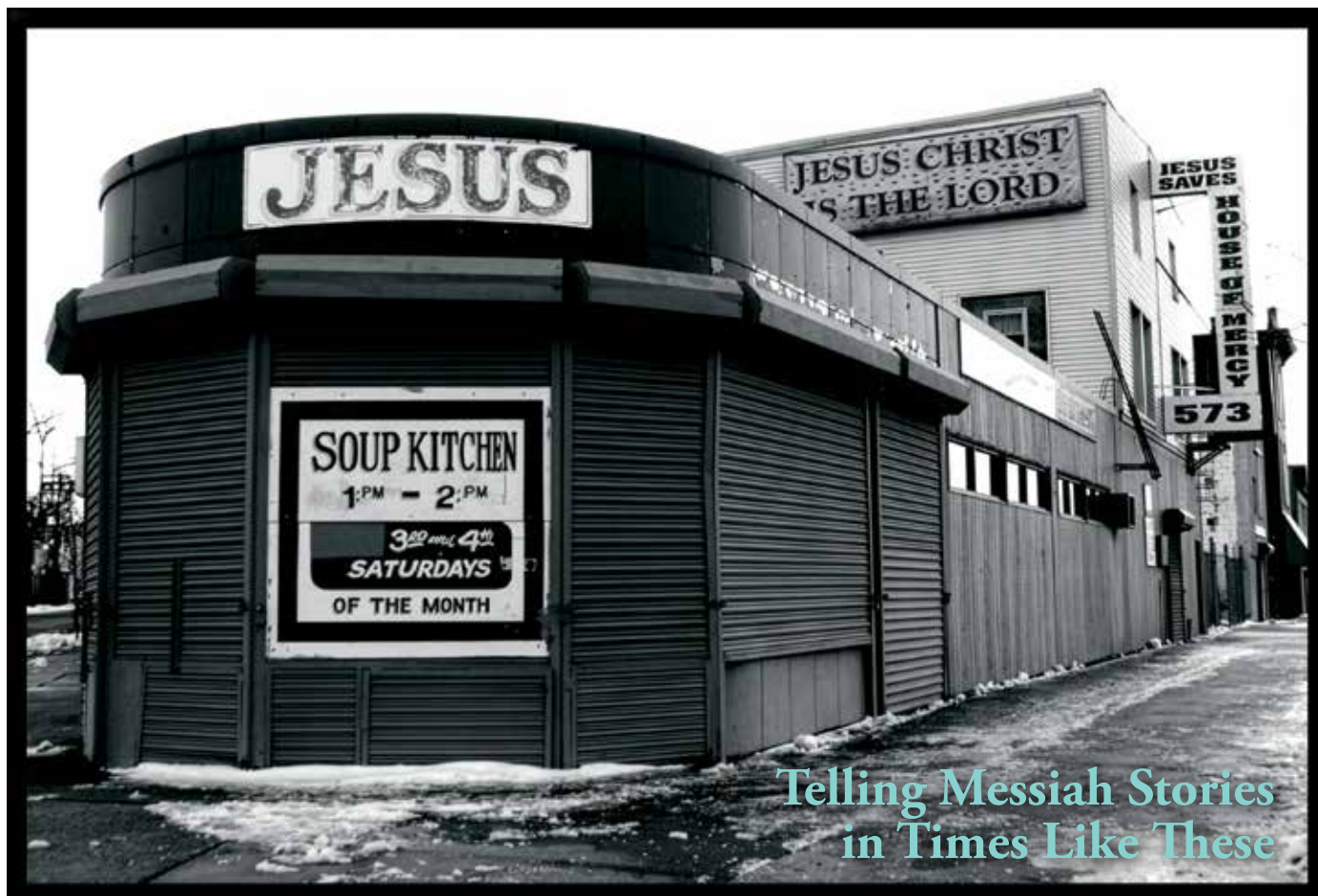




Telling Messiah Stories in Times Like These

Introduction to This Issue **Telling Messiah Stories in Times Like These**

Such times we live in. It will not do to pretend that there ever was a Golden Age during which we all just got along. But it also will not do to whitewash the present dominance of angry and crude public discourse. I was reading the remarkable collection, *Conflict or Consensus in American History*.¹ In the volume, prominent historians focus on several key moments in the history of the American experiment to ask whether there ever has been a common consensus shared by the American people, despite recurrent conflict, or if basic disagreements are in fact an engrained characteristic of this nation. The arguments on all sides are stimulating. Even those who argue for the existence of a solid bedrock of basic agreement note the fiery disagreements that have repeatedly torn communities apart. One particularly striking interchange focuses on the moment in 1856 when Senator Charles Sumner was beaten nearly to death on the floor of the United States Senate by another Senator who supported slavery.

We live in another moment of angry disagreement and violent confrontation growing out of bitter rhetoric. The assault in the Senate in 1856 was part of the run-up to the American Civil

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War. Though I hope that our current rancor does not yield the same extreme result, it is worth noting how some loud voices have indeed called for another Civil War.

Such times we live in.

In the years after the crushing of the First and Second Jewish Revolts against Rome, rabbis addressed a painful question: How did we lose the Temple? It was not a merely religious question. The Temple was not merely a religious building, not merely a symbol of the Jewish faith. As Shaye D. Cohen points out, in

1. Allen F. Davis and Harold D. Woodman, eds., *Conflict or Consensus in American History* (Boston: Heath, 1966).

Photo: Fischer, Tony. *Jesus Feeds the Hungry*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt University Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

the centuries at the beginning of the Common Era, the Temple in Jerusalem was understood to be the place where God created safety and stability in a chaotic and dangerous world. The question about how the Temple came to be lost was thus a radical question about the possibility of safety in a world so in debt to violence. The wrangle that followed was vigorous, and sometimes vicious. Trauma often leads to the splintering of communities. Every party had an answer. Most of the answers pointed blame at other parties.

The answer? After careful consideration, the rabbis answered: We lost the Temple because of factionalism. This is a brilliant answer, one that has present relevance, I think.

The focus of this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* begins with a question that was put to each of the writers: How do we tell messiah stories in times like these? This is not merely a religious question. If the task of messiah is to turn the broken Creation right-side-up, this question is a basic question about how we can live and hope and act, so as to make things less awful. As I listen to all sorts of theological discussion (professional and popular) I hear versions of this question being asked on all hands.

And I hear all sorts of conflict. Every party seems to know who is to blame for the divisiveness of the present moment. Every party seems to have a way of telling messiah stories that they imagine will correct things. The stories often exclude each other, sometimes explicitly and gladly.

You will notice differences among the answers both given and implied by the writers of the articles in this volume. That is not an accident. I would argue that it is not a problem, at least not a problem to be eliminated. When we treat difference as a problem to be eliminated, we typically respond in one of two ways: either we demand dogmatic agreement, or we imagine that every idea is as good as every other idea. Neither of these responses is satisfactory. If we imagine that truth will only emerge when everyone agrees with our dogmatic positions, we will finally need to extirpate those who, inconveniently, see things differently.² But if we pretend that all ideas are equally good, we will have to blandly accept white Christian nationalism as essentially no different from the gospel of the messiah.³

There are real and intentional differences among the voices in this volume of *Currents*. What holds the voices together is that they are all listening to the same story, the same gospel. And they are all paying careful attention to what it means to tell messiah stories in times like these.

Mark G. Vitalis Hoffman digs deeply into the matter of hearing the story as it is told. This matter concerns the choices we make in terms of the translations from which we choose to read

and preach but, more importantly, it sinks its roots deep into the historical origin of the stories that became our gospels. As Vitalis Hoffman points out, this is especially crucial for our consideration of Mark's story. This old—and very odd—story came into being as an oral composition performed for a listening audience. This has implications beyond mere antiquarian interest in ancient levels of literacy. Hearing transforms. Listening is thus essential to the work of the gospel.

The second article, by **Tim Brown and Jason Chesnut**, draws you into a conversational exploration of the scene in Mark's story where a woman (who is not named) anoints Jesus' head (Mark 14:1-9). Probably every preacher knows this story well. I remember as a little kid asking my mom what "nard" was. Most preachers who are members of text study groups probably have engaged in conversational explorations of this scene, likely focusing on the charge of wastefulness that appears in the scene. Brown and Chesnut (two pastors who are part of the Anam Cara online community), however, engage with **Richard Swanson** in a rather different exploration. They wonder together about the act of anointing the Anointed One and that this act of anointing is performed by a woman. This sets up an intriguing exercise in hearing and listening.

Richard W. Swanson considers how the matter of messiah's giving of life as a "ransom" (Mark 10:35-45) has been told and heard, and how it might be heard differently. The author especially focuses on how listening to such a scene might shape an audience and heal a community. What if the "ransom" has nothing to do with expiation, but everything to do with family?

Carla Christopher explores how a particular moment of hearing the Palm Sunday scene in Mark's story is shaped by a life rich in experiences, some of which might be quite unlike your own life or experience. How does a pastor who is a poet, a lesbian, a social worker, and a foster parent hear this pivotal scene in Mark's story? How does the presence of a young person with a "scrawny, jagged haircut and awkward swagger" require a new way of listening and create a new way of hearing? How might this shape our stories of messiah?

The final article by **Jenny Alexander-Allen** listens very differently to the end of Mark's story. Ancient hearers of Mark's odd ending responded by patching on alternate endings that smoothed and completed the story. Literary-critical students have noted that the silence at the end created a powerfully broken end to a story that often has seemed too smooth, too predictable. The author points out that not all silence is silent. Sometimes the very act of remaining silent communicates a clear message. Alexander-Allen listens to this ending as a member of the Queer community and hears things that might surprise you.

Listening and hearing have never been simple, obvious activities. In times like these, we need to consider again what it means to listen to Mark's story in the company of people who listen differently, people who may hear things we do not. We offer these articles to you in the hope that listening to this old, odd story in

2. Emmanuel Levinas made this clear. He argued we have two alternatives: a totalizing response and an infinitizing response. If I imagine that I possess total truth, Levinas notes, I will finally have to kill you if you are inconveniently different. At that point, Levinas points out that the only relevant commandment is Thou Shalt Not Kill. See *Totality and Infinity*.

3. See the articles in the theme issue "Declaring Independence from Christian Nationalism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* Vol. 53 No. 3 (July 2026).

the rich company of these writers can provide models for how we might help heal Creation.

In the first of two **Currents Focus** articles for this issue, **Yung Suk Kim** notices how some biblical narratives involve challenges and controversies because of complexities about ethnic conflict and oppression. The movement of Christian nationalism is a growing threat not only to democracy but to critical, transformative biblical interpretation. This ideology represents some aspects of ideology met in Joshua's conquest narrative and Jesus' conversation with a Canaanite woman. Oppressors can be external but are also found internally within the community, often masquerading with a cause of liberation. Revealing this ideology is essential to biblical interpretation. True liberation and transformation can happen when one faces opacities of enemies all around oneself—from outside or from within, and even within oneself—not by defeating or feeling superior to others, but through accepting human weakness and embracing God's impartial grace.

In their article on "Race, Religion, and Corporal Punishment in the ELCA's Social Message on Child Protection," **Victor I. Vieth and Jemour A. Maddux** recount how this social message strongly opposes the physical discipline of children, while also calling on both the church and the state to address racial disparities in the child welfare system. Since corporal punishment is used more frequently in some faith communities and in families of color,

reducing corporal punishment and racial disparities in the child welfare system can be challenging. The authors assert, however, that both goals can be achieved simultaneously and offer concrete examples of how to do this. Although primarily addressed to individuals involved in multi-disciplinary teams, the arguments apply to a wide spectrum of professionals, including teachers and religious leaders as well as parents and others who interact with children. Since the ELCA social message on child protection calls on the church to advocate for numerous public policy reforms, this article may assist individuals of faith to advocate for strong policies in both the church and state to confront racism as well as practices that contribute to child physical abuse.

This issue of "**Preaching Helps**" will mark the end of Ordinary Time. But for many people in this country, including in our congregations, October is *not* Ordinary Time. It's a frightening time, a time of war against Iran, a time of economic hardship for many. How do we preach when Ordinary Time is not ordinary? What do we hear as we listen attentively to the lectionary texts and the texts in our communities? The introduction to "Preaching Helps" will try to pay attention to both texts as we move toward elections on November 3.

Richard W. Swanson
Issue Guest Editor

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