciled with your sisters and brothers because anger is a form of killing. Don’t use violence to resist evil. Love your enemies (not only your neighbors). How did Jesus’ sermon sound alongside an executive order banning people from seven mostly Muslim countries? Of course, there are many Christians who affirm the ban, not only for the safety of our country, but as an affirmation that Christianity must be protected as the true salt and light for the world.

Now we are moving into Holy Week. Preachers and congregations will again find deep personal meaning in the story of Jesus’ suffering and death. They will be assured by the wondrous promise of resurrection. But Pilate’s question at Jesus’ trial is more political than personal: “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Matt 27:11). Herod heard a similar troubling question from the magi at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” (2:2). If preaching pays close attention to the biblical texts, the political dimensions of the story cannot be avoided and the personal meanings won’t be left behind.

Will Willimon, retired Methodist bishop now teach-

ing at Duke Divinity School, affirmed the power of faithful Christian preaching and pastoring in an essay with a political title: “Alien Citizens: Karl Barth, Eberhard Arnold, and Why the Church Is Political.”

In Charleston, South Carolina, the senior pastor of Emanuel AME Church, Clementa C. Pinckney, was a state senator and a powerful politician. But the night he was martyred he was in the basement hall of his church, leading a small group of laypeople in prayer and Bible study. Much of the ordinary, unspectacular work pastors do is holy if we believe that the church is the incarnate Christ’s chosen means of showing up in the world. Even the mundane body work done by pastors and lay leadership is sacred when it equips Christ’s commissioned “ambassadors” and constitutes an “embassy” of another sovereignty, a living, breathing Body, something that a young South Carolina racist recognized as a threat to his white supremacist world... The people who got the nation’s attention by giving so bold a witness to forgiveness after the massacre at Mother Emanuel didn’t drop down out of heaven. They were produced here on earth, in lifetimes of listening to sermons by pastors like Pinckney who took seriously their responsibility “to equip God’s people for the work of serving” (Eph 4:12).

So, preach, my friends, and know that your preaching makes a difference in shaping people to be Christ’s body in a troubled world.

We welcome back several people who have written for “Preaching Helps” in the past—and a Presbyterian New Testament scholar who is new to these pages. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is co-lead pastor at Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Reno, Nevada. Her lectionary reflections can also be found regularly at Political Theology’s lectionary blog, “The Politics of Scripture” (<http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/tag/politics-of-scripture/>). She is a graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and holds her PhD in New Testament and Early Christianity from Vanderbilt University. **Christa M. Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a B.A. in English and a Masters in Teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa started her career as a high school teacher in Columbia, South Carolina. She was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a PhD from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2013 and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham,

New Jersey. **Brad Froslee** was recently called as pastor of St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota, after serving at Calvary Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis. Brad grew up on a farm near Vining, Minnesota, and studied at St. Olaf College and Harvard Divinity School. He is passionate about preaching, worship, and prophetic witness. He enjoys spending time with his husband and son, traveling, and working on genealogy and poetry projects. **Sarah Trone Garriott** is a 2008 graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, currently serving as associate pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Clive, Iowa. The act of committing scripture to memory so that she can proclaim it by heart is her primary exegetical strategy and essential to her preaching. She finds it impossible to fully separate the act of engaging the text from the pastoral implications—which you may happen to notice in her commentary. **Wilbert “Wilk” Miller** began his ministry as pastor of The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in New York City in July 2016. Prior to coming to Holy Trinity, he served First Lutheran Church-San Diego; St. Paul's Lutheran Church-Ardmore, Pennsylvania; Augustana Lutheran Church-Washington, D.C.; and Calvary Lutheran Church in center city Philadelphia. Wilk and his wife, Dagmar, are like kids in Disneyland as they explore and celebrate the wonders of New York City. **Matthew L. Skinner** is Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, where he has taught since 2002. His publications include *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts* (2015) and *A Companion to the New Testament* (forthcoming). He contributes to numerous online and print resources that help preachers and lay people consider the enduring theological relevance of the Bible. He is one of the co-hosts of the popular weekly podcast Sermon Brainwave.

Barbara Lundblad,
Editor, “Preaching Helps”

Fifth Sunday in Lent April 2, 2017

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalms 130

Romans 8:6–11

John 11:1–45

A Conversation Between Ezekiel and John

It's hard to know where to begin on this last Sunday in Lent: Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, Paul's powerful testimony to life in the Spirit, or Jesus' raising Lazarus from death? There are connections tying these three texts together, but it's probably not possible to preach on all of them. What might

John and Ezekiel say to each other?

Mary and Martha gather up our longings and regrets at the gravesite: “Lord, if you had been here our brother would not have died.” Why did you wait so long? They had no idea Jesus had said Lazarus' death was for the glory of God—and if they had known, they would have been furious! *If only* you had been here...*If only* my prayers had been answered...

It is easy to stop there—the “if only” of both sisters sticking in our throats. Or to put resurrection talk off to a time after we die. That was Martha's understanding: yes, I know he will rise at the last day. But Jesus turns to her and says, “I AM the resurrection and the life.” I AM, in present tense. “Do you believe this?” Martha answered, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” It was a profound confession of faith—almost the same words spoken by Peter in Matthew's gospel. When Peter made his confession, Jesus turned to him and said, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Martha's strong confession moved a friend of mine to write a song, “They Never Named a Church after Sister Martha.”

Lazarus is dead. He has been dead four days. “There was an opinion among the rabbis that the soul hovered near the body for three days but after that there was no hope of resuscitations.” (Ray Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 424) Lazarus was not sleeping. The only reality here was death.

That's what Ezekiel saw, too—only death all over the valley, bones dry as dust. “Mortal, can these bones live?” God asked. “O LORD GOD, you know,” answered the prophet. It is up to you, O God. It is beyond me. But God doesn't speak or breathe upon the bones. Rather, God calls Ezekiel to speak: “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” So, Ezekiel prophesied and there was a noise, and a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. Then sinews connected the bones and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them. Surely now God will breathe upon these human statues standing lifeless in the valley. But once more, God says to the prophet: “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” We may pray at the communion table, “Come, Holy Spirit.” We may sing, “Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.” But here Ezekiel is called to prophesy to the breath! It is audacious, this calling. Prophesy to the breath: “Come from the four winds. Come breathe upon these slain that they may live.” God waits upon the prophet. **It is a participatory resurrection.**

But Lazarus is dead. There is no breath in him. Jesus feels the horrible reality of death. “He was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (v. 33)—the Greek word *embrimasthei* also means “angry.” Jesus was angry at the powers of death. And he wept over the death of his beloved friend.

Though Mary and Martha scolded him for waiting too long, he waits no longer. He acts, even though death is so real you can smell it. He looks up to heaven and prays—not for himself but so the crowd may believe that God had sent him to bring life to this valley of despair. Then he shouts in a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!” That same word will describe the crowd shouting for Jesus’ crucifixion. The shout that brings life to Lazarus, will bring death to Jesus. It must have been an eerie sight—the dead man walking, still wrapped in grave clothes.

But the story isn’t over. Lazarus isn’t yet fully alive. Jesus turns to the mourners and says, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Unbind him. Bring him fully to life. Unbind him and let him go. **Participatory resurrection once again.**

God turns to us now and asks, “Can these bones live?” We stammer our answer, “O Lord God, you know.” But God will never let us stay with that answer. God calls us to participate in resurrection. After the congregation council has mapped out the five-year goals, after the renovation is complete, the calling remains as it has been from the beginning: to proclaim God’s gospel of life and hope in the midst of dying. To call the breath of God to come from the four winds to breathe upon each member of this congregation and in every place of despair. To stammer our confession with Martha, even though she didn’t completely understand what she was saying, and neither do we. “Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Beloved of God, the one coming into the world.”

To each one still bound by despair, Jesus says, “Unbind her, and let her go.”

Barbara Lundblad

Palm/Passion Sunday April 9, 2017

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalms 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Matthew 21:1–11

Entering Jerusalem with Jesus

In many congregations Passion Sunday has preempted Palm Sunday. Traces of Palm Sunday remain in the distribution of palms and the reading from Matthew 21 as part of the entrance rite. The Passion story from Matthew 26–27 will be read and may replace the sermon. Then on Good Friday, John’s passion story will be heard, but should John be read every Good Friday? There are many reasons to mark today as *Passion* Sunday, including the reality that many people won’t attend other services during Holy Week. They will go from

“Hosanna!” to “Alleluia!” without stopping at the cross. If you are reading Matthew’s passion story today, you will find reflections on that text in the Good Friday section below.

But there are good reasons to reclaim Palm Sunday to begin the drama of Holy Week. We can encourage people to experience the rhythm of this week: entering the city, gathering at the supper, watching at the cross, keeping vigil until the first light of Easter dawns. What happens if we hear Matthew’s story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as this week begins?

Who is this? (Matt 21:10) That was the question then, and still is. The whole city was in turmoil as Jesus came riding in. The scene is almost comic—especially since Matthew places Jesus on a donkey and a colt! (21:7) If this is an army, it is a strange one indeed: children, women, fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and others called sinners. Surely they were there for Jesus kept company with such people. Perhaps Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph were there, for we will see them later in this story (27:56; 28:1).

Who is this? We know his name is Jesus. I suppose we know many things about him, at least we think we do. Centuries of tradition have taught us that Jesus died for our sins, a payment we could never make on our own. At times it seems as though God had planned it all out beforehand and Jesus had to follow the script: “Send disciples to Bethphage. Untie donkey and colt. Repeat prophesy. Ride into Jerusalem...” Was it all so neatly scripted? Some have dared to raise questions. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson isn’t the only one who challenges the traditional interpretation of Jesus’ death as “required by God in repayment for sin.” Such a view,” she says, is virtually inseparable from an underlying image of God as an angry, bloodthirsty, violent sadistic father...”

Rather, Jesus’ death was an act of violence brought about by threatened human men, as sin, and therefore against the will of a gracious God. It occurred historically in consequence of Jesus’ fidelity to the deepest truth he knew... (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 158).

Jesus is riding into the city today. Try to hear the story as though for the first time. In many ways, it is the first time for we are not the same as we were a year ago. Jesus enters a different city this year, a very divided country, a suffering world. We hear the agonized cries of people in Syria, driven from home, uncertain if they will ever find home again. Will there be no end to the pain of this world? Elizabeth Johnson gives words to what we may not even know we’re thinking:

A God who is not in some way affected by such pain is not really worthy of human love and praise. A God who is simply a spectator at all of this suffering... falls short of the modicum of decency expected even

at the human level. Such a God is morally intolerable (Johnson, 249).

But the God we meet in Jesus is not a spectator. I guess we should have known from the beginning. Even before Jesus was born, the angel whispered to Joseph in a dream: “You shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God with us).” God-with-us not only at the moment of birth in Bethlehem, but God-with-us riding into Jerusalem. God-with-us in the heart of suffering. God-with-us when things get worse instead of better. God-with-us when things are going so well that we forget that God is with us.

We may keep asking the question all Jerusalem was asking, “Who is this?” We won’t ever know by staying at a distance. Will we be with Jesus in the upper room on Thursday night when he washes the disciples’ dirty feet? *Who is this who bends down like a servant?* Will we come on Friday to hear the story of Jesus’ suffering, death, and burial—standing with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee? (27:56). *Who is this who enters the heart of the world’s suffering?* Will we come in the darkness of Saturday night to light the first fire of Easter? *Who is this who surprises us when we had given up hope?* This is Immanuel, God-with-us. That was the word at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel; that is Jesus’ word of promise at the end of this gospel: “And remember: I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20b).

Barbara Lundblad

Maundy Thursday April 13, 2017

Exodus 12:1–4 [5–10] 11–14

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19

1 Corinthians 11:23–26

John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Engaging the Texts

The Triduum, the sacred three days of Holy Week, is one liturgy that begins with Maundy Thursday, continues on Good Friday, and concludes at the Easter Vigil. Those who attend this three-day liturgy will be deeply moved by the highs and lows of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Maundy Thursday receives its name from the Latin word *mandatum* meaning “command.” Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” Unlike the synoptics, John’s gospel makes no mention of the Last Supper’s institution narrative. Instead, John uniquely weaves in the foot-washing: Jesus rises from supper, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, and washes his disciples’ feet.

John’s account gives witness to a community of love where rigid boundaries and possible looming resentments are broken down and all are welcome to the meal.

What becomes clear is Jesus’ openness to those who fall short of his love. Judas, as the text reveals, will soon betray Jesus. Peter, who says, “You will never wash my feet,” overestimates himself, incapable of realizing how he will soon shrink from his high ideals and repeatedly deny ever having known his dearest friend. In spite of the horrid betrayal, denials, and cowardice about to occur—not by Jesus’ detractors but by those who adore him—Jesus is glorified through his sacrificial love. As his friends fall by the wayside one by one, nevertheless, Jesus demonstrates his profound affection for them.

Jesus articulates this new command “to love one another” not only in the words he speaks at the meal but also by his washing of the disciples’ feet.

Pastoral Reflections

Most of the congregations I have served have observed foot-washing on Maundy Thursday. Much to my disappointment, however, no matter how clear the bulletin rubrics and verbal invitations have been and even if I have remembered in advance to warn women not to wear hose and men not to wear holey socks, very few have availed themselves of this liturgical action. We can feel terribly exposed as we wash and dry one another’s feet with tender love. Many people prefer to sit out the foot-washing. Some choose to steer clear of Maundy Thursday worship altogether.

In those moments when we are so mindful of our human vulnerability, the Christian community gives witness to the gentleness of Christ’s glory: he loves Judas the betrayer, Peter the liar, and the other ten cowards who slink away as he breathes his last. Jesus loves us, too, even if we prefer not to come to the bowl and towel.

While this action may strike some as new-fangled and reek of “touchy-feeliness,” there are Christian traditions, notably the Amish, Mennonite, Adventists, and Pentecostals, that incorporate foot-washing as part of their regular Communion liturgies.

Pope Francis has demonstrated how Christ’s glory is so beautifully revealed in foot-washing. Breaking with the long-standing papal tradition of washing only priests’ feet, he has washed the feet of women, Muslims, AIDS patients, and homeless people. His gesture of kneeling and washing “outcasts” feet has touched millions and given profound witness to what the church can be when it dares, as did Jesus, to break down all manner of rigid boundaries.

Could some of the awkwardness of foot-washing be caused by the difficulty many have in receiving gifts? When giving gifts, we feel in control; when receiving gifts, we suddenly feel subservient to the gift giver. Peter’s words, “You will

never wash my feet,” are easy to comprehend. There is something deep inside many of us that prefers not to take from another. Yet, when we allow this gift of washing, somehow the community is made stronger through mutual giving and receiving in Christ’s name.

I have often noticed my inclination to refuse the gifts of those who have much less materially than I. I catch myself saying, “Oh no, I wouldn’t dare take that from you.” Aren’t the materially poor capable of deciding for themselves what they can and cannot give? Shouldn’t they know the joy of giving as well as receiving?

I experienced this receiving a number of years ago, not in a church sanctuary, but in a hospital room. I had been in intensive care for quite a while and was feeling miserable. Finally, a hospital aide came to bathe me. I was dreadfully dirty and felt wretched. I will remember that sponge bath as long as I live. It was a sacramental occasion: through this woman’s vocation of bathing my feet, I was treated with rare graciousness and love. At one of the lowest points in my life, I was lifted up through her compassionate ministry. I think of that dear woman every Maundy Thursday, of that holy moment when I was so deathly ill and she washed me clean.

While Lutherans do not call the rite of foot-washing a sacrament, I would dare say it is quite sacramental. It is an occasion when we catch sight of what it is to love one another in Christ’s name; it is a moment when Christ stoops low to us through the loving actions of our brothers and sisters.

Wilk Miller

Good Friday April 14, 2017

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Hebrews 10:16–25

John 18:1—19:42

[or **Matthew 26:14—27:66**]

Engaging the Texts

When studying biblical texts in preparation for a sermon, my tendency is to reach immediately for the commentaries on my bookshelf and the sermons of my favorite preachers. I want to know what the experts think and how they say it.

When I was in divinity school, one of my New Testament professors urged us not to make the scholarship and thoughts of others our first exegetical move. Rather, he urged us to read the lectionary texts carefully and prayerfully on our own, trusting our initial judgments before turning too quickly to the experts’ ideas.

The length of the passion narratives may cause us to steer clear of commentaries if for no other reason than we simply

do not have the time. The sheer amount of biblical material can feel incapacitating—what to think, what to say—during the busy days of Lent as Holy Week quickly approaches.

Worshippers will form their own initial impressions as the passion account is read. Good Friday’s quiet darkness will invite them to observe a reserved silence in anticipation of Jesus’ final words from the cross, “My God, my God...”

There is so much to ponder—the meal, Gethsemane, the trial, the crucifixion. What will strike those who know the story so well in this year’s hearing—the denials, the cowardice, the vitriol, the arrogance, the cruelty?

Many congregations divide the passion reading into parts so a host of people can be involved. Every year, I am vigilant when choosing readers for Peter, Judas, and Pilate, worrying who might take offense at being asked to utter their devastating words. And when the entire congregation joins in with “Let him be crucified” and “Hail, King of the Jews,” I wonder what will go through their minds.

I give most attention, though, to who will read Jesus’ words. Whoever it is will need to be one of the finest readers. Every year I am surprised by how few words Jesus speaks. In these days filled with strident and often reckless words, Jesus’ silence is breathtaking. How astonishing that his last words, according to Matthew, rather than ending with a powerful declarative statement, conclude with a sobering question, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As we walk out of church on Good Friday, we will realize Isaiah was correct, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.” At least for a night, all will be quiet.

On this holiest of days, when Jesus could have lambasted friend and foe alike, he said next to nothing. Just when he could have taken power into his hands, those hands were helplessly stretched out and nailed to the cross. Jesus was so passive, so powerless and yet in his passion, we behold our salvation.

Pastoral Reflections

In these days when the demise of Christendom feels so imminent, as seminaries shrink, congregations close, and rostered leader rolls dwindle, it is good to remember Jesus’ passion. What is striking is how little he said, how helpless he was, what cowards his followers ended up being. After all the years, in spite of what occurred on that first Good Friday and what our beloved church faces today, we continue to proclaim: “Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.”

I was recently struck that my favorite “desert island books” are not particularly uplifting. Each contains pathetic settings, flawed characters, and gloomy prospects. Surprisingly though, in the face of it all, there is hope. Graham Greene’s

whiskey priest in “The Power and the Glory” brings the gospel to desperate people despite his own revolting flaws. Annie Dillard’s rickety country church shimmers with a peculiar brilliance amid the hapless characters who make Dillard feel like she is “on an archaeological tour of Soviet Russia” (Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, [Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1977], 57). There is another little church in Island Pond, Vermont, where the rector gets the odd idea of holding an Easter Vigil. Only a handful show up and Garrett Keizer writes: “The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools. I like it that way. I believe God likes it that way. My worry is always that others will be discouraged rather than exalted by the omnipresence of the two possibilities” (Garret Keizer, *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, [Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1991], 73).

In spite of hopes and dreams gone sour, the laziness, cowardice, and violence of the entire lot, Jesus says very little and simply stretches out his hands on the torture-tree. He embraces those who showed so much possibility and finally failed; those who dropped their nets and tax ledgers, left their parents, and followed in radical obedience; he embraces the more notorious and obvious suspects, the high priests and Pilate, the puff-chested soldiers and the furious mobs; and, yes, he even embraces us.

For Lutherans who place so much emphasis on words spoken, we will likely be surprised by the power of Jesus’ silent love. It is this helpless Lamb of God whom we fall down and adore on Good Friday. Oddly, in his weakness and passiveness, we behold our salvation.

Wilk Miller

Resurrection of Our Lord/Easter April 16, 2017

Acts 10:34–43 [or Jeremiah 31:1–6]

Psalms 118:1–2, 14–24

Colossians 3:1–4

Matthew 28:1–10 [or John 20:1–18]

Engaging the Texts

In Matthew’s Easter account, two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, go to the tomb expecting nothing. This is the day after the Sabbath, just another routine day in a gloomy week about to unfold—or is it a new day perhaps, the eighth day, an unimaginable day? According to Matthew, the women bring no spices to tend to the body because there is no need for this: Jesus is dead and his body has been sealed in a tomb behind a huge stone. In the absence of any expectations beyond the stink of death, there is a great earthquake and an angel appears and rolls back the stone and sits on it. This is

beyond the hope or comprehension of any reasonable person.

The angel calls to mind other angels, ones that have appeared to Joseph, Mary, and the shepherds. Once again, an angel says, “Do not be afraid.” The angel at the tomb is not an invitation to be intrigued by angelology. Far more important, the angel summons us to attend to the message: “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” Angels bear good news from heaven that death has been destroyed and this is all that matters when discussing angels!

Upon hearing the news that Jesus has been raised, the women leave quickly, with fear and with joy, to tell the disciples. Unlike the other gospels where trembling, astonishment, and fear are in evidence, Matthew adds joy. And as the women go on their way, Jesus greets them on the road.

The variations in the resurrection accounts are stunning. The differences will scandalize some but clearly there is something critically important afoot. The gospel accounts, each in their own way, tell the resurrection story so that it can be heard by different people in different times. The task of effective preaching is similar: we do not come to the tomb with stock answers but rather craft our story-telling in a fashion that will enable all who gather on Easter morning to hear and to celebrate that Christ is risen.

Pastoral Reflections

As we preachers look out over the congregation on Easter, we might wonder why people have come. Of course, they have come for a variety of reasons. The gospels offer different slants for those who have gathered. Some people are delighted; life is to be celebrated and Easter is a joyous affair. Others are apprehensive; they will leave the empty tomb, not kicking up their heels as much as pondering all this in their hearts. Some are frightened and depressed; they desperately want to find the stone rolled away and any community worth its salt will do its best to embrace them with hope. Some familiar with the church’s well-worn ways expect only to be bored yet again. Which slant will inform the preacher’s sermon this Easter: delight, disbelief, fear, boredom? Whoever is present, the news of Christ’s resurrection if told with sensitivity, passion, and joy, might surprise them and change their lives forever.

The women did not at first see Jesus at the tomb. All they heard was, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” Just words! And yet, with words came fear and great joy—what an unusual combination. Isn’t this the feeling we should have as we approach the pulpit on Easter? A throng has gathered. Some are befuddled, others come to pay their respects and to hear a eulogy, some hope the preacher’s words will set their world upside down for the better. Much to their surprise, flowers are everywhere, they sing to the accom-

paniment of timpani and trumpets, and they witness people making fools of themselves as they shout, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” There is a reckless audacity that makes them shudder.

Like the guards who shook, preachers should have a good case of nerves as Easter fast approaches. The preacher is entrusted with the awesome responsibility of speaking of the Risen Savior and, with words spoken well and carefully, can turn the world upside down and for the better. There is cause for fear—and, remarkably, there is cause for joy. Nervousness that inspires on such an occasion is an invaluable gift from God—if knees are not knocking come Easter morning, it is probably best the preacher refrains from mounting the pulpit steps.

We too easily underestimate the power of words. The people who have stirred me have believed in the power of well-crafted words. I remember hearing William Sloane Coffin preach to a packed chapel, to Christians and Jews, agnostics and atheists: his words mattered when people longed for action and were suspicious of churchy words. Might we be living in similar days? Let us make our words count!

I wonder, though, if we pastors feel guilty spending too much time with words. Isn't there more to ministry than preaching? We dare not forfeit the power of words entrusted to us. As we prepare our Easter sermons, let us remember the words of the great sportswriter Red Smith, “Writing is easy. You just open a vein and bleed.”

As one of my liturgy professors urged, on Easter we should “pull out the stops and let ‘er rip.” Choirs and ushers, altar guilds and Sunday school teachers, refreshment preparers and assisting ministers, and, yes indeed, preachers, we should all come with fear and great joy. There is no better opportunity to proclaim that Christ has been raised than on Easter morning. Let our knees knock and let us sing, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!”

Wilk Miller

Second Sunday of Easter April 23, 2017

Acts 2:14a, 22–32

Psalm 16

1 Peter 1:3–9

John 20:19–31

Engaging the Texts

In Luther's *Small Catechism*, Luther focuses on the words “for you” in explaining the sacrament of the Eucharist. (Martin Luther. *Small Catechism*, translated by Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016], 49-51). Forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are things that God does *for us*. They

are not done generally or without personal reference, but for *each one of us*—the “you” (pl) to whom Jesus speaks in the gospels. Nor are these actions done *by us*, as though such great gifts are within human control.

It is telling, then, that this same object of action recurs in all of our texts today. These texts and the divine actions described are addressed to the second person plural “you”—or, for the sake of us who are their audience—“us,” the seekers and believers who meet these words in the Scriptures today.

In Acts, Peter addresses “*You* that are Israelites” (2:22), describing Jesus as a man “attested to *you*” (2:22), “handed over to *you*” and crucified by *you* (2:23), and finally (though this last part is not included in our selected text) pouring out God's Holy Spirit “that *you* [might] both see and hear” (2:33).

First Peter declares God “has given *us* new birth into a living hope...and into an inheritance...kept in heaven *for you*” (1:3–4). And John tells us, “these [signs] are written so that *you* may come to believe...and that through believing *you* may have life in [Christ's] name” (20:31).

What may not be as readily apparent is *who* God's people are. Who is addressed in the life-giving, hope-sustaining “you” of these texts? In light of the rise of anti-Jewish threats and acts of violence in recent months, it is particularly important to be clear on this point, lest the “you” of God's promise be read to exclude, or worse, condemn our Jewish sisters and brothers. It is worth considering an expansion of the lectionary selection from Acts to include verse 33, lest we leave Peter's address to the Jews in the negative.

Here it is important to remember that the early church addressed the gospel of Christ's life, death, and resurrection to *all people*—Jews and Gentiles—for the purpose of conversion. John's gospel was no exception. These Christians were motivated by a desire for all people to experience the joy they found in Christ; however, they did not believe that the inheritance they had in Christ forestalled the promise the Jewish people already celebrated through Abraham. Moreover, this is a promise addressed and intended for *all* people who come to know God through the reading of Holy Scripture.

Pastoral Reflections

During Holy Week, we often emphasize the role that collective humanity had in the crucifixion of Jesus. Theologically, this finds its place in a substitutionary view of atonement that rests upon Jesus dying *in our place* as a sacrifice for our sins. Historically, this is often played out by equating twenty-first century Christians with a group of first-century Israelites who the gospels describe calling for the crucifixion of Christ. Liturgically, such an emphasis is often made manifest by a symbolic action such as nailing our sins to a wooden cross.

However, historically, Jesus was killed because of the concrete actions *he* took to incite hope in an oppressed people.

Although we can never be certain how many (if any) Jewish collaborators participated in his arrest and execution, we know the Roman imperial government played a primary role. Theologically, there are also multiple ways to understand the atoning purpose of Jesus' death.

Rather than focusing on the complicity of a minority of first-century Jewish leaders in Jesus' death, which can have confusing (if not devastating) consequences in an interfaith environment; or on the concomitant complicity of twenty-first century Christians to instill contrition and penitence, the preacher may do better to focus on God's role *through* Jesus, *for us*.

First Peter describes it this way: "By *God's great mercy* God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1:3b). The forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation that we celebrate are not predicated upon *any* human action. These are all *free gifts* from a God who loves us—even in our sinfulness—so much that God chose to confront the evils and sins of this fallen world, including the Roman imperial government, in the person of Jesus Christ, even to the point of execution on a cross.

We have hope not because we repent, nor because we believe. We have hope because God *is our refuge* (Ps 16:1). Because God did not and does not give up on us. In John's gospel account, the disciples in the upper room see Jesus not because of their own foresight to be in the room at that moment, but because of *Jesus' word* to them: "Peace be with you" (20:19–20). Before that, Jesus was among them, but they did not see. So, too, for us, Scripture records the signs of Jesus and the Holy Spirit breathes on each of us *so that we may believe*. So that we may see God and God's world in a new light. So that we may have hope.

In this season of Christ's resurrection, let us celebrate this hope—God's action for us—every one of us, no matter who or what we are!

Amy Lindeman Allen

Third Sunday of Easter April 30, 2017

Acts 2:14a, 36–41

Psalm 116:1–4, 12–19

1 Peter 1:17–23

Luke 24:13–35

Engaging the Texts

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus testify that Jesus "was a prophet mighty in deed and word" (Luke 24:19). Had Jesus been merely a great speaker, his words would have been empty and the promise void. Likewise, had he performed

mighty deeds without connecting them with the coming of God's Kingdom, he would have received the thanks of many, but the impact of his life would not have stretched beyond his geographical confines or his own generation.

By combining his mighty words and deeds together, Jesus made a compelling witness for God's action in human history that stretches beyond time and space. By doing good and showing love in the name of a good and loving God, Jesus inaugurates God's kingdom in which God's people are themselves called to proclaim God's love in word and deed.

It is significant, then, that the disciples from Emmaus do exactly that! Although they are overtaken by grief, when they encounter a stranger on the road, they testify to him about the power and witness of Jesus. Then, when they reach their home, they invite this same stranger in to protect him from the dangers of the evening.

Later, of course, through this stranger's own words and deeds—his teaching and breaking of bread—these same disciples discover that they were entertaining Jesus all along. But first, as they meet on the road, they humbly model the example that he has already set for them.

Similarly, our psalmist, in giving thanks for God's life-giving deeds by way of relief of an illness, declares, "Because God inclined God's ear to me, therefore I will call on God as long as I live...I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord" (Ps 116:2, 17). God's word of life and act of healing cause a new word of hope and act of thanksgiving on the part of the psalmist.

This close relationship between action and proclamation are at the heart of the epistle of 1 Peter. The author suggests that having been obedient to the truth [God's word], the believers thus "have genuine mutual love" [a love lived out through action] (1:22) and again that they "have been born anew...through the living and enduring word of God" (1:23).

It is this combination of the power of divine word and deed that leads to the baptism of so many people at the end of Peter's address in Acts. Having heard the word of God, those who believed felt compelled to act on this word. Faith and works are thus intertwined in service to Christ who both faithfully lived and proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom.

Pastoral Reflections

As Lutherans, we believe that a sacrament is the combination of two things—a promise of God (God's Word) and a sign given by God (a physical element). In the case of baptism, this is the promise of new life in Christ through the experience of water—an element known to be both cleansing and life-giving.

This is easy enough to practice in worship. However, when we move into living out our faith in our daily lives, we often focus on the elements—the tangible actions that we do

without always attaching them to the promise of God. This feels more comfortable in our post-Christian world. Particularly as a progressive Christian, I find it easier not to attach my deeds to the brand of Christianity that has offended so many.

And yet, it's not how God calls us to live. It's not how Jesus modeled the way. And it's certainly not how the early Christians and Israelites engaged in God's mission. While doing kind deeds and engaging in mutual love is fantastic, if this is as far as we go, if we don't confidently claim that we do these things—indeed, that we are only *able* to do these things—by the grace and the power of God, then our actions remain empty. They do good in the moment, but are unable to inspire hope and new life beyond that moment.

However, if all we do is talk about how we value life—how God values life—and do not actually act in favor of life, then we are hypocritical. We do not only devalue the promise of the Gospel entrusted to us, but we make it more difficult for others to hear God's promise in light of our false actions.

As Lutherans, as Christians, we are called to proclaim the word of God in word *and* deed. We are called to welcome and break bread with the stranger. We are called to minister to the sick. We are called to practice mutual love and to discipline ourselves against any contrary human desires. This is the example set for us in Christ. It is what is commended to us in Acts and 1 Peter. It is the action out of which the psalmist, healed from an illness, cannot help but respond.

This life, lived through the power of the Holy Spirit, is our baptismal vocation. It is the path to which we are called when we promise to seek justice in all the world and proclaim Christ in word and deed. Although it may not always seem easy, although its impact may not always be clear, it has a power for hope and transformation beyond any human deed or word.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 7, 2017

Acts 2:42–47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19–25

John 10: 1–10

Engaging the Texts

As a social activist, I am humbled by today's reading from Acts 2. The early Christians didn't just stand in solidarity with the marginalized, "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:45). Scholars have called into question the existence of such an ideal commune on both historical and textual grounds.

But even if Acts 2 represents an ideal that was never truly reached, the bar has been set. And it has been set *high*.

If the contrition I feel at falling short of this self-less Acts community were not enough, we also have 1 Peter. This text tells us, "For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly" (2:19).

So, for those keeping track: Sell all you have and give to those in need, suffer for righteousness sake, and don't complain. Do these things and, the author of 1 Peter suggests, "you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls" (2:25).

Before going any further, a word of caution: 1 Peter addresses slaves and ought to be reproached for this. Although the social context was one in which the Christian movement would have suffered reproach for preaching the release of slaves, popular opinion ought never be a rationale for human suffering. Christians need to be reminded that our God who frees people from suffering and bondage never asks us to remain in abusive relationships by free choice or otherwise.

Our God certainly never suggests that we should seek suffering or abuse. However, when we do experience pain or reproach for seeking after righteousness, this is not to be spurned. Likewise, Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27). This means giving what we do not need (and honestly discerning what we truly need), but not giving to the point of our own deprivation. Even the idyllic Acts 2 Christians shared their possessions and continued to break bread together.

Nevertheless, the examples of these early Christians in Acts and 1 Peter are all *good* things to do within the right context. But they are good things *because* they give us a picture of the way in which we can live a Christ-centered life. They are not intended to be battering rods with which to make one another feel bad because we are not fully living this life in the present.

For this reason, the image of Christ as Shepherd takes central place in my reading of this text. For, while the sheep know the Shepherd's voice and follow the Shepherd, it is the *Shepherd* who leads the sheep. When a sheep is lost, it is the *Shepherd* who seeks that sheep out (Luke 15:3–7).

Therefore, in the face of insurmountable odds, in a world always in need of more mercy, we can take comfort in the words of the psalmist: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me" (Ps 23:4).

Pastoral Reflections

When someone walks into my office, one of the first things they see is a small wooden sheepfold. The gates are made with Lincoln Logs. Inside the fold, painted wooden sheep gather around their shepherd. This isn't really a toy so

much as devotional material and its origin is a children's faith formation program titled "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd." The sheepfold helps children three to six years old unfold the promise of gospel.

It works like this: In the first lesson, the catechist tells the story of the Good Shepherd from John 10, emphasizing that the sheep know their shepherd's voice and the shepherd calls his own sheep by name. Together, the catechist and the children re-enact the story using the materials, while the catechist wonders with the children how wonderful it must be to be one of these sheep the shepherd cares for so much. Over time, as the children continue to return to the sheepfold, the catechist reaffirms the story and encourages deeper wondering in the child. Wondering together about the names that the shepherd calls the sheep, the catechist is able to watch the child's comprehension of the parable deepen over time.

Having experienced this method with groups of children, it is a joy to watch them move from playfully calling their flock names like "Fluffy" and "Baa Baa" to beckoning the sheep with their own names and the names of their friends and family members. In this transition, the children internalize the promise that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, cares for *us* and calls *us each* individually by *name*.

Indeed, our Acts reading picks up immediately from last week when "those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized" (Acts 2:41)—a baptism which, just as it does today, calls each believer *by name*, a child of God, marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever.

It is from this personal relationship with God who knows us, cares for us, and leads us beside still waters (Ps 23:2) that the mutuality and fellowship of the Acts community flows.

The model of the Acts community is thus not intended to be a model of works-based righteousness, but an example (among many included in the New Testament) of how people called and inspired to a vocation of discipleship by Christ might live together and in service to our Shepherd.

Amy Lindeman Allen

Fifth Sunday of Easter May 14, 2017

Acts 7:55–60

Psalm 31:1–5, 15–16

1 Peter 2:2–10

John 14:1–14

Engaging the Texts

The gospel text for this week is one that is commonly read in the context of funerals and memorial services. This is a reading of comfort and strength for many. It holds the prom-

ise of God's dwelling place with many rooms along with the promise that Jesus goes to prepare a place for the followers. Standing in the tradition of Israel (evoking images of intimacy with God and the House of the Lord), this text from the Gospel of John lifts up a safe haven for the faithful into the ages of ages. Dr. Allen Callahan, a scholar who focuses on Johannine writings, emphasizes the significance of community, home, and safety in the context of desert and nomadic communities in the Ancient Middle East. Yet, within the lectionary reading even the disciples struggle with what Jesus is telling them. Thomas doesn't seem to think the disciples know the way to this holy dwelling and Philip asks Jesus again to show them the way. The disciples long for assurance, and likely this is the message we long to hear at funerals and in the sermon this Sunday within our own contexts. Especially when the text is coupled with the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen and a psalmist seeking help from God, people long to be reminded of something greater in the face of danger and death. Preachers have the opportunity to acknowledge the challenges in our lives and to turn our attention with the psalmist and the gospel to the promise of refuge and dwelling place. Depending on context and events in the congregation, this day offers the opportunity to challenge people with the witness of Stephen, to offer comfort to those who need to hear a word of hope or strength, or to create a space in which to accomplish both. In all things, though, God is lifted up as the place of sanctuary and everlasting hope.

Pastoral Reflections

Many years ago I came to know a man named Moses in Uganda. Moses was building a house outside of his village. Over the years this house has become a haven for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender in need of safety in the midst of a harsh church and political realities in his country. The house has also been a place of employment and safety for an albino man who is threatened by the dominant culture. It seems that whoever is struggling, is unsafe, or is being marginalized, Moses welcomes these people into his home and offers care and strength for the journey. He creates a space, a safe haven. Today's texts of refuge and holy dwelling place make me think of Moses as one who provides a place of welcome when life and the world seem stacked against people. In much the same way the work of sanctuary congregations across the United States speaks to the belief that we create a holy dwelling place for migrants and those on the margins. Yet the work of Moses in Uganda and the work of sanctuary congregations is not easy—this is faithful and risky business. Faithful people are putting themselves on the line much like Stephen. The image of people engaging in the creation of God's home is powerful when set alongside 1 Peter 2:2–10 with its image of people becoming living stones built into a priesthood. What a

gift to imagine people building the holy dwelling place “here on earth, as it is in heaven.” If one goes with the 1 Peter text, the story of the Jewish people building the booths of Sukkot, becomes a wonderful image, as people construct a holy place to remember God’s dwelling among them on earth. Throughout the lectionary today, the images of refuge and holy habitation for God’s people become a refrain and promise for all. The texts offer comfort to those longing to know promise, perhaps in the face of a diagnosis, addiction, broken relationships, or the loss of a loved one. At the same time these texts offer challenge and call for faith-filled people to engage the promise of God’s refuge and dwelling place here and now and into life everlasting.

Brad Froslee

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 21, 2017

Acts 17:22–31

Psalm 66:8–20

1 Peter 3:13–22

John 14:15–21

Engaging the Texts

There has been a resurgence of conversation around testimony and the power it holds in worship and preaching. Preachers and teachers such as Anna Carter Florence, Thomas Long, and Walter Brueggemann have highlighted this movement. The word “testimony” comes from the Latin root word meaning “to witness,” and strives to capture the Greek word, *martureo*, utilized in the New Testament. In the lectionary for this Sunday there is a running theme of ways that people of God live their testimony. There is the wonderful image of Paul going into a cross-cultural context in ancient Greece and walking through the city and stumbling across an inscription “to an unknown God.” That discovery opens doors to speak to a new community of the “God made known in Christ.” In the psalm, testimony moves from sacrifices in the temple to the telling of the mighty works God has done. The text from 1 Peter encourages the community not to fear, but to make a defense (a witness) for hope in Christ. The gospel calls the disciples of Jesus to become a living testimony as they keep the commandments and show their love for Jesus. Throughout these texts there is an experience of how the testimony—the telling—of God at work in the world and in the lives of people is transformational. In the context of a gathering with friends (in the gospel) or in encountering people new to the story of Jesus (in the first lesson) or simply in recounting the acts of God (referenced in the psalm), we are invited to engage deeply in the story of faith and living our testimony

Pastoral Reflections

As a junior in high school I traveled with a 4-H youth trip to the USSR. Toward the end of the trip we took a bus ride with several of the youth who were hosting us and our translators. We made conversation about family, our parents’ employment, pets, school, sports—then one of the young men asked if we were Christians. Prior to our travel, we had been instructed to be very careful about our language around faith and Christianity while in the Soviet Union. Yet, it became clear that with this small group there was great curiosity. Finally, I noted that I was Christian and part of the Lutheran tradition; another 4-Her noted that she was Roman Catholic. One by one each of us Americans noted that we were Christians. Then the Russian teenager in the group who had asked the question pulled a crucifix on a necklace out from under his shirt. Then one by one many of the Russians pulled out crosses or began telling stories of being baptized or being part of a faith community. In this foreign land, we stumbled across images and words that allowed us to share stories of God and faith. We opened ourselves to a hope greater than Cold War destruction. Before leaving these youth, we shared a meal of jello, cookies, and popcorn (gifts we had brought from the US). It seemed fitting to have a type of communion that shared friendship and care for each other.

The lessons for today invite us into greater conversation about how we tell and live our stories of faith. Even in the midst of difficult times we look to opportunities, words, and actions that reveal the promise of God—our lives become a testimony.

This week, what are the ways the community might reflect on opportunities to tell the story of faith to those from different backgrounds? What words are used to engage those who have never heard the promise of God in Christ? How might pastors and congregations truly see the inscriptions around us in culture and engage in a fuller conversation, as Paul did?

What are the ways we are called to defend or give an account of hope? In the wake of the past presidential election, we live in an increasingly divided nation. How does the church speak a witness of life and hope in the face of brokenness? How in the gospel witness today are we called to be a living testimony that points to making God known in love and keeping of commandments?

Today may provide an opportunity for one or two members of your congregation or community to share personal testimonies as “Faith Stories” or to weave them into a sermon. The idea of testimony often resonates with people who come out of evangelical, multicultural, or recovery communities and may serve as a bridge to be in deeper relationship as we “talk the walk” of faith.

Brad Froslee

Ascension of Our Lord May 25, 2017

Acts 1:1–11

Psalm 47 or Psalm 93

Ephesians 1:15–23

Luke 24:44–53

Engaging the Texts: Acts 1:1–11

With such a brief introduction to the Book of Acts, it may be tempting to rush on to get to the action. It may also be tempting to give priority to the gospel text. Instead, let us slow down and appreciate the details that pave the way in Acts. Even if Acts is not your preferred text, it may help to inform preaching on Luke's ascension.

Listeners need to know that Acts continues the story that began in Luke. The assembly has been hearing a lot from John in recent weeks, with just a little bit of Luke on Easter 3 and today. In the author's day, it was necessary to remind people of what had taken place in the past before moving ahead. It may be helpful for the preacher as well as the assembly to get reacquainted with Luke as a resource for understanding what will happen next—or what could, or even what should, happen next. This story begins with an ending (the end of Jesus' earthly ministry as they knew it). His followers look to "all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning" to guide them when he is no longer with them.

In the first sentence we are not only directed to the past but encouraged to look toward the future with the promise of "instructions through the Holy Spirit." The author speaks as if the audience already knows what is coming. Perhaps they do. That is certainly the case for most in our preaching context. Therefore, we are to hear the ascension story while anticipating "the sound like the rush of a violent wind" that will soon follow. There will be very little time for the disciples to catch their breath before the Spirit rushes in and exhales them into the world as apostles.

Only two sentences in, the author feels a need to present "proof" that the resurrection did in fact take place. According to the New Interpreter's Bible commentary on Acts, this specific word, *Tekmerion*, appears in ancient rhetoric to describe "the hard evidence that convinces the skeptic or confirms the authority of the apologist (40)." There were still people in the community who doubted, as well as believers who were on the defensive. This is really not so surprising. Don't forget that the disciples refused the women's proclamation as an "idle tale." In the Emmaus story two disciples didn't recognize Jesus even when he was standing next to them. In our communities, as well, there is a struggle to trust even though we have once again lived through Good Friday and Easter morning. The

word "proof" may direct us back to the gospel of Luke. The witness of scripture provides an important resource to reassure the believer and strengthen faith.

In the next sentence, there is a reference to Jesus' activity during the 40 days. We do not know much about what Jesus did or said during those days, but we are told that he spoke of the kingdom of God. Looking back at Luke, images of the kingdom of God have very little similarity to an earthly kingdom. Therefore, it is a little disappointing that the disciples ask, "Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus' teaching did not seem to sink in. For his part, Jesus doesn't bother to correct them or even answer their question. Instead, he answers the question he wanted them to ask: "How can we take part in bringing the kingdom of God?" The disciples ask for Jesus to act. Jesus responds by saying what will happen to them and how they will act. Jesus is already shifting agency from himself to his followers, always a step or two ahead of them.

Now we get to the exciting part—lift off! The scene echoes stories from the recent and distant past. The moment brings to mind the last glimpses of Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11 as he ascended in a whirlwind. In that account, a follower is left to move forward on his own. In Acts, Jesus is taken out of sight by a cloud, evoking the cloud that led the Hebrew people in the wilderness and the cloud that descended on the mount of transfiguration. Jesus has barely disappeared and the disciples are jolted out of their reverie by two men in white robes. This brings to mind the two men in white at the tomb in Luke. They move the action forward—in both cases interrupting what could have been a very long time of dumb-founded staring, short-lived.

Pastoral Reflections

Ascension is not just a moment of looking back. It is also a time to anticipate the future. The past is a resource, but the Spirit is on her way with something new for the next phase of ministry. This moment is just a brief pause. As we saw in Acts, the disciples cannot stand there indefinitely, gazing up at the sky in awe. The two men in white give them very little time before nudging them onward.

Ascension is a brief pause on the way for today's disciples. This festival is an opportunity to celebrate the resources of the past and begin dreaming about the gifts the Spirit will soon bring. Is there a way to encourage both reminiscing and imagining? Consider a time of sharing about the congregation's past year or reach back further into history. Take time also to lift up hopes for the future of this ministry. This is an opportunity to involve many voices in the worship or preaching—empowering individuals across the generations to prepare and offer brief reflections. Where is the push to move on coming from? Is there a need in the wider community that is calling

these disciples to get moving? While pastors may often fancy themselves to be the ones who nudge the community forward, is there some other messenger showing up and calling these followers to keep going? Perhaps the festival itself calls for a movement away from the expected. Ascension does not have to be marked with a traditional worship service. Consider marking the ascension with something more informal, such as a meal with scripture and conversation.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 28, 2017

Acts 1: 6–14

Psalm 68: 1–10, 32–35

1 Peter 4:12–14; 5:6–11

John 17:1–11

Engaging the Texts: John 17:1–11

John 17 is not an ascension text. These words come shortly before Jesus is lifted up on the cross. Even if your congregation did not observe the preceding festival, the Acts story appears here again in an abbreviated version. Consult the previous commentary for some insight into what is omitted from this Sunday's lesson from Acts. If you don't want to miss out on ascension, the preacher may find it useful to expand the Acts text and make it the focus of this Sunday's worship. If not, some similar themes are heard in the gospel this week. We've been spending a lot of time with the gospel of John during Lent and Easter—and that is by no means an argument against sticking with it. The preacher and the assembly should by now be familiar with John's voice and story, which can be very useful for engaging with another one of Jesus' complex monologues.

Echoing the ascension scene in Acts, this is also a transitional scene in the story of the church. As we pause for a moment here, Jesus reminds us of everything that came before. As the disciples listen in, maybe they remember the glorious signs they have seen Jesus perform. Each of these signs pointed to some aspect of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Eavesdropping on the prayer we sense some of the intimacy of this relationship in action. Once again, the disciples find themselves confused by Jesus' words, bringing to mind many other times they did not get what he was saying. Intrigued, but confused, those within earshot tend to draw in closer to Jesus, lingering a little longer. As we see again and again in John, the result may not be greater understanding, but rather, a deeper relationship with Jesus.

This is not the first time we have seen Jesus pray like this. Recall the moment before raising Lazarus where Jesus prays

very publicly for the benefit of all who hear. Perhaps we are to think back to that moment when Jesus approached the tomb, then astonished all with new life. That resurrection was just the dress rehearsal for what would come next. Don't forget that the raising of Lazarus is also the occasion for Jesus' opponents to begin plotting against him. Both of these prayers anticipate threat as well as promise. The word "glorify" in Jesus' prayer may sparkle and shine, but it is also tarnished with grim foreboding.

This prayer does not simply direct the listener to look back, but it makes a turn toward the future in the final verse of the pericope. In the verses that follow, Jesus shifts his focus to the future of the ministry and his hopes for the disciples. While we may stop short of hearing the rest, we do get a hint of what may be coming by including verse 11. Jesus begins the prayer by drawing our attention to the past, but leaves us facing the unknown future. However, the disciples do not go forward unequipped. Jesus prays for the resources they will need in the days ahead—protection, grace, unity, relationship.

Pastoral Reflections

I'll never forget what it was like to proclaim portions of Jesus' last supper monologue when I was preparing to leave my first parish. I had not yet resigned. As I spoke those words of goodbye I was painfully aware of everything that was already taking place—and all that they did not know or could not understand. Caught up in my own intense emotions, Jesus' rambling and repetition made so much more sense. Of course! How does one say goodbye—honoring the time together, communicating the love that is felt, expressing hope for those they are leaving behind? It is impossible to put a relationship into words. Jesus has tried throughout the gospel of John, but ultimately all words and signs point back to the truth that a relationship cannot be explained, it can only be experienced.

To this end, consider how you can help your assembly experience Jesus in this moment. This passage is a little complicated, but it is not long. Could this be an opportunity for the preacher or someone else to commit these words to memory, to try to embody them? The experience of this passage should be of one listening to another praying from the bottom of their heart, not of another reading from a page. There is intense emotion here. Imagine watching someone you love deeply pray out loud on your behalf. Imagine that this prayer comes moments before the parting of death. Words will fail to express what body language can convey. If preaching is an event, so should be the proclamation of the gospel. It will not be possible to explain it later if it isn't captured somehow in the telling.

The church is on the verge of Pentecost, but isn't that always the case? We are always poised, waiting to receive the

next inspiration, the next equipping, the next sending out. Both scriptures from Acts and John remind us that the present moment is only to be a brief respite. The two men in white will not let the disciples keep staring up into heaven. Jesus will call an end to this dinner party and lead them out into the night. The church is to keep moving. We need these moments to gather, to look back to the past, and also to hear the promises of the future. But it won't be too long before some messenger shows up and reminds us that it is time to get going again.

Sarah Trone Garriott

Pentecost June 4, 2017

Numbers 11:24–30

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Acts 2:1–21

John 20:19–23

Engaging the Texts

The Spirit cannot be contained. Whether it comes in the rush of a violent wind or tongues of fire, the Spirit is a powerful, unsettling force. Even when the disciples receive the Holy Spirit from the risen Christ, that Spirit does not stay in one place. Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” but he adds: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” but he immediately talks about their power to forgive. The Spirit is not meant to be hoarded or confined within borders. The Spirit is on the move and sends us out to do the difficult work of testifying and forgiving.

The Spirit cannot be contained, but it does not always get a warm reception. In Numbers 11, the minute the Spirit rests on Eldad and Medad and they begin to prophesy, someone runs to tattle to Moses about it. Joshua then pleads with Moses to stop the two men. In the Pentecost story from Acts, the impressive linguistic work of the Spirit gets a mixed reaction. At best the people are perplexed by what they hear from the disciples. The more cynical among the crowd sneer, “They are filled with new wine.”

Moses' response to the critics of Eldad and Medad is a pointed one: “Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” As if in response to that question, Acts 2 quotes the prophet Joel: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” *All flesh*. What if all the Lord's people were prophets, on fire with the Spirit? What would that look like? How would it change the world?

Pastoral Reflections

When was the last time you were truly surprised? There's something unsettling about surprises, even good ones. They challenge our illusion of control. They shake us loose from the settled routines that make us feel safe.

I don't know what the disciples expected as they waited together on that Day of Pentecost. I'm sure they never predicted what happened next. They could not possibly have planned that a rush of violent wind would come sweeping through their lives, up-ending everything.

God has a great track record when it comes to surprising people. God surprised Moses by calling him into leadership with some flaming shrubbery. God surprised Naomi and Ruth by leading them from famine to a new future. God surprised David by promoting him from unknown shepherd to famous king. God sent Jesus, who took surprises to a whole new level, with the turning of water into wine and walking on water and coming back from the dead. God is good at surprises.

On the particular Festival of Pentecost we hear about in Acts 2, God pulls one of the biggest surprises of all. These ordinary people were suddenly thrown into the public square. With no time to prepare, they find themselves preaching in languages they had never learned to people from every corner of the known world. I suspect no one was more surprised than the disciples themselves.

It's quite a story. It makes me wonder if we're willing to be surprised by the Spirit today. Don't we prefer our order, our routine, our plans, our ideas about how things are supposed to be? What would it be like to let ourselves get shaken up every now and then? What might the Spirit be doing to unsettle us right now—in our own lives and in the lives of our congregations?

“The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon” once featured an invention by two recent college graduates. Seth Robertson and Viet Tran, engineering students at George Mason University, figured out how to put out a fire with sound. They blasted the flames with low-frequency sound waves in the 30–60 hertz range (think about the “thump thump” bass line in hip-hop music). Somehow those sound waves agitated the air in such a way that it extinguished the fire and kept it from reigniting.

That invention reflects what we often do in response to the fire of the Spirit. God stirs up something in us, lights a fire—and we fight back with our own sound waves. We talk ourselves out of what the Spirit is urging us to do. We douse the flames with a flood of words and arguments and rationales. Our own logic or self-doubt becomes a spiritual fire extinguisher.

On that Acts 2 Day of Pentecost, the opposite happens. The fire of the Spirit gives birth to new words, new languages, new ways of speaking and new ways of hearing. That fire

spreads so that it includes all people—young and old, slave and free, women and men. It ignites a movement that will extend far beyond Jerusalem, carried along by all those confused, astonished, disoriented listeners who refused to ignore this strange and wonderful turn of events. The Spirit—and the good news it carries—can be neither contained nor controlled.

I wonder what the Spirit will put before us in the days ahead. What will move us in new directions? What visions and dreams will be made possible? May we live into the surprises that await us, trusting in that unsettling Spirit to lead us.

Christa Compton

Holy Trinity June 11, 2017

Genesis 1:1—2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

Matthew 28:16–20

Engaging the Texts

The question addressed to God in Psalm 8 is one point of departure for this day: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” This question captures our longing to be in relationship to God, and the Trinity provides some answers about how God responds to that longing.

The creation story from Genesis 1:1—2:4a establishes not just God’s creating power, but also that the Spirit has been there from the very beginning, as the wind swept over the face of the waters. The creation of humankind in God’s image shows how much God desires a connection with humanity.

The familiar Great Commission of Matthew 28 gives us the most explicit language of Trinity. We are instructed to baptize in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But we are also told to *teach* people about Jesus—which suggests a longer, more complex relationship. Jesus promises to be with us always, and his presence empowers us to walk with others.

Together these texts remind us that God wants our relationships with each other to reflect the mutual interdependence and love of the Trinity. In 2 Corinthians, we hear: “Agree with one another, live in peace.” We struggle to follow that instruction, which may be why we need the Trinity even when it perplexes us.

Pastoral Reflections

A few years ago, I hoped to catch a glimpse of the much-hyped “honey moon”—the full moon that gets its name from the warm color provided by the haze and humidity of the midsummer air. Much to my disappointment, the east coast sky was so cloudy that I could see almost nothing—just a faint glow somewhere behind the clouds. I awoke the next morning to pictures of a gorgeous full moon shared by friends on the west coast. They raved about how beautiful it was.

But I didn’t want to hear about other people’s experiences. I didn’t want to see *their* pictures or read about *their* awe and wonder. Nor did I want to read the scientific explanations about the times in the lunar cycle when the moon is at its shortest distance from the earth. Neither the testimony of friends nor the expertise of scientists could satisfy me. I wanted to experience it for myself.

On Trinity Sunday, our listeners want more than someone else’s experiences or explanations of the Trinity. They want to encounter it in a more personal way. The Trinity is, after all, about relationship.

The creation story from Genesis offers one entry into what the Trinity has to do with relationship. Here we have God the creator—the One who speaks into existence the wonders of this world—the light and dark, the sky and earth, the waters and the dry land, the seeds and fruit and vegetation, the stars and seasons, the sun and moon. And the creatures: the swarms, the herds, the pods, the flocks, the litters, and the broods. This staggering variety comes from the One who was present from the beginning—the One who created us in God’s image and was there at the beginning of our lives too. The One who looks at creation and calls it *good*.

All of that *is* good, but it isn’t the whole story. That same God sought another kind of relationship with us in the person of Jesus, the Word made flesh, who lived among us so that we would know that blind people can see again and outcasts can be welcomed home and everyone can be fed. Jesus, to whom all authority on heaven and earth has been given, shares some of that authority with us. He entrusts us with the sacred responsibilities of baptizing and teaching.

All of that is good too, but it still isn’t the whole story. There is yet another way that the divine love is with us—in the Holy Spirit. Genesis tells us that the Spirit was there from the beginning too, sweeping over the face of the waters and stirring the new creation to life. That Spirit is with us still, shaking us up and sending us out.

All of that is good, but it still isn’t the whole story. Our triune God continues to create and connect us. Frederick Buechner writes in his book *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC’s of Faith*:

Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours God creates something new out of

them. If you think you're seeing the same show all over again seven times a week, you're crazy. Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and never will be the same again, either (69).

Creation is ongoing. Father, Son, and Spirit are with us still. Each of us will experience that creation in our own way. Some of us encounter the Trinity as ocean waves pull the sand from beneath our feet. Some of us experience the Trinity as we feed the hungry or care for the dying. Others find that connection in the satisfaction of daily work or the opportunity to worship and pray with others. Even in the smallest things—the soft breath of sleeping children, the pinch of a mosquito bite on an ankle, the vibration of the symphony's final chord—God is still creating.

All of these moments are details added to the story of a God who never tires of dreaming up ways to be in relationship with us.

It turns out that God was right. Creation *is* good—and it is still unfolding, day after day.

Christa Compton

Second Sunday after Pentecost June 18, 2017

Exodus 19:2–8a

Psalms 100

Romans 5:1–8

Matthew 9:35–10:8

Summer is arriving, and this Sunday marks the presence of new, or renewed, beginnings. Easter has concluded and Trinity Sunday is in the rearview mirror. The lectionary offers congregations the opportunity to embark on a journey through a large portion of Matthew, following the narrative for a five-month period until the church year concludes. A fourteen-week-long road trip through a large and rich region of Romans also starts today. Preachers may want to devote some effort this Sunday to orienting their hearers to where they are in these two books, as well as previewing some themes that will recur during the upcoming months.

Engaging the Texts

Following the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spends the bulk of Matthew 8–9 performing extraordinary deeds, delivering people from illness and oppression, and summoning followers. Just when one might expect the Gospel to develop into a story about a man who is determined to heal as many people as he can as quickly as he can, Jesus signals a shift

in strategy. He remains compassionate toward the weary and downtrodden, but the sheer magnitude of human suffering leads him also to introduce something new: the need for the Lord “to send out laborers” (Matt 9:38).

Jesus then appears to respond to that need, for he designates twelve apostles and equips them to do the same kind of deeds he has been doing: driving out unclean spirits and curing illnesses. He intends for them to proclaim the same “kingdom” he has been proclaiming.

Jesus does not keep his ministry all to himself. He shares it. First, he sends his followers to the people of Israel. Later in the story the scope of their work will expand to “all nations” (Matt 28:19). At that time, Jesus commissions his friends to continue his ministry in his power, for he remains with them “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). The church's ministry today finds its roots, therefore, in Jesus' commands to his disciples. They are sharers of his work, not just beneficiaries and certainly not mere observers. We participate in the inauguration of God's reign (“kingdom”).

Jesus' appointment of twelve apostles begins an extended speech, the so-called Missionary Discourse of Matthew 10. The whole chapter consists of instructions for the disciples' ministry. This Gospel takes care to underscore Jesus' determination to have his followers be equipped for the challenges that await them. Even if this Sunday's lection does not extend into verses that describe the difficult aspects of the ministry (Matt 10:9–23), the rest of the chapter acknowledges the dangers and rejection that will be part of that ministry. Matthew presents Jesus as a divisive figure. Ministry in his name is often no less disruptive to “business as usual.”

Prior to Romans 5, Paul has established that all people are captive to the power of sin apart from the justification that God accomplishes through Christ. In Chapters 5–8, the discussion turns to the question of what it means to be justified, or made to share in God's salvific righteousness. Paul speaks to the Roman believers in first-person-plural rhetoric, describing how “we” should understand what God has done “for us.” Paul's language here is steadily corporate. God's love extends to all, God's Spirit belongs to all, and all believers enjoy reconciliation with God together.

The first eight verses of Romans 5 also emphasize God's initiative in this salvation. Our justification is an act of God, whose grace and love reside at the heart of the good news. To be justified is nothing less than to be encompassed and renewed by divine grace and divine love. Salvation is not a cold and calculated transaction; it is to be seized by a God who is determined to claim us as God's own. In light of that, not even the experience of suffering can strip believers of all hope, as long as they remember who they are and to whom they belong.

Pastoral Reflections

The readings from Matthew and Romans both support the notion that the Christian life is an experience of participating in God's palpable compassion and love for the world. Neither text depicts Christian living as heroic, however, nor do they imagine believers' existence as trouble-free.

Both passages offer preachers opportunity to emphasize, here near the beginning of Ordinary Time, the importance of understanding the transformative consequences of God's salvation. One might describe that salvation in terms of Matthew's kingdom of heaven and the new realities that Jesus brings into being. Or one could lean on Paul's conception of justification and reconciliation. In either case, God brings God's people into the arena of God's activity; believers are, together, participants in God's ongoing commitment to bring the kingdom to fruition and to allow people to experience peace with God. Sermons can pose the question: what kinds of Christian communities best exemplify the compassion that Jesus has for the masses and the love of God that manifests itself in Christ's death? What kind of ethos do those communities cultivate, how do they bear witness to Christ, what do their budgets prioritize, and how do they deal with adversity?

Although the Romans text speaks about hope's ability to persist in the midst of sufferings, it does not promise that suffering is inconsequential for believers. Hope may be able to survive in difficult times, but suffering can still destroy everything else. In no way does this passage make suffering into a virtue. Nor does it excuse the damage inflicted by suffering that comes from abuse and oppression. The suffering Paul has in mind seems to be a particular kind; it is related to the discontent that believers and indeed the whole creation endure while awaiting the fullness of God's promises (see Rom 8:18–25). Similarly, sermons that venture deeper into Matthew 10, where Jesus warns his followers about struggle and rejection, should avoid implying that the church should seek out conflict for conflict's sake. Jesus may describe the good news as divisive, but that does not mean churches get to claim a victim's status in every disagreement or setback they experience.

Matthew L. Skinner

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 25, 2017

Jeremiah 20:7–13

Psalms 69:7–10, 16–18

Romans 6:1b–11

Matthew 10:24–39

The readings from Matthew and Romans speak of serious business. They depict the way of the world as violent,

the nature of the good news as divisive, the human condition as servitude to sin, and death as the solution—whether that death comes by taking up the cross or by being united to Christ in baptism. Although the two texts have their individual concerns and their distinctive rhetoric, both speak about the Christian life as an existence lived in continuity and relationship with Jesus Christ.

Engaging the Texts

Every Gospel has its share of hard sayings and depictions of discipleship that are either unattractive or intimidating. Some of Matthew's are found here, near the end of the so-called Missionary Discourse that began last Sunday. As Jesus commissions his followers to extend and perpetuate his ministry, he reminds them that the world will be as unsafe for them as it was for him. He offers no guarantee of comfort and success, as conventional wisdom understands what comfort and success are.

The trials and threats Jesus describes are not a hazing ritual to weed out the faint of heart or an attempt to reveal a life of contentment hidden in suffering. The horrors he mentions are much more matter of fact. The Gospels are, in part, stories about the world's resistance to the in-breaking of God's kingdom. What Jesus experienced in his own rejection and suffering was hardly an aberration. His followers should expect more of the same. After all, "a disciple is not above the teacher." The good news continues to threaten the world's powerful people and systems. It continues to expose the status quo as idolatrous, oppressive, and deceptive. The status quo will not stand idly by.

At the same time, this Gospel text is not all gloom and doom. There are promises lurking in these verses. Jesus' followers have great value in the sight of God. Jesus will acknowledge those who acknowledge him. In the way of the cross—a radical identification with Jesus and his boundary-breaking ministry—lies the possibility of finding one's life.

To understand Paul's discussion in Romans 6, one must note that Paul's letters refer to the problem of "sin" (singular). Only rarely does Paul speak of "sins" (plural). Humanity's core problem, according to Paul, is not that we commit sins in the bad things we do or in our failure to do good things. Rather, human beings are, apart from Christ, enslaved to a power called "sin." Individual sins are therefore manifestations of that deeper sickness. Furthermore, Paul does not speak about "forgiveness" of our "sins." Instead, he refers to being delivered or liberated from the power of sin. Through Christ, God defeats sin, as well as death.

Paul explains to the Romans that they experience their freedom precisely because they share union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Just as baptism symbolizes death followed by being raised out of a watery grave, believers par-

ticipate in Christ's own crucifixion and resurrection. Because believers have, in effect, been crucified, they have already suffered the full ferocity of sin and death. Because believers have been raised up in Christ, they now exist free from sin's dominion and are able to "walk in newness of life." Paul's point is about much more than enjoying a new status in God's eyes. The change is existential; believers have been transferred into a whole different sort of existence—one in which they are free from servitude to sin. The "newness" that Paul names has already begun.

Pastoral Reflections

The lections from Matthew and Romans require extra effort by preachers to help congregations find their place in the texts' rhetoric. The persecution and divisions that Jesus describes sound monstrous and almost fanatical to us who dwell in a society that mostly values pluralism and tolerance. It is difficult for many to imagine how Jesus' words might comfort anyone. But believers in the ancient world who faced social ostracism, economic loss, and estrangement from their families because of their embrace of Christ might have found these verses much more familiar. (Some modern Christians have that experience, too.) The text would have assured Matthew's earliest audiences that their struggles were hardly signs of personal failure or divine indifference. The promises embedded in the text provide reminders that God sees those who suffer rebuke because of their faith.

Jesus' instructions to his followers offer important reminders about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. We fool

ourselves when we imagine that the gospel is an unobtrusive or politically compliant message. Remember that near the beginning of Matthew a king went on a murderous rampage to prevent the newly arrived "king of the Jews" from surviving (Matt 2:1–18). Of course, near the end of the story Jesus will be unable and unwilling to escape the violence of the empire's elites. Jesus, his gospel, and those who minister in his name speak out against injustice and hypocrisy by heralding the arrival of a new order, a different "kingdom." In doing so, they inevitably criticize those who wield power or who have a vested interest in preserving corrupt elements of the status quo. Conflict ensues.

As for the passage from Romans, it requires hearers to see the universe from Paul's perspective. His language about enslavement and deliverance, and his claims about the union that believers share with Christ almost sound like they could be at home in a fantasy novel or mythology. While some preachers will want to explain to their congregations that Paul was deeply influenced by the symbols, rhetoric, and worldview of Jewish apocalyptic theology, other preachers will prefer to point out, more simply, that Paul always views salvation in light of what God does on behalf of the whole world and indeed all creation. In the gospel, God does more than reach out to individual sinners. God reorders the cosmos. God defeats everything that stands in the way of God's purposes and sets the world on a new course. Paul thus urges his readers not only to believe certain things but to step into a new reality, one marked by newness and communion with Jesus Christ. His ultimate point is that we belong to God.

Matthew L. Skinner