

Preaching Helps

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

Reformation—Looking Back and Leaning Forward

This past October 31, Lutherans and Roman Catholics gathered in Lund, Sweden, to mark the beginning of a yearlong commemoration of the Reformation. Therefore, it is exactly the right time for this issue of *Currents* to honor Kurt Hendel, the Bernard, Fisher, Westberg Distinguished Ministry Professor of Reformation History at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC). He has supposedly retired—perhaps it had become too much for him to write his long title at the end of a letter! I say “supposedly retired” because it’s clear from the LSTC catalog that he is teaching courses both semesters of this academic year. I cherish the brief time we were faculty colleagues in Spring 2015 when I filled in as professor of homiletics. It was not unusual for students to quote Professor Hendel in a sermon or class discussion—evidence that his teaching was not so esoteric that students didn’t connect Reformation theology to their work as preachers and pastors.

Reformation can emphasize retracing Luther’s footsteps in Germany, a time only for looking back. But the very word “reformation” calls us always to look forward. What needs to be re-formed in this time of history? In May, Lutherans from around the world will journey to Namibia for the gathering of The Lutheran World Federation. They will focus on three themes: Salvation—Not for Sale, Human Beings—Not for Sale, and Creation—Not for Sale. In these three themes we hear echoes of Luther’s passionate insistence on salvation as a free gift of God. But we also hear themes that weren’t important to Luther or other reformers of 1517: human trafficking and care for creation.

Looking back and leaning forward are also marks of preaching. We look back at ancient texts. On Sunday morning people lean forward to catch some meaning in those texts for their own lives now. How will Jesus’ command to love our enemies sound in this new year? Within the space of one week people in the United States will mark the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. (Jan. 16) and the inauguration of President Donald J. Trump (Jan. 20). How do those two events speak to each other? Is there any text that can hold them both? As we look back and lean forward we need to listen closely to the voice of Jesus when he says, “Come and see,” in John’s gospel (Jan. 15), then “Follow me” in Matthew, the next Sunday.

We welcome old friends and new writers to this issue of “Preaching Helps.” **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 Ph.D. 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. **Mary Halvorson** and her husband, Dan Garnaas, are co-pastors of Grace University Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, a church surrounded by the University of Minnesota and the U of M hospital. When she is not wrestling with sermons, Mary delights in being a grandmother, reading, running, and collecting stories and ideas. For sixteen years, **Jeff Johnson** has been pastor at University Lutheran Chapel of Berkeley, a progressive, welcoming, and engaged community of faith “at work in the world.” The Chapel has recently declared itself a place of sanctuary for undocumented immigrants under order of deportation back to situations of violence and extreme poverty. He also serves on the Campus Pastoral Care Team at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, and lives with his husband in Oakland, California. **Ron Luckey** received a B.A. from Lenoir-Rhyne University, M.Div. from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and a D.Min. from Lexington Theological Seminary. Recently retired after forty years of ministry, Ron served as a pastor in North Carolina, campus pastor at Clemson University, and pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Lexington, Kentucky, for twenty-five years. He has been involved in community organizing in Lexington with the founding of BUILD (Building a United Interfaith Lexington through Direct Action.) He has been a member of the ELCA Community Organizing Advisory Team, board of Directors of DART, and co-chaired the Indiana-Kentucky Synod Community Organizing Resource and Engagement Team. Ron also received training through the Gamaliel Foundation and National People’s Action. He and his wife, Pacita, a retired public school teacher, have four grown children and six grandchildren. **John Rollefson** is a familiar friend in these pages. An ELCA pastor, he has served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles, plus interims in Solvang and London. John’s book *Postils for Preaching: Commentaries on the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A* was published in 2016 and is a wonderful resource for preaching on the texts this year. John and his wife, Ruth, live in San Luis Obispo, California, where they are members of Mt. Carmel Lutheran

Church. **Troy Troftgruben** has served as Assistant Professor of New Testament at Wartburg Theological Seminary since 2013. Before that, he served for five years as a pastor in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and as an adjunct instructor of religion at the University of North Dakota. He teaches on campus and online for M.Div. students, TEEM students, and church groups in various settings. He has written journal articles on Luke-Acts and Matthew, and a Bible study for Augsburg Fortress on Matthew's gospel (2016). Troy sees himself as a pastor with a specialized call: the education and formation of leaders for the ELCA through Wartburg Theological Seminary. **Amy Vaughn** lives on the coast of Maine where she serves as pastor of the Deer Isle Sunset Congregational Church, UCC. Prior to this call, Amy spent twelve years as co-director of the Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry and three years as director of a community-based public health initiative in rural Maine. She is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and has dual standing in the United Church of Christ.

I am grateful to each of these writers for their careful looking back at the texts and their imagination leaning forward toward the sermon.

Barbara K. Lundblad
 Editor, "Preaching Helps"

First Sunday of Christmas January 1, 2017

Isaiah 63:7–9

Psalms 148

Hebrews 2:10–18

Matthew 2:13–23

Engaging the Text

Matthew speaks of an angel and a dream, but we might say that Joseph has good intuition. Previously, when he found out that his girlfriend was pregnant, after a good night's rest (an angel and a dream), he decided to stick around. A little baby is nothing to be afraid of. But a narcissistic autocrat? That's a different matter altogether.

Joseph is right about this guy. Joseph's instinct (an angel and another dream) tells him to take his family and run when political life gets tricky. So they pack up, cross the border into Egypt and seek sanctuary in this land of their ancestors.

Crossing the border seemed easier than it might be today. No papers—a prompt that documented and undocumented are unfortunate modern conventions—very much like asylum hearings, visa expirations, and detention centers. Joseph,

Mary, and the infant Jesus simply cross into Egypt and remain there as long as they need to stay—that is, until the autocrat dies. It's a luxury we no longer have.

If simply wandering across the border is too much to imagine, think about the kind of conversation they might have had with a border official at a checkpoint. It would have been enough to say simply: "Life has become dangerous and the king is unstable. We will live here in this land awhile. After all, our ancestors lived for a time in this land."

Matthew uses the term "fulfills" to describe the relationship of this narrative to the ancient stories. We might say "resonates" or "reminds." This story does remind us of other ancient stories about Egypt and Israelites and Josephs. Of course, this is the foundational Israelite story of the escape from slavery—the story with slavery and bricks, a tyrannical ruler, an angel of death, and Egyptian chariots upturned in the sea.

But there is also in that story another Joseph, brought to Egypt as a captive. Later he interprets Pharaoh's dreams, becomes prime minister, and rescues his scoundrel brothers from famine and certain death. These were the very same brothers who threw him in a pit and sold him into slavery.

Matthew's Joseph has the same intuition as his predecessors in Israelite faith. Instinct enough to trust God to stay when staying is best and to flee when your life depends on it. In both the staying and the fleeing, God has always accompanied the people. And God crosses the border this time as well, as they seek security and sanctuary in the land their ancestors knew so very well.

Good intuition is important—especially with unpredictable, unstable, and autocratic rulers.

Pastoral Reflections

The horror at the center of the gospel narrative draws our focus. Given the joyful tone of the other texts, it is this terrible slaughter that grabs us. It's not that different from stories we see each morning on the front page. The small refugee boy who washes up on a Mediterranean beach. The children of Aleppo. The Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram. The students who disappear in Mexico, bodies burned and ashes scattered, victims of rogue squads of police and corrupt government officials. This seems a never-ending, always unfolding story.

I find difficult the pairing of this holocaust text with the ebullient praise of the psalm and the Isaiah text. To be sure, there is thanksgiving at the center of Matthew's narrative about Jesus and his family escaping the tyrant. But without careful attention and nuance, such thanksgiving for their escape rings callous alongside this never-ending slaughter. A bit too much like giving thanks and praise to God for sparing you and your family from the ravages of a tornado that has

destroyed the rest of your neighborhood and left your house standing. It's not the time to glibly shout for joy but to pay attention to those who have been left behind.

"I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us." That is, unless you can't escape into Egypt.

"The Lord has raised up strength for the people and praise for all faithful servants, the children of Israel, a people who are near the Lord." *Selah!* But for those left behind, the Lord is not near, but far away.

"Let them praise the name of the Lord, whose name only is exalted, whose splendor is over earth and heaven." Hallelujah? How is such praise possible in the center of the terrifying events unfolding throughout Herod's reign? A word of praise and thanksgiving in the manner of the psalm or the Isaiah text is not something to trumpet to those left behind.

More than this, fleeing the turbulence seems a bit of a luxury. Divine intervention saving one at the expense of the others. Sanctuary for one family, terror and death for those who cannot flee the violence. The message that Jesus escapes by divine intervention leaving the other little children to die at the hands of this despot doesn't feel in keeping with the larger message of the gospel narrative, where God promises to stay with us.

This is the message shaped by the cross at the end of the gospel, the total resistance of divine intervention in the moment of Jesus' deepest darkness. "He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him" (Matt 27:42).

The message of the cross is not that God will abandon you at your darkest hour or that you can escape suffering if you are blessed. The cross proclaims God's solidarity in the darkness. The cross trumpets the message that Jesus will not slip away from the world's suffering to save his own skin, leaving us to fend for ourselves. Rather, God is with us. Period.

This ancient story of a scary autocrat and the violence at the center of his power need not cause us to forget the promises of God's solidarity. The cross is the repudiation of every kind of magical spiritual solution for the lucky only. Jesus is not savior of the charmed and fortunate. Jesus doesn't remove himself from turmoil to flee the danger posed by autocrats or escape the violence of the world all around us. Rather, he takes it upon himself on the cross. He stands in total solidarity with us. He experiences the deepest darkness, suffering alongside those who suffer, and bearing the burdens we bear. God has made a place among us, and won't be driven off.

This promise of solidarity is indeed something—even in the midst of the terrible things we witness and experience—for which to give God thanks and praise. *Selah!*

Jeff Johnson

Epiphany of Our Lord January 6, 2017

Isaiah 60:1–6

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14

Ephesians 3:1–12

Matthew 2:1–12

The Magi and a Poet

On Epiphany we rearrange the crèche. The shepherds and sheep must go, along with Joseph for there's no mention of him. Mary is here with the child. The place is still Bethlehem, but the stable has become a house. How does Matthew coax us into this story so remote from our own lives? Every gospel writer longs not only to teach us but to reach us.

There's politics here (as in Luke's story). Matthew focuses on King Herod, king of Judea, a puppet king installed by the Romans. There was only one real king—the emperor in Rome. Even knowing the limits of his kingship Herod didn't want to hear about another king of the Jews! Already there is tension in the story. No king wants to worship another king.

There's prophecy here, too. Matthew is fond of quoting Hebrew scripture. He seems to be writing for a community that included at least some Jews who knew the prophet Micah. This could mean that Matthew is an "insider's book"—yet this is a story about outsiders.

Who were they? The Greek word is *magoi*—a plural word translated "magi." Some scholars suggest that they came from Persia, known for its astrologers and wisdom writings. They knew the constellations and counted on Orion to be where he belonged in the night sky. A new star would have shocked them. Why did they assume this star announced the birth of the king of the Jews? They weren't Jewish. They hadn't read Micah but depended on Herod's scribes to point them toward Bethlehem. Tradition claims there were three, but Matthew never counts them! All we know is that they brought three gifts, then departed. We never hear of them again. They headed home by a different road, warned in a dream to avoid Herod. What did they tell their friends and family when they got home?

The poet W. H. Auden wondered about them, too. He gave them lines to speak in his narrative poem "For the Time Being."¹ The poet goes with the number three, giving each one a part. The first wise man begins:

Led by the light of an unusual star,
We hunted high and low.

1. W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, Edward Mendelson, ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 380–381.

This star-watcher speaks of what he sees in the created world—what Christian theologians call “common grace,” grace known in the universe itself: patterns, seasons, tides, and constellations. The magi might have simply noted the star in their journals, but something made them leave home to follow that strange star. Common grace was not enough—not for them or the poet. So, the second wise man speaks:

[We’ve] traveled far
For many days, a little group alone
With doubts, reproaches, boredom, the unknown.

The magi are no longer strangers from the East but the poet’s own circle—friends, colleagues, professors, and other writers—gathered over a pint of ale at the pub. Some doubt they’ll ever get published. Some hear reproaches from critics and can’t write at all. Others have become famous, but boredom has set in—“So what?” they ask. The poet walks out into the cold night—his own breath forming clouds under the streetlight. He can explain: his breath is warm; the night is cold. But so much remains unknown. The story of the magi has gotten inside him now—it’s no longer someone else’s journey.

Through stifling gorges, over level lakes,
Tundras intense and irresponsive seas.
In vacant crowds and humming silences...

“Vacant crowds”—two words that don’t belong together. Yet, you know there is often no place more lonely than a crowded party where you feel you don’t belong. We travel on.

By ruined arches and past modern shops,
Counting the miles,
And the absurd mistakes.

We have no idea if the magi counted their absurd mistakes—but the poet has and we probably have, too. Maybe we did that on New Year’s Eve. If only I had raised my children differently. If only I had bought a condo when the market was low. If only I had taken that other job. We don’t have to travel anywhere to count the absurd mistakes.

Counting the miles
And the absurd mistakes.
O here and now our endless journey stops.

That last line feels too abrupt. How did the magi know this was what they were searching for? How did the poet know? Had all his questions been answered? Probably not. No more than yours or mine. Did the magi stand for a time outside the house where the star hovered? Can this simple house be the place? Whatever their uncertainties, they went in. They knelt before the ordinary child and his ordinary mother. They opened their treasure chest and gave him gold—fit for a king;

frankincense—the smell of incense rising up with prayers; myrrh—for anointing a king or for embalming a body. “O here and now our endless journey stops.” The voice of the magi and the poet come together. You come to a place where you can bring all your absurd mistakes and know you won’t be turned away. Epiphany: the place where the distant, eternal God touches your life. Where God through a child says, “Come in.”

Barbara K. Lundblad

Baptism of Our Lord January 8, 2017

Isaiah 42:1–9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34–43

Matthew 3:13–17

Engaging the Texts

Most listeners will not immediately be aware of the differences among the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, but Matthew’s version has its own distinct elements. Most notably the voice from heaven declares, “*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*” Mark and Luke both say, “You are my Son.” Matthew’s wording suggests a public declaration addressed to those who witness this event: *Pay attention, folks. Something important is happening here.*

The voice of God has a distinct presence throughout the day’s texts. In the servant song of Isaiah, God expresses delight in the servant and promises strength in the midst of the most overwhelming challenges. Nothing will crush the one chosen by the Lord to be a light to the nations. In Psalm 29, “the voice of the Lord” is repeated again and again. That voice is thundering and powerful, flashing forth flames of fire and causing trees to break and whirl.

Acts 10 reminds us that we have voices too. Peter offers his testimony to God’s inclusive vision, one that encompasses every nation. Peter succinctly summarizes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who is Lord of all, but Peter is not simply reciting past events. He summons us to proclaim the good news in the present. We are commanded to preach about God’s prophetic power and the forgiveness of sin.

Matthew presents the Baptism of Jesus as a juxtaposition of the intentional and the unexpected. Jesus shows up *to be baptized*; it is not an impulsive moment. John resists at first. He understandably feels unworthy, but Jesus says that what they are doing is proper to fulfill all righteousness. They are carrying out a plan that was set in motion long before John and Jesus arrived at the Jordan. But as the baptism unfolds, there are many surprises. The heavens open, the Spirit

descends like a dove, and a voice from heaven names the Son, “Beloved.” Even when you’re doing what is proper, God has a way of shaking things up.

Pastoral Reflections

When it comes to baptism, we often focus more on propriety than on the surprising promises being made. We get caught up in the white gowns and family photos. Meanwhile, God declares us beloved and promises to wash us clean. The baptized (or the parents) promise to live in faith—to worship, to care for the world, to work for justice and peace. The community promises to support and pray for the newly baptized.

When we are tempted to become too sentimental about baptism, it’s helpful to remember that Jesus goes straight from the water to the wilderness. There is no party, no picture-taking. The newly baptized Jesus immediately finds himself locked in a battle with the devil.

We are reminded that baptism equips us for a life of struggle. That’s especially true if we take seriously the call “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa 42:7). It’s all well and good to say we will work for justice and peace, but that work always comes at a price. Are we willing to grapple with the forces of evil that seek to defend oppression? Are we willing to trust that God means it when God promises that we will not grow faint or be crushed?

I remember one Sunday morning with a congregation that had temporarily moved the baptismal font near the sanctuary door so that people could remember their baptisms as they left worship and headed into the world. I was sitting near the back and watched as the adults approached the font with hesitation. One by one, they dipped a couple of fingertips in the water, hardly rippling the surface. With barely wet fingers, they made the sign of the cross hastily, almost apologetically. Then one of the kids approached the font. He didn’t hesitate. He didn’t flinch. He plunged his entire hand into the water and brought it out dripping wet. He proceeded to smear the water all over his face with unbridled delight. No reluctance. No dainty gestures. No apologies. Still soggy, he sprinted through the door, ready for whatever the world had waiting for him.

A day on which we remember the Baptism of Jesus is a good time to remember that our own baptisms are not about being demure or cautious. We belong to a God who shows no partiality. We are called to set free those who are imprisoned. Some are literally imprisoned in our sprawling, unjust system of mass incarceration. Others are imprisoned by addiction, illness, or despair. Still others are held captive by racism, sexism, and poverty—all results of the sin that has infected our society’s economic, political, religious, and educational institutions.

In baptism, we are claimed by a God who never lets us go. Why not relish the freedom that God’s unfulfilling promise offers? Why not take risks for the sake of this outrageous God? Knowing that we are both broken and beloved, we can bear God’s holy light and head out with courage to illumine the world.

Christa Compton

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 15, 2017

Isaiah 49:1–7

Psalm 40:1–11

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

John 1:29–42

Engaging the Texts

These texts are an appropriate sequel to the Baptism of Our Lord last week. They highlight the significant challenges of bearing witness to God’s grace and goodness, but they also bring assurances that God is faithful to God’s own servants.

Listeners may not know the post-exilic themes of Second Isaiah or the identification of Isa 49:1–7 as a “servant song.” Listeners will, however, know the feelings of futility that can accompany faith: “I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity.” When we experience backlash from friends, family, and neighbors for living our faith, we understand what it means to be deeply despised. We sometimes feel we don’t have a clear avenue for using our spiritual gifts. We might be a polished arrow, but it’s hard to hit any targets when we’re hidden away in a quiver.

The passages from Isaiah and 1 Corinthians are nicely paired. Isaiah reassures the servant: “The Lord, who is faithful...has chosen you” (v. 7). Similarly, Paul comforts the Corinthians with the assurance that they have the spiritual gifts they need. The message is resoundingly clear: “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9).

The words “testimony” and “testify” appear in the epistle reading and in the gospel. John’s form of testifying involves pointing and proclaiming: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” And later: “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” But John also describes his own relationship with Jesus, telling the story of Jesus’ baptism in a way that gives his testimony a personal context. Jesus himself extends a simple invitation: “Come and see.” Andrew and Simon remain with him for the day, at the end of which Simon has a new name. We know that Andrew and Simon (now Peter) will remain with Jesus far longer, but it all begins as time spent with their new teacher—who also happens to be the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Lamb of God.

Pastoral Reflections

Most of us have encountered a particular form of evangelism. It might have started with a knock on the door or a person shouting on the street corner, but it usually involves a pointed question: “Are you saved?” Sometimes the question takes other forms: “Have you accepted Jesus?” or “If you died tonight, do you know where you would go?” This kind of witness takes a certain courage, but it relies on an implicit threat. If you don’t accept Jesus, you’ve bought a one-way ticket to hell. Today’s gospel gives us a starkly different picture of evangelism—one that is more about invitation than manipulation.

Take John the Baptist. Our imaginations more naturally gravitate toward Luke’s depiction of John as a kind of hellfire and brimstone preacher urging people to repent. But here he seems a bit softer. He simply names who Jesus is and shares his experience of Jesus’ baptism. John does not rant and rave. He just keeps pointing to Jesus.

This gospel encourages us to nurture people’s spiritual curiosity. The first thing that Jesus says in the Gospel of John is a question: “What are you looking for?” Jesus honors our seeking—even when we don’t quite know how to name our questions. The disciples know enough to call Jesus their teacher, but their response is hardly profound. They simply ask where he is staying. But Jesus’ opening question and the disciples’ lackluster answer are the beginning of what will become a more complex and beautiful relationship. Jesus does not give them a sales pitch or threaten them with eternal punishment. He simply says, “Come and see.”

It’s beautiful to witness how the invitation gains momentum. The new disciples invite *other* people who then invite even *more* people. The next day a new disciple named Philip seeks out his buddy Nathanael to see if Nathanael wants to follow Jesus too. And what does Philip say to Nathanael? “Come and see.” There’s a ripple effect. Jesus invites the disciples. The disciples invite people they know, and those people become disciples who invite people *they* know. It’s like a great big pyramid scheme of evangelism.

There’s plenty that makes us anxious about sharing this kind of invitation with the people in our lives. Sometimes we fear that those we invite won’t find what they’re looking for, and then we’ll feel awkward about having asked in the first place. Or we worry that we’ll have to mentor others in their faith when we’re not entirely sure about our own. But we’re not responsible for defining someone else’s relationship with God. We encourage. We pray. We share our own story. But we don’t bully or threaten someone into it. We make the invitation, and trust the Holy Spirit. Come and see.

When my niece was little, she loved getting the grown-ups involved in her games and adventures. She would rarely tell us what she was concocting in her imagination. Instead, she would grab us by the hand, tug gently, and say with a

smile, “I show you!” We could not resist, and soon we would find ourselves wearing crazy costumes or playing a game whose rules were clear only to her.

That’s what it means to invite people to follow Jesus. We get so excited at the idea of sharing the journey that we can’t help but take someone’s hand and say, “Let me show you!” There are no guarantees about what will happen, but we know that God is faithful in seeking us out again and again. How can we help but share the joy of that good news?

Christa Compton

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 22, 2017

Isaiah 9:1–4

Psalm 27:1, 4–9

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

Matthew 4:12–23

Engaging the Texts

Our texts this Third Sunday after Epiphany speak of God’s light breaking through the darkness and of our call to participate in a hopeful disruption of the status quo. The Isaiah passage originally spoke to people living in a time of great uncertainty, conflict, and distress in the last third of the eighth century BCE. Israel and Judah were embroiled in civil conflict even as the Assyrian empire was exercising greater control. The tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun were conquered by the Assyrian king, Tiglath-Pileser III, in 732 BCE, and the people living in that region were deported to Assyria. Isaiah reveals that God sides not with the large and powerful empire, but with the oppressed people of these small vassal states. Those who have walked in the darkness of war, oppression, and exile will be liberated. It is a vision of things as they might be, a vision of hope in the face of challenge, a vision of the in-breaking of God’s reign. The psalmist claims YHWH as “my light,” “my salvation,” and “my stronghold.” God is a shelter in time of trouble. In verse 7, the psalmist begins speaking directly to God, imploring God to be gracious and to stay close. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reminds those early believers of their mission and identity. The Corinthian church was in conflict, splitting into factions following different leaders. Paul calls them back to their baptismal identity, rooted in Christ, and exhorts them to be unified in their purpose.

The gospel passage brings us full circle, addressing a people who once again live under the threat and reality of an oppressive empire. Matthew quotes the Isaiah text, revealing Jesus as the embodiment of God’s light shining on those in darkness. This reference ties Jesus’ purpose to liberation and freedom, and to breaking the bar of oppression. The call to

Simon, Andrew, James, and John launches Jesus' ministry in Matthew as he invites these four fishermen to participate in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and healing the sick.

I am writing these notes the week following the 2016 presidential election in the United States. There is much fear among vulnerable people. Darkness, division, and conflict run deep. These texts speak a word of hope and issue a call to action.

Pastoral Reflections

I live in a small fishing town on the coast of Maine. Boys from fishing families get their student licenses young and many have their own boats in the water by the summer after eighth grade. It is rare for a young lobsterman to set his traps aside for four years to go to college. It would be the talk of the town if a fisherman took a couple of days off in August (the height of lobster season) to drive to Boston and catch a Red Sox game. I cannot even imagine four brothers leaving their traps in the water and their boats on their moorings to start a new endeavor in the middle of the season. Yet here in this gospel lesson, four fishermen leave their nets and boats behind to follow a former carpenter on a mission to bring good news and healing. A popular understanding of Christian vocation has developed that goes something like this: Ask yourself three questions. What do I love to do? What am I good at? What does the world need? The intersection of your answers is God's call on your life. This is a helpful practice to undertake with a high school guidance counselor, or for anyone trying to decide a career path or determine "the color of her parachute," to quote the title of a popular book. But this introspective view of vocation looks nothing like the call narratives in the Bible. Think about it. Moses, Jeremiah, David, Esther, Mary, Paul, and the first disciples do not find themselves at the comfortable intersection of their passion and talents and the local market. These calls are disruptive and risky. These calls involve leaving behind the familiarity of what you love and the safety of well-honed skills to meet desperate needs. I for one am grateful for the pairing of this passage with Psalm 27. Sunday mornings when I was a child, my dad put albums by gospel singer and civil rights activist Mahalia Jackson on the record player. Her powerful version of this psalm often filled the house as we got ready for church. "The Lord is my light and my salvation. The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom then shall I be afraid?" In preaching this Sunday we might do well to reflect on those in our communities and congregations who have heeded Christ's call in the face of disruption and risk, to consider how we might open our own lives to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and to give thanks that we are empowered and emboldened by the God of light and love.

Amy Vaughn

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 29, 2017

Micah 6:1–8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Matthew 5:1–12

Engaging the Texts

The texts for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany flip expectations. According to Micah, God does not want burnt offerings and extravagant sacrifices but rather people who seek justice and live with kindness. The letter to the Corinthians flips weakness and power and turns foolishness and wisdom inside out. In the gospel lesson, Jesus confounds expectations, blessing those the world would consider vulnerable and weak. The Micah passage ends with the stirring and familiar rhetorical question, "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The prophet uses language evocative of a courtroom or a lawsuit. God calls witnesses and brings a complaint against Israel. How can Israel have wearied of God, when it was YHWH who delivered them from bondage in Egypt and protected them in the wilderness? The people respond with a bit of sarcasm, "What do you want us to do, God? Are our routine sacrifices not enough? Do you want a thousand rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? Our firstborn children?" God does not want more piety and cultic religion, but desires justice, kindness, and humility. God requires relationship. Paul's letter to the Corinthian church also undercuts religious pretension. The weakness of Christ crucified is more powerful than signs or human wisdom. Here in the season of Epiphany, Christ is revealed not as a wise and majestic ruler, but as one whose strength is located in vulnerability. The epistle matches well with the Matthew passage, in which Jesus lifts up those who are a far cry from the world's definition of success and fulfilled ambition. The beatitudes are often understood as commands, but the mood is indicative, not imperative. Jesus conveys actual blessings and promises. There are reversals in all of these texts. Religious extravagance is rejected in favor of justice and mercy. The foolishness of the cross trumps wisdom and strength. The vulnerable receive Christ's blessing rather than the ambitious claiming the accolades society deems they deserve.

Pastoral Reflections

A quick search of the popular marker "#blessed" on Twitter or Facebook provides a glimpse of how the term "blessed" is understood.

Final score 24–3! #blessed
 On vacation at Disney World! #blessed
 Newly elected president of the student body #blessed
 Great win tonight! Proud to be part of this team. #blessed
 Check out my new car! #blessed
 Another beautiful, relaxing day on the yacht in
 St. Barth's #blessed
 Love my awesome family! #blessed

We use “blessed” to indicate victory, strength, financial resources, successful relationships, good health, a picture-perfect family, and general prosperity. Jesus turns this understanding on its head. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Blessed are the meek.” “Blessed are those who mourn.” These are the last people we would expect to put a #blessed in their tweet or post. But Jesus wants us to see “blessed” where nobody expects a blessing:

Really missing my mom today on the anniversary of her death #blessed
 Marginalized at work again on account of my gender and race #blessed
 Picked on at school because I'm timid and shy #blessed

That would be very strange indeed. Those listening to the Sermon on the Mount must have been puzzled by Jesus' remarks. We think of blessing as something we must earn. Saying we are blessed is sort of a humble brag. “Look what I've accomplished. Look at the gifts I've been given because I deserve them.” I used to think Jesus was simply changing the to-do list with the beatitudes. Instead of striving to be ambitious, financially successful, and carefree, we should strive to be meek, to be pure in heart and to be peacemakers. *Then* Jesus will bless us. But what if Jesus isn't setting up the conditions required for a blessing but is *actually* blessing those who have gathered on the mountain? Surrounded by those who were least likely to succeed, least likely to have beautiful photos of their adventures and possessions on *Instagram*, and least likely to be humble bragging about their prosperity, Jesus offers them his blessing. What does it really mean to be blessed? What does it feel like to be blessed? Spend some time remembering occasions on which you have received a blessing and what that felt like. In preaching you might share a story of receiving a blessing from a friend, mentor, parent, or beloved and how you experienced that conveyance of kinship, promise, possibility, and love. Consider exploring with your congregation how they might look for opportunities to bless one another and their friends, family, students, colleagues, and neighbors beyond the church. How might they extend the hope and love and kinship of blessing, especially to those who are not regarded as “#blessed” in our world?

Amy Vaughn

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany February 5, 2017

Isaiah 58:1–9a (9b–12)

Psalm 112:1–9 (10)

1 Corinthians 2:1–12 (13–16)

Matthew 5:13–20

Engaging the Texts

A common theme for today is authentic, faithful living. Whether visible through genuine fasting, counterintuitive preaching, or an unconventional lifestyle, living out faith with integrity shines.

Isaiah 58:1–9a contrasts religious ritual with forms of devotion truly desired by God. Fasting was a common practice of self-abnegation in ancient Israel, associated with sackcloth and ashes (Neh 9:1; Dan 9:3; Jonah 3:5). It became more common in the post-exilic period (Ezra 8:21–23; Neh 9:1; Zech 8:19), and in time was associated with divination (*b. Yoma* 4b; Dan 9:3; 2 Esdras 5:13; 2 Bar 5:7). In Isaiah 58, despite Israel's alleged interests (vv. 2–3), their fasting became a pretense for self-service and fighting (vv. 4–5). God's aspirations, meanwhile, were for a “fast” that saves others from oppression: feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the unclothed, and welcoming those nearby (v. 7). When such “fasting” happens, “your light shall break forth like the dawn”—making God's favor evident (v. 8)—and the LORD will answer your cries for help (v. 9).

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:1–12 portray his proclamation as remarkably simple: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (v. 2). Paul's speech and presence deliberately lacked “lofty words” of human wisdom so as to emphasize God's power (vv. 4–5). His example contrasts markedly with popular orators of his day (see 1:17; 2 Cor 10:10). It also raises good questions for preachers today whether and how to strive for similar goals in order to express a message that is “not a wisdom of this age,” but one that is “secret (*en mysteriō*) and hidden,” reflective of a counterintuitive wisdom (1 Cor 2:6–8).

The Beatitudes may begin the Sermon on the Mount, but Jesus' words that follow in 5:13–20 crystallize its themes more directly—portraying the way of discipleship as a path of superior righteousness of positive benefit to the world. Jesus uses two metaphors from everyday first-century living to characterize his followers: “you are the salt of the earth” and “you are the light of the world.” Salt was an indispensable preservative associated with purifying (see Job 6:6; 2 Kngs 2:20–21; Mark 9:50; Col 4:6) and worship contexts (Ex 30:34–35; Lev 2:13; Num 18:19). And light was inestimably precious to a world that knew no artificial lighting (see Matt 25:1–13), and au-

tomatically associated darkness with evil (Isa 9:2; Ps 139:12; John 1:5–7; Col 1:13; 1 John 1:5). Using these metaphors, Jesus portrays his followers as priceless sources of sustenance and beauty for the entire world.

Verses 17–20 address the issue of Jesus’ relationship to Israel’s traditions in ways only Matthew’s Jesus does: “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (v. 17). Emphatic statements that follow in vv. 18–19 stress Jesus’ fidelity to Israel’s scriptures. These words resonate with how Jesus’ teaching develops directly from Israel’s sacred interpretations (“you have heard it said. . .” vv. 21, 27, 31, 38, 43). His concluding word implies that the “righteousness” (*dikaïosynē*, here a right orientation to God’s concerns) of those who follow Jesus’ teachings will exceed the standard set by such religious leaders, who do not practice what they preach (23:3). Readers who hear in 5:20 an impossible demand should take heart: in the purview of Matthew’s gospel, “the scribes and Pharisees” do not set the bar of “righteousness” very high (3:7; 7:29; 23:1–36).

Pastoral Reflections

What the “fasting” depicted by Isaiah 58 looks like in today’s world is a question the prophetic oracle poses to us. Luke’s Jesus quotes Isaiah 58:6 (“to let the oppressed go free”) as part of the inaugural declaration of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 4:16–20), further underscoring the activity’s relevance for various contexts. Even more, Isaiah’s words “your light shall break forth like the dawn” (58:8) resonate noticeably with the Sermon on the Mount: “you are the light of the world. . . In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:14, 16). These two passages collectively guide believers today toward what a divinely endorsed, constructive witness in the world looks like. In both cases it entails generating tangible good toward fellow human beings (Isa 58:7–9; Matt 5:21–26, 38–47). More thought-provoking is how religious ritual can become an obstacle (Isa 58:1–6), if not also religious professionalism (Matt 5:20). The question stands for us, especially this season of Epiphany: how do believers “shine” in the world today? And how might we, as church, do so more radiantly?

Paul’s words give preachers a different dilemma to ponder: like Paul, do we preach “nothing...except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2)? What precisely this looked like in practice is hard to say, but cues here (vv. 3–5) and elsewhere (2 Cor 10:1, 10; 11:6) imply the accuracy of Paul’s description. In today’s context, where impressive preachers gain crowds and hearers praise entertaining stories, we preachers wonder whether Paul’s practice in 1 Cor 2:3–5 is feasible and worth the risk. More important is his depiction of God’s “wisdom” as “secret and hidden”: reflecting truths quite countercultural to the modern obsessions of image and impressive-

ness. At the end of the day, Paul deeply believed the message of the cross cut against superficial human interests, which itself states something profound. In the cross, God’s wisdom is truly made known. And that is a message worth proclaiming even more than we already do.

Troy Troftgruben

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany February 12, 2017

Deuteronomy 30:15–20

Psalm 119:1–8

1 Corinthians 3:1–9

Matthew 5:21–37

Engaging the Texts

An overarching theme for today’s readings is “clarifying the better path”—one that entails following God’s precepts (Ps 119), heeding Jesus’ words (Matt 5), and leading ultimately to life (Deut 30).

The Deuteronomy reading is a climactic appeal for enduring loyalty to God’s commands. Authoritative witnesses give teeth to the appeal (v. 19a), as does simplifying the future into a choice between two options: the way of life, prosperity, and blessings; or the way of death, adversity, and curses. The former way entails heeding God’s words and experiencing abundance in return; the latter way entails revering alternative gods and perishing. Much like the whole of Deuteronomy (4:1, 19–26; 8:1, 19–20; 11:22–28), the passage calls all Israel to faithful covenant obedience to Torah instructions.

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians challenge a factionalism present in the community, associated with unfounded reverence for human leaders. Chastising the Corinthians as “people of the flesh, infants in Christ” (3:1), Paul clarifies that such leaders are merely “God’s servants” (*synergoi*), working together for the common purpose of growth and upbuilding. These factions constitute a primary reason for Paul to write the letter (1:10–17), and the rest of its contents portrays the work of “building up” (see 3:9, *oikodomē*) as central to Paul’s goals for the community (8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:3–5, 12, 17, 26).

Matthew 5:21–37 presents the first four of six antitheses (“you have heard it said..., but I say to you...”) in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount (5:21–48)—a portion known for its challenging ethical stringency. Throughout this section, Jesus builds upon ideas from Israel’s scriptures (Matt 5:21, cf. Exod 20:13; Matt 5:27, cf. Exod 20:14; Matt 5:31, cf. Deut 24:1–4; Matt 5:33, cf. Exod 20:7; Matt 5:38, cf. Exod 21:24; Matt 5:43; cf. Lev 19:18; Ps 139:19–22). Six times he refers to a scriptural code of ethic, then surpasses it by focusing on the internal disposition behind the act (Matt

5:22–26, 28–30) or proposing a higher ethical claim (5:32, 34–37, 39–42, 44–47). At points Jesus seems to take issue with scripture (e.g., 5:31–32, 38–42). Perhaps more accurately, Matthew’s Jesus reflects a more dynamic and elastic understanding of scripture (vs. a flat code of law), whose ethical applications aim not to disregard but to “fulfill” scriptural ideas (5:17–18). In fact, many of these same teachings will reappear again in Matthew’s narrative: on misleading members (18:8–9; cf. 5:29–30), on divorce (19:1–12; cf. 5:31–32), and on loving one’s neighbor (22:34–40; cf. 5:43–47; see also 22:40; cf. 5:13–16). In these ways, the Sermon on the Mount, and this section in particular, distills representative themes of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples in Matthew’s gospel.

Pastoral Reflections

Many hearers of either Deut 30:15–20 or Matt 5:21–37 hear in these readings more “Law” (demand, requirement) than “Gospel” (promise, affirmation). And indeed, no other Sunday in the lectionary offers so robust a blend of adultery condemnations, references to hell, and strong emphasis on choosing life over death. Given this, two reflections are important.

First, challenges to our ethical practices can be constructive—and even necessary. I cannot hear Deut 30:15–20 without remembering the experience of a ministry colleague of mine, who first heard in these words God’s call to a changed life. To this day, she swears that experience saved her from a premature death due to a destructive lifestyle. As for the Sermon on the Mount, despite the “fire and brimstone” feel of portions, many of these same words have inspired some of the greatest Christian reformers of the modern world: Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, André Trocmé, and Brother Roger (Taizé). Bonhoeffer, for example, credited the Sermon on the Mount with a “great liberation” of his from striving erroneously to be the master of his own life.² These examples show that Jesus’ ethics do not simply demand—they can foster a liberating way of transformed living. However much at odds they may seem with a theology centered on grace, they inform very well how a graced people can in turn respond by incarnating radical grace in community for others outside themselves.

Second, scripture as a whole has no misguided pipe dreams of a perfectly obedient people of God. The Deuteronomy reading near the end of that book, stands at the start of an ensuing story of failure: Israel would not ultimately choose the path of life and blessing consistently, as the entire Hebrew Bible heartily attests. As for Matthew’s narrative, Jesus’

disciples are portrayed throughout as those of “little faith,” prone to doubt, as opposed to him (14:31; 16:20–23; 28:17), unable to endure temptation (6:13a; 26:39), and in constant need of forgiveness (6:9–13). Like Peter, the disciples are prone to walk on water one moment and sink immediately after (14:28–31). And yet, these same frail followers are named the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (5:13–16). Long story short: despite the challenges issued by today’s readings, God’s larger story for God’s people is of trial and error, failure and forgiveness, and small victories by the grace of God. This point of perspective is worth emphasizing, this Sunday and every day.

Troy Troftgruben

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany February 19, 2017

Leviticus 19:1–2, 9–18

Psalm 119:33–40

1 Corinthians 3:10–11, 16–23

Matthew 5:38–48

Engaging the Texts

The reading from Leviticus 19 recalls the Ten Commandments—not in the same order as in Exodus 20, but all under the rubric, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (19:2). The verses omitted from today’s reading echo familiar commandments: Revere your father and mother. Keep the Sabbath. Turn from idols. Do not steal. Do not swear falsely. (vv. 3, 4, 11, 12) But there’s more than repetition in these verses. There are specifics we didn’t learn in confirmation: Don’t reap the edges of your fields or strip your vineyard bare. “You shall leave them for the poor and the alien” (19:9–10). Everything moves toward the summary in verse 18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” When Jesus refers back to this command in today’s gospel, he quotes the part about neighbor love, but there is nothing about hating your enemy. Later in this chapter God commands the people not to oppress the alien: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you...” (19:34). Jesus wasn’t the first to expand the meaning of “neighbor.” The scribes who compiled Leviticus insisted that neighbor-love includes the alien, someone we might see as an enemy. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul addresses the divisions within that community of believers: some follow Paul, others follow Apollos. Earlier he had included those who claimed they belonged to Cephas (1:12). Paul refers to himself as “a skilled master builder,” but he says his skill means nothing if Christ Jesus is not the foundation of the building. What might Paul say to us: “Some claim allegiance to Pastor Swanson, others to Pastor

2. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, eds.; Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 291. (editors’ afterward to the German edition).

Anderson—and now our pastor doesn't even have a Scandinavian name!" Whatever we claim, Paul reminds us: "Let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (3:21–23).

The Gospel continues our reading of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a sermon that began with the Beatitudes, followed by a call to be salt and light. In verses 21 through 37, Jesus expands the meaning of the commandments—anger is a form of killing and adultery can take place within the human heart. In today's reading Jesus doesn't expand the commandments, but argues against traditional teachings. Some interpretations of Jesus' words have been downright dangerous. "Turn the other cheek" has been tragic for women suffering domestic violence. But recent biblical scholarship has challenged these dangerous interpretations. Walter Wink has shown that Jesus wasn't calling people to be doormats but to resist evil in non-violent ways. The word *antistenai* usually translated "resist" is more accurately translated "Do not violently resist the evil one." [For extensive treatment of these verses see Wink's book *Jesus and Non-Violence: A Third Way*.]

Jesus' call to "Love your enemies" is radical. Though Leviticus commanded people to treat aliens as citizens, there is no biblical precedent that explicitly called people to love their enemies. Jesus' teaching here is distinctly new. When people claim that the United States has abandoned "Judeo-Christian" values, are they thinking about Jesus' call to love our enemies?

Pastoral Reflections

Tomorrow is "President's Day" in the United States, marking the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln. Perhaps the sanctuary will be emptier than usual as people in the congregation take a mid-winter holiday. Tomorrow also marks exactly one month since the inauguration of a new president. There have been many pleas for us to come together across political differences. But for many people in our country, the campaign season and the election have brought fear and danger. Children in elementary school have taunted classmates saying, "You're going to be deported!" Hateful words once considered "fringe" have made headlines. Hopefully the heated rhetoric of the campaign has gone from boiling to a low simmer by this President's Weekend. No matter how we voted, today's readings challenge us to struggle with what it means to live as followers of Jesus in this time and place. What does it mean to love our neighbors as ourselves? What does it mean to love our enemies? How do we treat the "aliens" among us?

Last November a Muslim woman spoke at the church where I'm a member. She told a story about being in line at a local Minneapolis store. Just when she reached the front of

the line a tall, burly white man stepped in front of her. She said, "Sir, there's a line." He shouted, "I don't care if there's a line. You shouldn't even be here. You should go back where you came from!" She didn't have to go far since she was born and still lives in Plymouth, a Minneapolis suburb. No one in the line behind her said anything. "I just wish somebody had come to stand with me," she said, "even if they didn't know what to say."

How can we stand with those who feel threatened? There are deep divides in this country. We often see each other as enemies. Can a blue congregation talk to a red congregation? Can we respect each other across our deep divisions? This isn't just political. It's theological. This is about taking Jesus' words seriously. How can we begin to love those we call enemies?

Barbara Lundblad

Transfiguration of Our Lord February 26, 2017

Exodus 24:12–18

Psalm 2 or Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16–21

Matthew 17:1–9

*I will tell of the decrees of the Lord: He said to me,
'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'*

—Psalm 2:7

Metamorphosis

Each year we commemorate this day by reading one of the three synoptic accounts of Jesus' transfiguration along with a variety of other texts. What distinguishes this Year A is that our Second Reading is taken from 2 Peter, one of the least known and seldom read books in the New Testament. Only one other reading from 2 Peter is appointed in the whole *Revised Common Lectionary*. Second Peter is thought to be one of the latest books of the New Testament to be written. It was on the short list of "Writings Spoken Against" in the New Testament's process of canonization, and it is characterized by its odd vocabulary of which fifty-five words appear nowhere else in the New Testament (see Fred Craddock's insightful introduction and commentary in *First and Second Peter and Jude* [Louisville: 1995], 85–86). Well beyond this mere curiosity factor, however, is that this lection contains one of the few New Testament references to today's story of Jesus' transfiguration. This suggests the significance of this story not only to the Petrine tradition but also to the wider Christian community. (For likely brief Pauline allusions to Jesus' transfiguration see 2 Cor 3:18 and Rom 12:2a. See also John 1:14.)

And so, I suggest we approach this day by paying special

attention to 2 Peter, written much too late for Peter himself to be the author, but which could be based on his own recollections. The author, writing in Peter's name, claims to have been one of the "eyewitnesses to his majesty...when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Leaving no doubt as to the importance of the transfiguration experience to the church's tradition, the author further confirms how "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain." The author then goes on to interpret its impact as having "the prophetic message more fully confirmed..." which can now function as a kind of "lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (3:16–19). Clearly, according to 2 Peter, paying attention to Jesus' words, as the voice from the bright cloud commanded is the take-away lesson. The implication is that we should not become preoccupied with the attendant religious fireworks, as Peter in the Gospel story seems in danger of doing in his initial zeal to commemorate the moment in brick and mortar. The oral message from the voice in the cloud takes precedence over the visual light display, which, we might say, "highlights" the message.

It is meant to be a flash-forward, certainly, to the glory of Jesus' resurrection, a kind of proleptic experiencing of God's glorious presence translucently claiming and proclaiming Jesus as the Abba's own beloved son and source of delight, to whose words we are to pay attention. And so, this odd mountain-top experience, from which the very *genre* takes its name, serves as the hinge in Jesus' story. Having had several weeks now to bask in the warm afterglow of Christmas, the church pivots to enter the season of Lent and its forty-day pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There Jesus will take up the cross of suffering and death, as he had prophesied to his disciples just six days earlier, as the beginning of our Gospel text reminds us. Not to be forgotten is that in order to ready himself for his fateful turn to the destiny that awaited him in Jerusalem, Jesus needed both time apart with his Abba, and an opportunity to counsel with two of YHWH's intimates of old, Moses and Elijah, those hoary shades of Jesus' people's past representing the law and the prophets.

Second Peter helps us to see how the story of Jesus' transfiguration, traditioned by the church, is intended to "metamorphosize" (change, transform, transfigure) Jesus for the road ahead. The story is also for those of us still on the way who need a lamp of hope to transfigure our present darkness as we await the dawning of that new day when the morning star of hope will rise in our hearts. The promise is that we will have more fully confirmed the prophetic message as we listen to Jesus' words, attending to the kingdom that his life and impending death and what lies beyond embodies. Metamorphosis is change we can believe in, because it's luminous change

that Jesus has already undergone—and invites us to undergo.

If you're tempted to sing what I consider the hymn with the silliest title and first line in the hymnal, "Shine, Jesus, Shine," (ELW #671), please do so with a big smile on your face knowing that they are words Peter himself might have penned in his overzealousness to freeze the glorious moment in time. Better to try Brian Wren's "Jesus on the Mountain Peak" (ELW #317) or "How Good, Lord, To Be Here" (ELW #315) although the Sarum text "Oh, Wondrous Image, Vision Fair" (ELW #316), beautifully fitting as it is, offers its own illuminating humor in its extolling of how "brighter than the sun he glows."

John Rollefson

Ash Wednesday March 1, 2017

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12

Psalm 51:1–17

2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

—Psalm 51:10

Lenten Oddities

It is Flannery O'Connor, good Georgia Roman Catholic afloat among a sea of Bible-thumping, born-again evangelicals, who put it best in her tongue-in-cheek paraphrase of Jesus' words in St. John's gospel, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you *odd*." That's precisely the feeling we ought to take away from Ash Wednesday: the oddness of this whole matter of being a Christian of which this forty days of Lent is to be a primer and internship. This Lenten journey is like Israel in the desert—God's "wilderness school" as Dan Erlander likes to call it in *Manna and Mercy*. The idea isn't self-improvement but rather is a conscious getting-ready for entering the long-promised destiny for which God is preparing us. It is God who disciplines us in order to make the church, as Krister Stendahl used to put it, God's "head start program" for the kingdom, a peculiar people intentionally out of step with the world for the sake of the world.

Ash Wednesday is a fitting ritual initiation into Lent's oddness. Must we really have the sign of the cross smudged on our foreheads while hearing intoned over us the chilling words, "You are dust and to dust you shall return"? Really!? Do we have to act quite so morbidly? I remember a younger ecumenical colleague in my campus ministry days who objected to our use of the traditional words, preferring something more uplifting, hopeful, and activist like "Repent and

believe the gospel.” But, oddly, we’re meant to begin by being reminded of our earthly origin and destination in the dust of the earth. This prepares the ground for hearing the utterly good news that God, the master potter, intends to make of us bits of clay what we are needed to become.

But even odder, is how contrary the visible smudge on our foreheads seems to be to the clear admonition from Jesus in the gospel text. He warns us *not* to practice our piety before others in order to be noticed by them. He states that we should not ostentatiously give alms or pray in public or display our fasting by disfiguring our faces. Rarely do we act in such clear contradiction to the very Word we are hearing read. It takes some explaining, doesn’t it, this odd behavior of Lent?

It’s become my favored practice on Ash Wednesday to use both First Reading options, employing the Joel text as a call to worship and the Isaiah text (which we just heard a few weeks ago) as a word of sending out onto our Lenten journey. The Isaiah text especially puts Ash Wednesday in its proper liturgical setting. It is the beginning of a forty-day period not focused on ritual cleansing but on repentance (meaning “life-change” as Eugene Peterson regularly translates “*metanoia*”); a fresh departure from; a kind of “transfiguration” of—to borrow a term—our same old routinized, everyday ways of “doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God,” as the prophet Micah puts it. “Giving something up for Lent” is such a tired and often trivialized religious idea, however well intended. Isaiah’s proposal is that we, in effect, give up religion for Lent—the idea that we can somehow influence God in our favor by tweaking our behavior by our own will power. Lent isn’t about doing God any favors but rather is about giving up the whole pious attitude that God is somehow under the influence of our religiosity and moral strenuousness. A whole new way of life in the world, not some interiorized tinkering with our spiritual psyche is what is called for. As Isaiah puts it, using “fasting” as a metaphor: “Is this not the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (vv. 6-7). Come to think of it, that’s why we begin these forty days by hearing those dreadful words droned over us, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” That’s the starting point of that radical change of heart and mind that leads to a change of direction that true repentance, God-given *metanoia*, makes possible. It’s change we can believe in, to coin a phrase.

The simple plea “Change My Heart, O God” (ELW #801) is a fit refrain for the occasion as are numerous settings of Psalm 51. Ash Wednesday is a superb occasion for ecumenical worship as the whole church enters onto the season of Lent. I recall a variety of liturgies from a simple, outdoor

service consisting of ashes, prayer, and song on the UCLA campus for students and staff; to a gathering of neighborhood congregations with a liturgy composed primarily of Taize songs led by a choir and small orchestra; to a sharing of a simple liturgy of ashes and communion with our nearest neighboring full-communion partner congregation in largely indifferent west LA, in a neighborhood near the looming Mormon Temple where Persian Jews were our single largest resident ethnic group. Odd behavior indeed, this matter of Lent!

John Rollefson

First Sunday in Lent March 5, 2017

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12–19

Matthew 4:1–11

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

—Psalm 32:1

Evie’s Truth: Don’t Means Do

We—most of us, anyway—return today to church with our foreheads clean of the ashen smudge we received on Wednesday, but with the words of our mortality still dining in our ears, “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” Today what do we hear but the haunting words of our First Reading from the book of Genesis, “Then the Lord formed humanity out of the dust from the ground” (2:7)? And if we go on a bit beyond today’s reading into chapter three we find the very words with which God expels man and woman from the garden (part of which we hear repeated at every graveside service): “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:19).

True as these words are, they don’t tell the whole story. For this second creation account, which begins “Then the Lord formed the human one of dust from the ground,” immediately goes on to say “and the Lord God breathed into the human one’s nostrils the breath of life; and the human one became a living being” (2:7). While we are one with the rest of creation in being rooted in the earth, we are also something special in the order of creation since we are enlivened—or enspirited, literally in-spired—by God’s very breath. This, I think, is what we take it to mean, at least in part, when in the first creation account YHWH says, “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness...” (1:26).

Only, then comes the clinker. “All this is yours,” God says. “Enjoy! Oh, but I almost forgot. You see that tree in the middle of the garden? I call it the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Well, that’s off limits. Never mind why. It just is. Don’t eat from that tree or you’ll die.” We know the rest of the story. For “*don’t means do*,” as my mother-in-law, Evie, used to say. Tell the best little kid in the world *not* to do something and, sure enough, like some magnetic force more powerful than gravity, the attraction of that simple “*don’t*” will overpower everything else around.

This utterly profound story found near the very beginning of the Bible contains an insight into the complex truth of our condition. It is one that goes to the crux of our human dilemma, because “*don’t means do*” lies so close to the heart of us, we strange earthlings who trace our origin both to the slimy mire and the inspiring breath of God. The origin of evil—where the “crack in creation” comes from—isn’t answered in the story but only *that* it happened and continues to happen. Sin—rebellion against God, which the Greeks understood as “*hamartia*,” literally “a missing of the mark,”—finds its origin in each of us as we refuse to let God be God in our lives and in our world; as we refuse to recognize the limits of our own creaturehood and, as the serpent insinuated, desire to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5).

If “Paradise Lost,” as the Puritan poet John Milton termed it in his great epic, is an appropriate title for the story of our origin and fall from innocence in the garden, then “Paradise Regained,” his subsequent poem, is an apt title for our Gospel Reading. For here, immediately following his baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. The story of Jesus’ successful resistance to Satan’s three-fold temptation marks the beginning of paradise being regained at Jesus’ hands.

The Gospel writer details the whole bag of tricks the tempter uses on Jesus including temptations to wield various sorts of power, all proof-texted by the devil’s pious appeal to scripture. That even and especially the devil quotes scripture is an important lesson for us good, pious folks. Jesus’ just saying “no” to the tempter’s alluring appeals shows us that not only doing good but resistance to evil is our calling, especially when we are tempted to accomplish good by taking the devil’s shortcuts and disregarding God’s Word. (For a compelling litany of saying “no” to the devil’s enticements—the allurements of following a “theology of glory” instead of a “theology of the cross,” as Luther called it—see Dan Erlander’s *Baptized We Live*, 23–25.)

The “Great Litany” of the church (ELW #238) is a fitting way to begin the liturgy (taking the place of the Kyrie) on this First Sunday in Lent. Marty Haugen’s “Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery” (ELW #334) is an especially apt hymn with a special stanza for each of the five Sundays of Lent, beginning

with its verse for Lent 1 “From the dawning of creation/you have loved us as your own;/stay with us through all temptation,/make us turn to you alone.”

John Rollefson

Second Sunday in Lent March 12, 2017

Genesis 12:1–4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1–5, 13–17

John 3:1–17

Engaging the Text

Nicodemus is an academic scholar, someone well-versed in having answers. He is comfortable in his head: ruminating, thinking, mulling over. He seeks Jesus at night perhaps to save himself from embarrassment, to protect his reputation, or to pursue a deeper curiosity about Jesus. We do know rabbis preferred to teach at night, in the dark and quiet, away from the distractions of the day. For whatever reason, a meeting takes place in the dark. Nicodemus begins the conversation with a statement, asserting what he knows. But Jesus won’t engage in this head game. Before Nicodemus knows it, he’s in over his head in a conversation he has difficulty following. He can’t move beyond the literal to metaphor. It’s a huge stretch for him to engage in birth talk. Jesus takes him where he is not prepared to go.

In his book, *Letters to a Young Poet* Rainer Marie Rilke’s words describe Nicodemus’ journey. “I would like to beg you...to have patience with everything that is unsolved in your heart and to try to cherish the questions themselves like closed rooms and like books written in a very strange tongue. Do not search now for the answers, which cannot be given you because you could not live with them. It is a matter of living everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, one distant day live right into the answer” (page 27).

Jesus presses Nicodemus to descend, to go deeper and be situated in a new place, where risk, trust, and the spirit’s movement live. We can sympathize with this learned man. It’s not easy to move beyond what we know. It’s a stretch to color outside the lines, and embrace God as wind, breath, uncontrollable spirit.

This is a rich text to explore the facets of birth. Birth means a separation from the comfort of the uterine wall, the warm water sac, the constant flow of nutrients. Nicodemus fears being separated from the familiar, the known. He is being invited into a life beyond birth, one soaked in God’s unfathomable love for the whole world. To be born from above

is to claim God as the originator of this birth, to step out of God's way, and receive this gift.

The reader knows Jesus is the one lifted up, the one who descends into the world God so loves, for the sake of the world. An excellent teacher, Jesus shifts the focus from the personal to the cosmic, and Nicodemus will find his place in that broad and loving scheme. It is God who makes the move toward us, and the whole world God so loves. Give yourself over to this truth, and you will have eternal life, abundant life, a life lived not in the shadows of night, but in the light of a new day.

Pastoral Reflections

Nicodemus is on a challenging journey, not a trek through the wilderness like Abraham and Sarah, but a journey from the head to the heart. Jesus tells him: you need to experience a new birth, leave the safety and familiarity of your womb of religious certainty and enter into labor. Let the struggle birth something new in you. It is possible with the Spirit's help—even at your age—you, too, can be transformed.

It's not the destination that matters, but the journey, the process itself that creates faith. We live into faith, we become people of faith. This Lent we travel with Jesus in his own becoming as the messiah, as he ministers on his way to the cross—becoming the one who will die for the world, offering new life and new beginnings out of ashes and suffering.

At a healing service, a former bishop was invited to tell his personal story about healing, to set aside his bishop's role and come as a regular guy. He shared his journey into untried territory. He was at the hospital, in a small pre-surgical room where doctors and nurses dart in and out getting patients ready for surgery, asking questions, making sure the right body parts are marked, offering assurance. You know the scene, as the pastor making a pre-surgery visit. But he wasn't making a pastoral call. He was with his wife and two kids, waiting to be wheeled in for brain surgery. He described how emotional it was, saying goodbye when he didn't know if he would see his family again this side of heaven. They prayed together, cried, and hugged, then an epiphany, a flooding realization poured into him. Perhaps it was like being born again, or born anew, or born from above, or just plain flooded with God's grace-filled interruption. Whatever it was it saved him, it changed him. All his life he tried to be faithful and good; a worthy Christian, a pastor, and now, bishop, who showed up and did the right thing. Lying on that gurney, waiting to be wheeled into the operating room, this truth was birthed: in the experience of fear and the unknown, this has nothing to do with being faithful, or worthy, or good enough. This has everything to do with God being utterly faithful to me, now, in this moment.

Jesus invites Nicodemus, and us, to open ourselves to

God's grace and in so doing, to allow God to change and make us new. We journey, we struggle, and we discover ourselves anew. And through it all, God is faithful to us; that is our starting point.

Mary Halvorson

Third Sunday in Lent March 19, 2017

Exodus 17:1–7

Psalm 95

Romans 5:1–11

John 4:5–42

Engaging the Texts

Our Lenten journey brings us to a well. It's noon. The place is empty because the townswomen collect their water in the morning and evening when it's cool. Noon is a desolate time at the well, no clusters of women gossiping, telling tales about their kids and husbands.

There is one lone figure carrying a water jar. She is used to being alone, working in silence. She is met by a man—a Jewish man. The unfolding scene holds all the makings of a full-fledged scandal. Jesus breaks so many cultural and religious rules, he could be tied up in Jewish court for months. What is the case against him? He travels through Samaria, considered enemy territory for Jews. He starts a conversation with a woman in a public place, asking her for a drink. Jews were not to drink from Samaritan vessels. Jewish rabbis were forbidden to speak in public to women. By asking for water, he extends the possibility of friendship to a woman. What takes place is the longest recorded conversation between Jesus and another person, a conversation that goes deeper with each exchange. He sees her as an intelligent human being. And she is no slouch; she brings her wit, questions, her probing mind. Jesus does another unexpected thing; he talks theology with her.

At the well, they come to know each other in the deepest way. He knows about her life and does not judge her. He discloses fully who he is: the Christ, the Messiah. He has not even breathed this to his disciples.

The case against Jesus gets worse. The woman at the well is a fallen woman, a woman who has had many husbands, a loose woman. This shunned woman with the letter S for sinner writ large all over her life is utterly outcast. Perhaps her husbands rejected her because she was barren, or her husbands died and the next of kin refused to marry her, as was the custom. Whatever her story, she is the most outcast of outcasts: a woman, a Samaritan, and a sinner. No wonder she came alone to draw water.

Jesus tells her about a different kind of water, water that sustains, makes new, waters of wholeness and salvation. Jesus is this living water. At the well, we see what kind of Messiah Jesus is. He is not bound by social conventions and religious restraints. He breaks open entrenched boundaries between male and female, chosen people and rejected people, insiders and outsiders, friend and enemy. The grace of God, the living water, is for all.

Pastoral Reflections

Jesus comes to the well thirsty. The woman brings her own thirst. For what do you thirst? We thirst for many things—meaning, intimacy, happiness, justice, forgiveness, love, God. The woman at the well (I apologize I don't know her name) didn't realize her deeper thirst until Jesus came along and treated her as a full human being. As their conversation flows, her faith deepens. Never before had someone given her the time of day or engaged her opinions and hopes. Then her eyes are opened: this thirsty man talking with her is the Messiah. She runs to town, this shunned woman, seeking community, and bears witness to what she has seen and heard. Because of her, this original evangelist, many come to faith.

The disciples are mystified. They wondered but didn't dare ask, "Jesus, why are you talking with this woman?" This question has been asked for ages: why hire a woman, why ordain women, why give them a voice and let them be leaders? They are emotional, fickle, and in this woman's case—as biblical interpreters cast her—immoral and loose. When Jesus reveals her story, some scholars claim she changes the subject and starts talking about theology! (Isn't that just like a woman?)

When she runs into town she is empty-handed, leaving her jar behind. With the women at the tomb she runs with the news: "he says he is the Messiah, can he be? Can he be raised from the dead?" They run because they, too, have been raised from the dead. She doesn't need the jar she has been lugging all these years in her lonely life. It's a jar that was filled with shame and isolation; it contained all her burdens and sorrows. Now she is free of it. She has living water. She has found her voice. "Put down the jar. Tell your story. You are loved by a Messiah who seeks you, who defies boundaries that have kept you out of reach, but never out of God's reach."

What jars are you lugging around; what burdens are you carrying? From what do you need to retire or resign? Put down the jar. You have no more need of it. Living water is offered to you. Run and tell the others.

This story can be engaged by the preacher in many ways. Find Ray Makeever's song *All Was Not Well*—ask a soloist or choir to sing it. Retell the story in your own words—as the woman, as the jar, or as a child hiding in the shadows who witnesses the entire encounter. Preach a dialog sermon with

someone, modeling the interchange between Jesus and the woman.

Mary Halvorson

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 26, 2017

1 Samuel 16:1–13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8–14

John 9:1–41

Engaging the Text

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, also known as *Laetare* (Rejoice) Sunday, is a reminder that though the journey to the cross is characterized by sober reflection, the people making that journey possess an unshakeable joy. What better way to bring that truth to life than with the images of sight and light. In the second reading, Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians that God has rescued them from joyless darkness so they may live as the children of light they are. Paul doesn't *exhort* them to be light. He reminds them that, by God's grace, they already *are* light, recipients of the privilege of thinking and behaving as the children of light they are. And lest that joy become just an abstraction on this Sunday, the gospel reading powerfully dramatizes one individual's movement from darkness to light with all its delightful, albeit complicated implications.

In the gospel reading, Jesus gives eyesight to a blind man. For the first time in his life, he can suddenly see everything around him. But notice that he only *gradually* sees who Jesus is. He moves from seeing "the man called Jesus" (verse 11) to calling Jesus "a prophet" (verse 17) to realizing this Jesus must be sent from God (verse 33) to ultimately worshipping him as "Lord" (verse 38.) There are probably some people in the pews (and pulpits!) who can readily identify with this man's religious journey.

In contrast to this man's coming to physical and spiritual sight, it's hard to miss the various ways that blindness is manifested in this narrative. There's the blindness of the disciples who seem interested only in discussing the theological implications of the man's disability. There's the blindness of the man's nosy neighbors who, instead of rejoicing with him in his newfound sight, pepper him with questions, wanting to hear all the juicy gossip. Then, there's the blindness of the "Bible-thumping" religious leaders who are so obsessed with determining right and wrong and upholding the tradition that they are unable or unwilling to recognize God's doing something that's never been done before (v. 32). Their "visual impairment" results in them eventually banishing the man from the religious community. How often have we seen

this happen in the church? And perhaps most poignant of all, the man's parents are so blinded by fear that they refuse to get involved. In this drama, the only one who can see is the man born blind. The others in the story *think* they can see but are actually "in the dark."

This story invites us to find ourselves as well as the church-at-large in its narrative.

As you consider preaching on this narrative, don't miss how the man's life suddenly becomes very complicated after Jesus has blessed him with sight. His experience is a reminder that when one moves out of darkness it is not all "sweetness and light." This newly sighted man suffers alienation from his family, is misunderstood by his neighbors, and is ultimately banished from the religious community. This man's life is testimony to the fact that blessings from God come with a price. A God-blessed life is always a cross-shaped life. But ultimately a hope-filled life. Because look how the story ends. Jesus hears about the man's trials, searches for him, and finds him. The hymn is right: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

Dr. Fred Craddock speaks for many commentators when he notes that the members of the Evangelist's first-century community surely saw themselves in the experience of this man who was healed. Blessed by Jesus, they knew what it was like to argue the faith with old neighbors, suffer misunderstanding and even separation from family members, and be excluded from the synagogue as unbelievers. But they also lived in the joy of knowing that, as with the man, Jesus would ultimately seek them out and vindicate their faithfulness.³

Pastoral Reflections

In his book *At Home*, Bill Bryson says this about light: "Open your refrigerator door and you summon forth more light than the total amount enjoyed by most households in the eighteenth century." Imagine that. The light bulb in our modern-day refrigerators generates more light than the entire homes of our great, great, great grandparents! It's easy to forget that for most of the history of life on this planet, the world was a very dark place. Nowadays, with light as near as the closest switch, those of us who are blessed with sight tend to take light for granted.

It's only when we are suddenly plunged into darkness that we appreciate the joy that light brings. More than we realize, light is a matter of life and death.

On a recent hike in the Shenandoah National Forest, my wife and I became lost in that vast forest. Every attempt to find our way took us deeper into those woods. Without food, water, map, tent, or flashlight we spent a cold night huddled together in darkness deeper than we had ever known. For

eleven hours we were literally blind amid the strange sounds of the night and the terrifying thought that we might never be found. Then, shortly before daybreak we saw the beam of a single flashlight, two hikers coming toward us on the trail. It was not just light they carried. They carried joy and, yes, life itself.

Ron Luckey

Fifth Sunday in Lent April 2, 2017

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6–11

John 11:1–45

Engaging the Texts

God's question to Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones, "Can these bones live?" is the interrogative thread that runs through three readings for the day. And in all three, the response is in the affirmative. The coming to life of the hopelessly dry bones of exiled Israel serves as a visionary foretaste of her eventual homecoming from Babylon. Paul promises the church in Rome that "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies..." And the resuscitation of Lazarus points to God's ultimate "yes" in the messianic dying and rising that will result in life for all humanity.

There is a frequent practice these days in some religious circles to replace funerals with "Celebrations of Life" that focus almost entirely on commemorating the life of the deceased with scant attention to proclaiming the hope that is ours through the dying and rising of Jesus. This loss of focus ought to serve as a cautionary word to the preacher who is tempted to focus this Sunday's sermon solely on the resuscitation of Lazarus instead of using this event to point to the larger issue of Jesus' impending death and resurrection that will be celebrated just two weeks hence.

From the beginning of this narrative, John trains our attention on the passion of Jesus. Jesus delays his travels to Bethany when word comes that his friend is very ill. It is clear that he does not intend to heal Lazarus even though he could have. Instead, he explains to the disciples that he intends to act "...so that the *Son of God may be glorified* through it." Jesus' glorification is a uniquely Johannine theme used in several places in John's gospel. For John, the terms "glory" and "glorification" ultimately have to do with Jesus being "lifted up" on the cross. At the outset, therefore, it is clear that this story is not merely about a family crisis averted by the resuscitation of a dead man but the crisis of the world that will be

3. Fred B. Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guides John H. Hayes, editor, 1982.

ultimately resolved by the death of the Son of God.

John maintains our attention on Jesus' passion by reporting Jesus' uncharacteristic emotion at Lazarus' tomb. Matthew, Mark, and Luke present a Jesus who weeps, gets angry, and becomes impatient on occasion. Not so with John. His Jesus always seems in control and above the fray. So, when he becomes "greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" and begins to weep, it is startling.

This has led many commentators to conclude that this emotional scene outside Lazarus' tomb is Jesus' "Gethsemane moment" when he confronts his own death and makes the agonizing choice to do the Father's will and turn his face toward the cross. This seems entirely plausible given that, unlike the synoptic gospels, John doesn't have a Gethsemane story. In John's gospel, after his last supper with the disciples, Jesus goes across the Kidron Valley to "a garden" and is immediately arrested. There is no tearful, agonized prayer, no sleeping disciples, no wrestling with whether or not to accept his fate.

With this in mind, I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say that in John's gospel the passion narrative of Jesus begins the moment Lazarus comes back to life, a fact borne out in verses 46–57. When Lazarus comes out of his grave, Jesus is on his way to his own grave.

In a world where the stench of death permeates the air—war, disease, human trafficking, genocide, systemic injustice, ecological disaster—more is needed on this Sunday than a sermon about the resuscitation of a corpse and the drying of two sisters' tears temporarily. Only a sermon that lifts up the hope

that is ours in the dying and rising of Jesus will do. The gospel reading provides just such an opportunity.

Pastoral Reflections

In his book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernst Becker says that what people fear most is not dying. What people fear most is that when they die, no one will notice. If the dying and rising of Jesus says anything, it says that God not only notices the deaths we experience and all the deaths we perpetrate on this earth. God has done something about it.

At an intersection not far from where I live, just off the road is a little wooden cross about two feet tall. As I drove past the corner last Lent, I saw a man and a woman draping the cross in purple and sticking plastic pin wheels in the ground to spin in the wind. Most people in my town probably have no idea what that's all about. But I know. The man and woman lost their teenage son in a car accident at that spot nearly ten years ago. A few days after the funeral they, along with some of their son's high school friends hammered the cross into the ground and decorated it with lilies and plastic butterflies. Since then, every few weeks those parents stop at that corner and re-decorate the cross to say to those who pass by, "Remember our boy." They are realists. They know that after all these years, most have stopped noticing. But there's a pinwheel blowing in the wind this Lent at an intersection in my town. It's their way of quietly saying to the world, "God notices."

Ron Luckey