

Preaching Helps

Last Sundays in Ordinary Time to the Sunday after Christmas, 2026

This Is No Ordinary Time in America

This October issue of *Currents* focuses on the gospel of Mark, Year B in the rhythm of the lectionary readings. I encourage you to save this issue so you can refer to these essays because preaching on Mark begins on November 29, the First Sunday of Advent.

For many people this October is not Ordinary Time. It is pre-election time. Preachers and lay people alike will experience October moving closer to midterm elections on November 3. Our lives will be filled with TV ads, emails, texts, billboards, and social media blurbs to promote candidates for local, state-wide, and national elections. For many people the last thing they want to hear on Sunday morning is more politics. Yet people are talking politics outside the sanctuary. They are making decisions about voting even though most pastors reading this journal will not endorse particular candidates. (We know this is not true in many churches where parishioners are urged [told] to vote for certain candidates by name.) So how can we preach faithfully on scripture texts while also being attentive to the reality of upcoming elections?

The lectionary is our friend. This is true even though some parishioners will be convinced these texts weren't in the lectionary, but were chosen to buttress our political opinions. In the pages that follow, you'll find commentaries on all the Sundays from now until the end of December. I want to focus on the three Sundays that lead up to the election in November.

October 18: Shall we pay taxes? In his Substack "Steady," Dan Rather responded to the news that U.S. debt had surpassed \$40 trillion. He was clear that one of the reasons for that unimaginable sum is due to tax policies. He reminded us that in the Eisenhower years, the richest Americans paid 50-56% of their income in taxes. Today the 400 wealthiest Americans pay 24% of their income. These percentages are from two different Republican administrations. Our preaching doesn't have to pit one party against another, but it's clear that the richest people in our country now pay lower taxes. "Jesus, is it lawful for wealthy people to pay such a small percentage of their income in taxes?" Tell me, what is written on your dollar bill? "In God We Trust," we answer. Jesus turns to us and says, "If you trust in God, what is lawful may not be faithful. Tell me, what will happen to those who are poor?" But, we protest, that's not the question we asked you!

October 25: Reformation Sunday or the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost. We may have the John text for Ref-

ormation Sunday memorized because it's the same every year: "And you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Jesus isn't speaking about truth in advertising or truth-as-facts in a culture that disdains facts. He's saying the truth that matters is this: the Son will set us free. One day last summer Jennifer Butler's post popped up on my phone. What caught my eye was a picture of a church bulletin board that looked familiar. Yes, I've often walked past that bulletin board outside University Baptist Church a few blocks from my home. That bulletin board often has a provocative message but the one in the photo was one I'd never seen: **Committed To Our Community. Even Under Surveillance.** It turned out to be true, factual. According to Butler, an undercover agent came into a class being held in the church gym wearing a concealed recording device. Federal records later revealed additional surveillance visits to the church, including on Sundays. Butler summarizes her concern about what's happening in University Baptist and other so called Mainline churches:

When a Mainline bishop, pastor, or congregation challenges unchecked government power, the audience can include Republicans, Democrats, and independents. [That includes:] People who may have voted for [President] Trump but recoil when federal agents enter churches. People who favor stronger border enforcement but don't believe government should decide whom the church may accompany. People who would never attend a protest but understand that a pastor ought to be able to minister without wondering whether someone in the room is wearing a wire.

Can we tell the truth about what's going on in some churches? Can the reforming spirit be alive in our preaching and in our actions?

The other lectionary option for October 25 is to preach on texts for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost. Jesus' adversaries now ask, not about taxes or resurrection, but "which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus doesn't hesitate: "Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind...And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:36-39) During Metro Surge in Minneapolis last winter, pastors and lay people used "neighbor" as both a noun and a verb. How can we neighbor our neighbors? Give rides, deliver food and patrol community streets watching for ICE agents. Now this is happening in even more radical ways in Springfield, Ohio, home to over 10,000 Haitian people. Again, Jennifer Butler:

As immigration enforcement intensifies, some people have become frightened to leave their homes. Parents are completing power-of-attorney documents so someone can care for their children if they are

detained. Churches and faith-connected volunteers are delivering food and diapers, providing rides to immigration court, finding lawyers, and building networks of families willing to step in when someone disappears into detention.

Think about what that means. Church families are preparing to take children into their homes if the government takes their parents.¹

We don't have to look far to find stories of immigrants detained, abused in detention, worried about their children, scared to leave their homes to work or to take their kids to school. We can preach these stories without naming particular political leaders; of course, many people will fill in the blanks.

November 1, 2026: All Saints' Day. This is the last Sunday before mid-term elections on Tuesday, November 3. Of course, this is also the Sunday that many people will be remembering loved ones who have died years ago or within this past year. The gospel text for this Sunday is Matthew 5:1–12, known to many as The Beatitudes. On this All Saints' Sunday, many will hear verse 4 and the rest will fall away: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." These blessings have deep personal meaning; they also have political meaning. "Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." How will we vote if we take the Beatitudes with us to the polls? As far as I know there is no law against taking Bible verses into the voting booth. "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." Some people may remember Bishop Mariann Budde's plea to the president at the National Cathedral shortly after the election. She spoke directly to him in a gentle voice: "I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now," she said, invoking gay, lesbian, and transgender children, as well as undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers. Many people listening to our sermons are scared now, whether they fit into any of these groups. "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy."

There are ways to preach faithfully in these October days leading up to the election. We know many people have already voted. Good for them! They can still encourage others to vote. You know not only the texts before you, but you also know the people sitting before you. Hopefully you've exegeted the congregation as carefully as the biblical texts. Blessed are those who preach even when they are afraid.

I'm grateful to our writers for this October issue of "Preaching Helps." Here's a little about them so you know who's talking with you: **Abby Ferjak** serves as the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Scarsdale, New York. She enjoys

going on local adventures with her wife (also a Lutheran pastor) and their two children. **Ali Ferin** serves as one of the pastors for the good people at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Ali is a graduate of Iowa State University and Luther Seminary and lives in White Bear Lake, Minnesota, with her spouse, children, and collection of pets: an excited goldendoodle named Dottie, a small school of fish whose names change depending on what TV show her children are watching, and a resilient snail named Lazarus who regularly resurrects from the dead. **Brad Froslee** serves as co-pastor at St. Michael's Lutheran Church in Roseville, Minnesota. Away from church, Brad stays busy with his husband, Bill, as chauffeurs to their teenage son and dog walkers to their Border Collie. Doing genealogy, writing poetry, and volunteering with the Alumni & Family Board at St. Olaf College, and as chaperone for the Minnesota Boychoir help to fill the time.

Patrick Cabello Hansel is a poet and retired Lutheran pastor, who served for thirty-five years in urban, bilingual congregations in the Bronx, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis. His poetry collections are *The Devouring Land*, *Quitting Time* and *Breathing in Minneapolis*, which deals with the challenges that city faced during 2020-2021. He is currently working on a novel, and teaching poetry with immigrants and seniors. He is the curator of the ArtStart poetry series in St. Paul, and the founder of the Not Dead Yet Poets Society, which sponsors the annual Poetry and Jazz in the Holy Ground at the historic Pioneers and Soldiers Cemetery in Minneapolis. His website is: www.artecabellohansel.com. **Shauna Hannan** began her tenure as President of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in July 2025. Prior to joining LSTC, she served as Professor of Homiletics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and as Core Doctoral Faculty for the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. She is the co-author, with filmmaker Gael Chandler, of *Scripting a Sermon: Using the Wisdom of Filmmaking for Impactful Preaching* (WJKP, 2024) and the author of *The Peoples' Sermon: Preaching as a Ministry of the Whole Congregation* (Fortress, 2021). Ordained in the ELCA in 1998, she has held various leadership roles on committees and boards and currently serves on the Board of Trustees for Augsburg Fortress. **Barbara Lundblad** is editor of "Preaching Helps" (and writes on some of the appointed texts when all else fails!) She was a parish pastor in the Washington Heights area of New York City and later served as Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary. For over forty years she was a preacher on The Protestant Hour (now Day 1).

Aaron Musser is pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, Leavenworth, Washington. Before moving to the mountains of the Pacific Northwest he served as a church musician in Milwaukee and Chicago and worked in outdoor ministry in northern Illinois, singing in choirs along the way. He still spends plenty

1. All quotations from Jennifer Butler are from her Substack post: *Reclaiming Faith*, August 27, 2026.

of time making music, but these days is just as likely to be found hiking a mountain trail, swimming in an alpine lake, or otherwise finding reasons to be outside. **John Rollefson** is a retired ELCA pastor living on California's Central Coast. He served urban and campus congregations in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor, and Los Angeles. **Barbara Rossing** is professor emerita of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. She loves to teach "Preaching the Gospel of John." She works on Bible and creation care, including her recent article "Kairos for Mission, Kairos for the Climate," <https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/536/558>. She serves on the ELCA Church Council and the board of directors of Lutherans Restoring Creation.

Grateful thanks to all these writers—and thanks to you for reading and for preaching.

Barbara K. Lundblad
Editor, *Preaching Helps*

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 4, 2026

Isaiah 5:1–7

Psalm 80:7–15

Philippians 3:4b–14

Matthew 21:33–46

Engaging the Texts

Themes of abuse of leadership and a wayward people run throughout this week's texts. While these truths are part of our lives as followers of Jesus, harsh or violent language can be hard for congregants to hear. Images of vineyards are a common theme, whether they are vineyards spoiled themselves or conflict over the management of the land. Preachers beware of the ways in which these texts have been misused to convey anti-Semitic messages throughout history.

Isaiah 5 presents us with a prophetic poem about a vineyard and the creator of it. The poet's beloved seems to have done everything right for the crop to flourish, but inexplicably bad grapes grow instead. We don't have to guess at what the author intends—it's spelled out for us in verse 7. The vineyard is the house of Israel; the bad grapes are the people of Judah. God expected justice but the people created bloodshed and the prophet is calling them to account.

Psalm 80 continues the vineyard theme. However, in this prayer of lament, the Lord is accused of breaking down protective barriers and hostile outsiders are the ones causing destruction. The psalm may have been written as a response to a disaster, possibly the fall and exile of the Northern Kingdom. The psalm names God's past faithfulness, states the current loss, and confesses hope in God's continued faithfulness.

Interestingly, verse 14 asks God to "turn now," hinting at the ability for God to change God's mind.

In Philippians 3 Paul writes from prison to a community he has deep affection for. Warning against people in Philippi who insist that circumcision is a requirement for following Jesus, Paul insists that attempts to elevate one's standing in God's eyes through such elements of the "flesh" are fruitless (v. 4). Paul is proud of his righteousness under the law, but states that the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ is what is of value (v. 9). Even in prison, Paul presses forward to God's call (v. 14).

Matthew 21 returns to a vineyard, this time in Jesus' parable. It's not unusual that a landowner would set up a vineyard and lease it to tenants, but it is unusual that tenants would unleash such violence on his messengers over and over. Similarly, it's unusual that the landowner would continue to send more messengers and finally his own son. The tenant's logic that killing the son would leave them as heirs continues the strangeness of the parable. Jesus tells this parable to the Pharisees and chief priests in the temple after they ask him where he receives his authority for his temple activities. Jesus calls the leaders out on their failed leadership of the people.

Pastoral Reflections

These texts name hard truths from which none of us can escape. They are true for everyone—the people and the leaders alike. Preachers will not need to look far to find examples of injustice in their communities. The challenge is to be sure we are not only pointing fingers at them, but also seeing how we are implicated. Depending on the preacher's context, it may be appropriate to lean into the lament found in the texts, or the call to see the truth of our own actions, or the assurance that God remains faithful even in the midst of trials.

Preaching Isaiah 5 provides opportunity to name the truth of our sins—our bad grapes. With a midterm election approaching in the semiquincentennial year, a preacher could call out the bad grapes of our nation—what is the injustice and bloodshed? How has the church participated in it? The good news here is hard, but good. Naming the truth of sin and the truth that everything is not okay is necessary for change and the flourishing of all. This passage brings to mind the song "Masks Off" by Jesse Welles, in which the many sins of our nation are plainly named. In listening to it, there is an element of healing simply by hearing truth named so clearly.

Psalm 80 could provide comfort for communities going through particularly difficult times. The preacher can name the ways in which God has been faithful in the past, while also naming feelings of loss or abandonment. Preachers can assure listeners that God can handle our honesty and anger.

A sermon centered on Philippians 3 could lift up perseverance in times of distress. Paul's lived example provides

inspiration to the preacher: a man who saw many trials but counts all of them worth it because of Christ. A man who, even behind bars, is moved by faith to continue living his call. It's been said that Paul's letter to the Philippians was on Martin Luther King Jr.'s mind when he wrote his Letter from a Birmingham Jail.

The parable from Matthew is quite challenging to preach. It's violent, confusing, and feels like it's from another world for many today. It is important for the preacher to remind listeners that parables are not supposed to "make sense" or be direct allegories. Parables are supposed to get us scratching our heads. A sermon could look at the ways in which the people of God are called to be stewards and the ways in which we fall short of that call. There is harsh judgment in verse 41, but a preacher may want to note that it comes from the mouths of the Pharisees, not from Jesus. If nothing else, this text calls us to account as God's people—what we do matters in the kingdom.

Abby Ferjak

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 11, 2026

Isaiah 25:1–9

Psalms 23

Philippians 4:1–9

Matthew 22:1–14

Engaging the Texts

Two divergent themes run through this week's texts. First, there is the assurance and comfort of God's provision for all. Second, there is the proclamation (or warning?) to heed God's call, whatever that may be. Preachers face another week with a confounding parable. Be mindful of the history of "traditional" allegorical interpretations that can limit the depth of the text and lead to anti-Semitic themes.

Isaiah 25 is a song of praise to God for saving the weak. It quickly takes a turn to the modern ear when the author names God's "wonderful things" (v. 1) as destruction of the fortified city and the palace of foreigners (v. 2). But the wonderful things continue with God's refuge for the poor and distressed. God's own self absorbs the intensity of the onslaught (v. 4). The song takes a view from the end of time, when God and humanity will have a new level of relationship (v. 7). It will be a time when God provides for all people (v. 6) and will wipe away all tears (v. 8).

With God as our shepherd, we lack nothing. That is the primary theme of Psalm 23. The psalm follows the journey of the author, a journey along still waters and through dark

valleys. The final verse (v. 6) can also be translated, "Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life, and I will return to the house of the Lord forever."

In writing to his beloved community in Philippi, Paul addresses conflict between two women, though we don't know the substance of it (v. 2). He goes on to urge the community to show gentleness (plural form) to all people, and to bring any worries to God in prayer. He ends by urging them to put their mental energy and time toward things that are worthy of praise (v. 8). This begs the question: what had their minds been on? Perhaps the things that cause worry? Perhaps gossip about internal conflict?

In Matthew, Jesus speaks to the Pharisees and chief priests in the temple. This is his third parable in a response to their question about where the authority for his temple activities comes from. The guests invited to the wedding banquet for the king's son don't show up and eventually kill the messengers sent to retrieve them. To decline to come to the heir-apparent's wedding banquet and then to murder the messengers and the heir would amount to a threat of an armed rebellion. The king murders the murderers and destroys the city. Everyone left—good and bad—make it into the party. The parable gets even stranger when one of the impromptu guests isn't dressed appropriately (v. 12) and gets cast into the outer darkness.

Pastoral Reflections

Isaiah 25 provides many rich opportunities for preaching. The view from the end of time provides us with a broader perspective on our lives that reveals our various parts as connected with a larger narrative. God's justice is prominent, and while the jarring images of verse 2 can distract a listener, the preacher can draw out the beautiful images of justice that follow. God destroys imperial oppression and lifts up the oppressed. The culmination of this justice is articulated in the vision of a feast, a safe place, and a God who cares for all people. At a time when multiple wars rage throughout the globe, preachers could focus on this hopeful vision of God's justice. The preacher might call out the ways in which we prevent that justice as well as name the moments we have seen this justice in our time. The preacher could also zoom in on a small community level and name the ways God has been a refuge for the community while challenging the community to be that welcoming refuge for others.

Preaching Psalm 23 at this moment in history could be a word of comfort and strength that congregants need to hear. The preacher may decide this is the week the people simply need to rest in God's promise to walk alongside them in dark valleys and lead them beside still waters. The reassurance that life holds both and that God is present in both perhaps isn't stated enough.

Conflict is afoot in the church in Philippi, and Paul wants them to work it out with the help of the community. Prayer should be involved, and a mindset focused on what is good so as to direct the community's life toward those things. If preachers are dealing with conflict or partisan division in their communities, this text urges them to ask their people: what is our common ground? What is good and honorable and just?

The parable in Matthew 22 begs more questions than answers, and this is an opportunity for the preacher to admit that. Preachers can show by example that reading scripture can be challenging and confusing. It could be freeing for listeners to hear the preacher list all of the questions that arise from this text. Then show that, even with all the questions and confusion, the spirit can still speak to us—and perhaps say something different the next time we read it! Is this a message about heeding God's call? That God will call as many as needed to get the kingdom work done? Or is this a message about wearing the "right garment," living the kingdom life? Or something else entirely?

Abby Ferjak

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost October 18, 2026

Isaiah 45:1–7

Psalms 96:1–9, [10–13]

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Matthew 22:15–22

Heads or Tails

The tension is mounting! The stories Jesus kept telling were getting edgier and edgier. Those who counted themselves among his opponents were growing tired of Jesus ending his stories, "So the last will be first and the first last," or "Many are called but few are chosen," sayings that seemed aimed at them—the religious leaders—whether priests or scribes or Sadducees, or as in today's story, Pharisees and Herodians. They were not natural allies but in the case of Jesus seemed willing to endorse the old adage, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

And so, Matthew tells us, they colluded in an effort to ensnare Jesus in his own words by approaching him and asking flatteringly, "We know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality"—quite an over-the-top string of compliments even if we can't help but hear them in a rather snide tone of voice.

So finally getting down to the business at hand—their

would-be entrapment of Jesus—they urged him to tell them what he thinks: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" (vv. 16–17). It's a simple question, but Jesus, smelling a rat and aware of their malice, had a query of his own, letting them know he's on to them: "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" (a word originating in Greek theatre as a "play-actor" or "one who wears a mask," as in ancient dramas). Jesus then asked them for a prop, "the coin used to pay the tax." So they produced a denarius. "Whose head is this and whose title?" he asked his interrogators. Their answer: "Caesar's"—meaning "the emperor's." Jesus responded, finally supplying them with their answer, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." Hearing this they were "amazed," Matthew reports, "and they left him and went away" (vv. 18–22).

This, in an important sense, was the question of Jesus' day, simple-sounding as it may be for us moderns. For anyone who wanted to be a law-abiding, Torah-reverencing Jew faced the issue of whether one, as a political subject of the Romans, should in good conscience pay taxes to the occupying overlords. But even more to the point, could a good Jew use a Roman coin which carried the image of one of the Roman emperors who, since the days of Augustus, had declared themselves to be divinities? Thus, by implication, a Jew would be participating in what many saw as an act of idolatry by the very use of such a coin. Yet again Jesus has eluded his opponents, escaping the trap they had set for him by slipping between the horns of the dilemma upon which they'd tried to impale him, stunning them into amazed silence.

Clever Jesus, we can't help but think! But remember that the final charge brought against him, as Luke's Gospel puts it, is just this: "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah (Luke 23:2). Shrewd perhaps, but not finally so clever as to elude the political and religious charges of his opponents that eventually would culminate in the successful plot against Jesus' life.

The real genius of Jesus' response is, to my mind, his leaving the answer yet again in the hands of his questioners which includes us. I like to think of Jesus not just eluding their trap with his wile but instead inviting them—and us—to see that simple "yes" or "no" answers are seldom, if ever, the right answers to the most important and difficult of life's questions, especially to the "big" religious and political and economic questions of the day. For Jesus shows us that life lived in faithfulness to God is ever and always a matter of struggling to discern how we are to give to Caesar the things that are rightfully Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Jesus said "and," not "either/or" but "and."

In other words, Jesus is saying "You figure it out," knowing as you do that as Scripture clearly teaches, all creation is

God's and as the psalmist put it, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Psalm 24:1). All there is is God's. So it's not as if Caesar is on a par with God, a real rival of God for authority. But—and it's a big "but"—Caesar, meaning political authority—can have a legitimate claim to our loyalty including our taxes. That is, an important part of our calling from God is our vocation as citizens of the kingdoms of this world where God restrains evil in the world through the powers-that-be, what brother Martin would come to call the "left-hand kingdom of God." Still, as Peter says in Acts, there are times when we Christians must obey "God rather than man," which Lutherans in too many circumstances neglected to remember in their zeal (or indolence) in conforming to the political cultures around them. But the bottom line is that our calling as Christians who are also citizens is the never-ending task of deciding what is legitimately owed to the political powers-that-be in the context of our supreme loyalty to God.

To keep us from thinking this is a simple matter, we have the witness of Isaiah to remind us of God's freedom in making the stunning choice of the pagan Persian king Cyrus as Israel's messiah, certainly no more outrageous a declaration than if we American Christians were to learn that some contemporary Iranian ayatollah is the God-appointed messiah for our day. Or as some biblicists in our day claim that our current president's immoral actions and unjust policies might just be the works of a God-approved contemporary Cyrus!

John Rollefson

Reformation Sunday October 25, 2026

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalms 46

Romans 3:19–28

John 8:31–36

Justification as Story: The Death of Ivan Ilych

During the waning days of the Cold War in the late 1980s I led a book study group for members and friends of the congregation I was serving at the time. The study was titled "Our Russian Neighbors." The idea was to read and discuss, from the perspective of Christian faith, a wide variety of Russian literature as a way of getting to know the people and culture of what the U.S. president of the day had identified as "the evil empire." We read Turgenev, Bulgakov, Dostoevski, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn.

Among our readings were short stories by two Russian masters of a century or more earlier that remain among my favorites, in part because I came to see how they illustrate vividly the breadth and depth of the doctrine of justification

by grace through faith which we celebrate on Reformation Sunday in word and song and sacrament. One, by Anton Chekhov, titled "The Beggar," is a short, short story, that nicely illustrates Luther's dying words, "We are beggars, that is true." The second is a long short story, almost a novella, by Count Leo Tolstoy, titled "The Death of Ivan Ilych," a dark tale that dramatizes the "life and death" character of justification, as the theologian Gerhard Forde used to call it (See his *Justification: A Matter of Life and Death* [1982]) as well as my article "Justification as Story" which uses these two tales to help explicate the two "poles" of the doctrine as laid out in the 1999 agreement between the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation ("The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" [see *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Fall 2012]).

Let me try to condense the second story and its message. Ivan Ilych is an upper class lawyer who has risen to become a judge in the tsar's civil service. By middle age he has achieved for himself an admirable niche in respectable Russian society—especially in his own opinion. To all outward appearances he is an exemplary person, even, perhaps, one favored by God.

But at the very moment of his reaching the pinnacle of success, he begins to suffer from a mysterious and debilitating illness that gradually, but with accelerating certainty, leads Ivan to realize that he is walking through the darkening valley of the shadow of death—and he is traversing it all alone. As the horizon of his life looms ever closer, Ivan, for the first time, realizes that his whole life—his work, his material success, even more alarmingly, his family and his friendships—have all accumulated like so much furniture intended merely to adorn his existence. Beginning as the merest hint of self-doubt that perhaps he has not lived his life as he might have, slowly but surely this nagging self-questioning of his outward success grows into the dreadful certainty that he has squandered his entire life.

The growing isolation from all around him as his physical pain intensifies and the sense of meaninglessness that engulfs him as death draws ever nearer fill the reader with a dread that is as vivid a picture of hell as anyone has ever imagined. Unlike Sartre, for Ivan his hell is not "other people," but being utterly alone in his suffering, his absolute self-containment and self-absorption. To this point the story sounds like a gross caricature of Russian literature as someone such as Woody Allen might poke fun at—life is heavy, morose, melancholy, utterly depressing, and despairing.

Except that Ivan is not as entirely alone as he thinks. For Gerasim, his peasant servant whom Ivan has always treated as a part of the woodwork, is there with him, tenderly caring for him in his growing incontinence, even going so far as to let Ivan's legs rest upon his shoulders through the long, dark nights, ameliorating his excruciating pain. Gerasim becomes

for Ivan the means of his redemption. Ivan is suddenly enabled to see that all the taken-for-granted of his former life in all of its oblivious self-justification is so much excrement disappearing down the toilet (much like Luther in his so-called “tower experience”).

Just two hours before he would draw his last breath, Ivan is finally able to let go of his former self-righteousness and behold the genuine sorrow in the eyes of his young son and grieving wife, and for the first time feel pity for them and seek forgiveness from them. Listen to Tolstoy’s own words:

At that very moment Ivan Ilych fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be made right.... He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. ‘Where is it? What death?’ There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was light. ‘So that’s what it is!’ he exclaimed aloud. ‘What joy!’ To him all this happened in a single instant and that did not change. For those present his agony continued for another two hours. ‘It is finished!’ said someone near him.... ‘Death is finished,’ he said to himself. ‘It is no more!’ He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out and died (Maude trans., p. 410).

May it not take our deathbeds to learn the lesson of Ivan Ilych—Jesus’ paradoxical truth that “sets us free,” that gaining one’s life consists of losing one’s life, letting go of all self-justification and falling, like a little child, into the arms of a loving and accepting God.

Use Luther’s own homely hymn “Dear Christians One and All Rejoice” (ELW 594) as fitting accompaniment.

John Rolfe

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost October 25, 2026

Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1–8

Matthew 22:34–46

Reflections on the Gospel for Preaching

Preachers may choose to focus on the texts appointed for Reformation Sunday. But since those texts are the same every year, you have probably preached on them many times. You may want an alternative. The readings appointed for Pentecost 22 offer a compelling option. Some of the following

reflections were part of my introduction to Preaching Helps in July and primarily engage the gospel reading, Matthew 22.

Religious leaders asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” That is, of the 613 laws on our books, which is greatest? Jesus didn’t hesitate: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus was a faithful Jew, shaped by the Torah and the prophets. The first part of Jesus’ answer was recited in Jewish worship: “Shema (Hear) O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6: 4–5).

Deuteronomy says, “...with all your might.” Yet, Jesus said, “...with all your mind.” Did Jesus mistake “might” for “mind”? That explanation only works if we believe Jesus was speaking English! Years ago, I was working with this text, and I wondered about “might” and “mind.” Whenever I ran into puzzles like that, I called my colleague Wyn Wright who taught biblical languages at Union. What does the Hebrew say in Deuteronomy? I asked. “That word for ‘might,’ well, it means much or we might say muchness. Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your muchness or power or strength.” But in Matthew Jesus says heart, soul, and *mind*? Wyn turned to her Greek lexicon: “It’s definitely mind,” she said, “meaning thought, intention, purpose, understanding, intelligence. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your thought, all your understanding, your intelligence.”

William Sloan Coffin, former minister of Riverside Church, put it this way:

There is nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith... Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary, it is what makes good thinking possible...faith ends up giving us that much more to think about... (Bill Coffin, Credo, 8)

So, Jesus invites us to love God with our minds! Keep thinking! Ask questions. Faith gives us much more to think about! I bought a bumper sticker last summer and put it on my car:

A closed mind is a wonderful thing to lose.

But Jesus wasn’t finished. After stating that the greatest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, and mind, Jesus says “And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” A second is like it. Not, “Number two is...” but “A second is like it.” Close to, almost the same as. Loving your neighbor is close to loving God. Loving God is like loving your neighbor. The two cannot be torn apart. One of the early teachers of the church pictured the connection as a large wheel: All of us are on the outer rim of the wheel. God is the

hub at the center of the wheel. Our neighbors are the spokes going in toward the center. You might actually have a large wheel to show this image—a bicycle wheel or a simple drawing you could make. Can you see it? There is no way to get closer to God without getting closer to our neighbors. When we get closer to our neighbors we are closer to God.

But what does it mean to love our neighbor? *Love* can be a squishy word: “I love God. I love ice cream.” The Bible makes “love” less squishy. We hear it in the passage from Leviticus where God says “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Lev 19:18b) Later in that chapter, God gets more specific about neighbor love: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you, you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:34). Love of neighbor didn’t wait until the New Testament! Isaiah 58 is a good summary of several Old Testament prophets. Neighbor love is tangible: it means “to let the oppressed go free; to share your bread with the hungry; to bring the homeless poor into your house; to clothe the naked.” Not squishy. Jesus echoed these words in Matthew 25: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me” (Mt. 25:35–36). Not squishy.

In Minneapolis during the ICE surge in winter 2025–26 “neighbor” became a verb: how can we neighbor our neighbors? The answers were not squishy: giving rides to kids whose parents didn’t dare to take them; delivering groceries to families afraid to leave their homes; patrolling school grounds to watch for ICE agents; patronizing restaurants owned by immigrants; raising money to help pay rent. Neighboring was as important as resisting. How is Jesus calling us to neighbor others and move ever closer to God?

Barbara K. Lundblad

All Saints’ Sunday November 1, 2026

Revelation 7:9–17

Psalms 34:1–10, 22

1 John 3:1–3

Matthew 5:1–12

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

All Saints’ Sunday is one of those situations when, like a funeral, the preacher would do well to begin with the occasion and address the possible mix of emotions in the room. Some people will be mourning the recent loss of a loved one. Others, while perhaps experiencing some lingering

grief, might be recalling with fondness those who have died. Yet others might be remembering the day of their baptism since All Saints’ Sunday has been a common Sunday for the church to hold baptisms, much like the Easter Vigil.

Wherever people are on the spectrum of emotions, the scene in Revelation 7 has its place on a Sunday like today. It offers a glimpse of the life God promises for those who have gone through “the great ordeal” (v. 14). “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more ... the Lamb ... will be their shepherd ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (vv. 16–17). It is no surprise that these words are commonly heard at funerals. On a day when we remember those who have died, we cry out and pray, “Amen! Amen! May it be so for them.”

Equally affirming and comforting, the three verses in 1 John 3:1–3 declare us children of God and encourage us to live the alternative lives to which we have been called, even when others no longer believe what the author believes to be true about Jesus. All three Johannine epistles call for love-in-action. While this text is about life in the present, it is also forward-looking. We do not know exactly what it will be like when the future is revealed, but we do know that we will be like him. Here is where 1 John’s high Christology connects to a very present ecclesiology: “unity in the community.” We are who we are because of God in Christ.

Then we get to one of the most well-known sections of Scripture—the Beatitudes. Jesus’ sermon recorded in Matthew 5 begs our consideration regarding its function as a prescriptive or descriptive word. That is, does it intend to tell us what to do, or does it intend to give us a picture of how things really are? For example, are we to adjust our lives so that we are more merciful? Or is it simply (!) that when we are merciful, we receive mercy? One might be concerned that if Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount are prescriptive, people might become peacemakers, for example, not for the sake of those who will benefit from newly found peace, but so that they will be called children of God (v. 9). This would still generate peace, but the goal is not the peacemaking itself, but the “heavenly reward.” The difference this makes is worth some reflection.

As description, this text would function not to exhort hearers to right action, but to provide assurance that their actions do yield blessing. The descriptive angle is not necessarily a “lazy” perspective. Knowing that persecution for righteousness’ sake will yield blessing may be just what a person needs to hear in order to continue in the ways of the Lord despite persecution in a politically volatile setting.

Interpreting the text descriptively is to read it from the perspective of those who are marginalized; those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are persecuted. It would be a mistake to elevate any kind of oppression in this way. Liberation

from oppression is still worth the struggle “because people never get used to being oppressed.” The descriptive view of the text acknowledges that this is already a reality for some. And when it is, being assured that such experiences are not in vain might be just the motivation for pressing on. If there is an exhortation in the Beatitudes, it is for those who are not living on the margins to hear in them a call to be in solidarity with those who are.

Jesus’ words both warn and teach his disciples. They warn that the disciples would be sent out into situations where they would likely experience what the Beatitudes present. They teach that these experiences will not be in vain, for God will bless them with comfort, mercy, the kingdom, and glimpses of God.

Recall that the Lord’s Prayer is at the center of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Indeed, this day we pray that the Lord’s kingdom will come, the Lord’s will be done—not only in the future in heaven, but on earth ... now.

Shauna Hannan

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 8, 2026

Amos 5:18–24

Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Matthew 25:1–13

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

Amos 5:24 is a well-known biblical proclamation of commitment: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Amos places these words in the Lord’s mouth: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” The Lord is not necessarily against worship, but against empty piety that fails to connect liturgy with justice. Whether among urban market vendors cheating customers or in agrarian settings, Amos saw the plight of the poor and bravely spoke on their behalf.

Another proposal that does not tolerate complacency is the parable in Matthew 25. Preachers, consider resisting a more typical allegorical reading of the parable, which identifies Christ as the bridegroom, humans as the bridesmaids, oil as good works or love, the closed door as eschatological judgment, and the marriage as a time of God’s salvation. The message with such an allegory becomes: Be like the wise bridesmaids—prepare yourself so you will be ready when Christ returns. But this easily becomes another “earn your salvation” sermon and does not correspond with the gospel’s

proclamation that, in Jesus, God has overcome sin, death, and evil.

More troublingly, the behavior of the “wise” bridesmaids hardly seems worthy of imitation. They refuse to share their oil, which Vicky Balabanski sees as “complicity in patriarchy/kyriarchy.”² They also fall asleep, just as the foolish bridesmaids do. If wisdom as resourcefulness is what this text promotes, I’d put my money on the foolish bridesmaids, since they are somehow able to find oil even when (1) they are dismissed by their peers and (2) the shops are closed at midnight. Yet some suggest that looking for oil at midnight shows just how foolish these bridesmaids are. But talk about tenacity! If having enough oil, or enough of anything, is what is key to getting into the banquet, then this is simply unfair to all those who do not have access like others do.

The bridegroom’s delay also complicates the usual interpretation, since Christ’s return has been delayed far longer for us than the bridesmaids’ wait until midnight. Most importantly, the bridegroom need not be Christ. Although Scripture sometimes depicts God or Jesus as bridegroom, the bride is never mentioned here, making the traditional allegory less likely. Note Luise Schottroff’s argument that the traditional allegorical interpretation “makes the representative of social injustice, the bridegroom, a divine figure and thus corrupts the gospel.”³

When the bridegroom is not Christ, the foolish bridesmaids do not miss out simply by being on the side of the closed door. The bridegroom is with those who do not share, those who have access to the goods and materials that are required. Might it not be the case, then, that Christ is on the side of those who are shut out? Of course, Jesus stands with the excluded. We know that! Even more, since Jesus has been attempting to encourage his disciples not to be led astray by false messiahs (Matthew 24), could not the bridegroom be one of those—that is, a false messiah? Could not the bridegroom in the story be the one who tries to convince us to work harder and harder, to claim what we have earned for ourselves without the need to care for the other, to revel in our own accomplishments? If the bridegroom is a false prophet, then when he says to the “foolish” bridesmaids, “I do not know you,” what’s keeping the bridesmaids from responding, “We do not know you”?

Schottroff proposes that everything depends on the interpretation of the word “then,” which begins this parable. Looking at the broader context of the whole fifth discourse (24:1–25:46) helps since it is precipitated by the disciples’

2. Vicky Balabanski, “Opening the Closed Door: A Feminist Reading of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matt. 25:1–13),” in *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and Wisdom*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 71–97.

3. Luise Schottroff, *The Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 33.

question, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (24:3). Jesus first encourages his disciples not to be led astray by false prophets (24:5). All the present suffering, Jesus says, will not be the end, but the beginning of the birth pangs (24:8). Those who endure all of this to the end will be saved (24:13). The sign of the end will not be destruction or closed doors, but a pronouncement of good news (24:14). “If anyone says to you [upon seeing the ‘desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place,’ 24:15], ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘There he is!’—do not believe it” (24:23). Only after the suffering will Jesus come (24:29–30).

The closed door describes the destruction—the beginning of birth pangs. But keep awake, foolish bridesmaids; keep hope. Despite being shut out now, there is another one coming.

Consider the next three weeks’ gospel readings as a unit. This week and next we get the “then,” which describes the penultimate destruction. From this we learn what God is not like. Then (!) on Christ the King Sunday we get the “then” of the end, fittingly on the last day of the church year, which is really a new beginning—“then,” when the Son of Man comes in his glory.

Help us be a listening community that is aware of the signs of the times. Describe for us the present birth pangs. Help us compare our present world to God’s kingdom. Help us to pray that God’s kingdom come. Awaken us to the hope that God will renew the world, that the door will be closed on this age.

The parable’s proposal, like all parables, is intended to alter the lives of its hearers. But instead of endorsing the individualized, self-focused, and perhaps “smug” behavior of the so-called wise bridesmaids, this parable endorses the present as “a time of longing, of standing fast in resistance, and of testing.”⁴ Wisdom is knowing what God has done for us and, because of that, refusing to see destruction as a sign of God’s presence. Wisdom is trusting and living into justice that rolls down like waters.

Shauna Hannan

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost November 15, 2026

Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18

Psalms 90:1–8 [9–11], 12

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Matthew 25:14–30

Rethinking the Parable of the Talents

We’ve heard some tough parables this year from the Gospel of Matthew. Now we come to a parable that may seem obvious but may be harder than we assume. Commentators and preachers have said many things about this parable over the years:

- This parable isn’t about money. It’s about talents of many kinds. Don’t bury the talents God has given you! Use them to their fullest and you will be blessed. OR if it’s Stewardship Month, it could be about money!
- This parable is a validation of the Protestant work ethic. Those who work hard will be rewarded and those who are lazy will lose what they have.
- Matthew sets this parable during Holy Week. It’s about Jesus who will soon go away and will entrust his followers with the Gospel. Some will faithfully spread the good news while others, out of fear or embarrassment, will bury their Bibles in the ground.
- This parable is an allegory and the master is God. Our picture of God determines how we live in the world. If God is for us a harsh, demanding judge, we will cower in fear and avoid all risks. But if we picture God as gracious and merciful, we will take risks and live life with generosity and joy.

But what if this parable isn’t a picture of God? New Testament scholar William Herzog doesn’t see the parables as morality tales like Aesop’s fables, but as open-ended stories that invite hearers to enter the conversation. For Herzog, Jesus’ parables were meant to be discussion-starters. So, what kind of discussion does this parable open up?⁵

Let’s try to read the parable of the talents through Herzog’s lens. The master of this estate isn’t God. He’s what Jesus says he is—a very wealthy man who has substantial property, servants, and enough money to go on a long journey. This would be an accurate description of an elite urban household in Jesus’ day—and a wealthy household it is! The owner of the estate gives out eight talents to three servants. Now, one talent was worth about 20 years’ wages! Let’s say a year’s wage was

4. Schottroff, *Parables of Jesus*, 35.

5. William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

\$1000, then 8 talents would be \$80,000. Jesus was talking about **huge sums of money**. The ones called “slaves” here were more likely overseers who managed the owner’s estate. Lowly slaves would never have been entrusted with such large sums of money! These high-ranking servants had slaves under them. In addition they collected payments from peasant farmers who were trying to work off debts to the estate owner. When these farmers couldn’t pay, their master would take their land which had been put up as collateral. Jesus was describing a scene he witnessed all over Galilee and Judea. Those who heard this parable would have nodded their heads in recognition. For them, it was not an allegory.

Herzog says these three servants were given “a first-century form of venture capital.” How can they turn a profit—not only for the owner, but for themselves? By exploiting those who were below them, especially peasant farmers who were in debt to their master. Jesus’ hearers would have had no difficulty identifying the servants in this parable: they had to contend with these overseers daily. The servants had plenty of time to double their master’s investments—and get something for themselves as well. After all, Jesus has told us that the master of the household was gone for a very long time.

“Well done!” says the master to two of the servants. “You’ve doubled my money. I’ll put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master!” But what about that third servant? He gets as much attention as the first two servants combined. His behavior isn’t easily explained. If he was afraid of a reprimand, you’d think he would have flattered his master. Instead, he is audaciously honest: “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” That is exactly how the master operates—he extracts land and produce from poor farmers. He reaps their harvest and gathers their grain, even though he had never planted a thing.

Then, his master mimics him: “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?” Can you hear the sarcasm in his voice? “You knew, did you... you think you’re so smart! Well, you’re fired!” That’s what happens when someone refuses to play along with the system. He didn’t steal anything from his master but gave him back exactly what he had been given. For that he was thrown into the outer darkness, out with those who owned no land, those who were on their way to extinction.

Is Jesus in this parable? He’s with the one who was thrown outside. That’s where he died—outside the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus takes his place with the third servant, the one who refused to make money on the backs of the poor. Now that’s a very different picture than the sermons I’ve usually preached on this text! I fear preachers and lots of church people prefer parables that are allegories—they’re about heaven or about spiritual matters, but they’re never about economics. But now

we cannot ignore economics.

Parables are complex and many layered. This parable may mean using our God-given talents and spreading the gospel rather than burying our Bibles! But let’s be open to the possibility that this parable is also about wealth and poverty, greed and exploitation. Jesus was passionate about economics—he talked about wealth and poverty more than anything except forgiveness. Maybe, when Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” he included economics.

If we refuse to see anything political or economic in this parable, Jesus fleshes it out at the end of this chapter. He frames his picture as judgment of the nations. People are surprised to be included among the righteous ones so Jesus says to them, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Mt 25:35–36) But when did we do that? “Truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40) Jesus’ words here are not an allegory. He means what he says.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Reign of Christ Sunday November 22, 2026

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Psalm 95:1–7a

Ephesians 1:15–23

Matthew 25:31–46

Jesus’ Last Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew

Today’s Gospel is Jesus’ last class session in the last teaching block in Matthew. He doesn’t frame his teaching as a parable. He seems to be saying this is how it will be when the Son of Man comes in glory. He says nothing about faith or doctrine, nothing about being born again or being a member of the church. Indeed, this isn’t a picture of ecclesia but ethnos—not the Church but the nations. The righteous ones weren’t raptured up to heaven but stand with everyone else before the throne of glory.

Jesus is fleshing out the lessons he taught in chapters 24 and 25. This is what it looks like to stay awake when the master comes at an unexpected time (24:36–44). This is what it means to bring extra oil for the long nights of waiting (25:1–13). The oil has become food and drink, clothing and hospitality. This is what it means to invest your talents while the master is away (25:14–30). Invest in those who have nothing to eat or drink, those who are naked and sick, those

who are strangers or imprisoned—those who probably won't increase your stock portfolio. Surely Jesus must have saved very important teachings for his last class. "When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 'You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified'" (26:1) When Jesus is handed over, his disciples weren't left wondering what to do.

While this last teaching puts flesh on Jesus' metaphors in his recent parables, he had already filled in this judgment scene with his words and actions throughout this gospel. The "righteous" ones don't simply show up at the end of time—they are living the kingdom life now. From the beginning of Matthew, Jesus was passionate about righteousness. Joseph was a righteous man, called to go even beyond righteousness to take Mary as his wife (1:19). Jesus' passion for righteousness is abundantly clear in his first teaching session, the Sermon on the Mount. Not once but twice, he blesses those who yearn after righteousness. Jesus calls his followers to righteousness exceeding the scribes and Pharisees (5:6, 10, 20). For Jesus, righteousness is far from passive. Jesus calls us to active righteousness in his first teaching session. Go and be reconciled with your brother or sister before you bring your gifts to the altar (5:23–25). Don't seek revenge, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you (5:38–48).

Jesus has already done what he calls his followers to do in this judgment scene. He has fed hungry people on the hillside. He has welcomed tax collectors, sinners, and other strangers to his meals. Jesus' first teaching overlaps with his last teaching. We see a double-exposed photograph in which the last day and the present day are part of the same picture. When and where will the reign of God come? Jesus told us in his first public words in Matthew: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). Judgment is happening all the time; righteousness is happening all the time; Jesus is with us all the time.

Jesus is clear about the timing of the last judgment: the gospel must first be proclaimed to all the nations but no one knows when that will be (24:14, 36). Though we do not know the date, we do know what Jesus expects us to do: feed people who are hungry, quench their thirst, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those in prison. The righteous ones are shocked at these words, wondering when they had ever seen Jesus. "Truly I tell you," he says, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Those who failed to do these things are equally astonished—if they had seen Jesus they would surely have given him something to eat.

Is Jesus speaking metaphorically? Separating sheep and goats is a metaphor—this isn't a lesson in animal husbandry! Jesus doesn't give any indication that his pictures of righteous-

ness are metaphors. Giving food to the hungry isn't preaching a sermon. Visiting prisoners isn't calling on people captive to the internet. Jesus is talking about food that hungry people can eat. Jesus means visiting people who are in prison even if we think we don't know any. But there are congregations where everyone knows someone in prison. While I was teaching in New York City, a pastor told me, "When people in our congregation talk about 'going upstate for the weekend,' they're not going to their weekend home. They're going to visit their father or brother or son in prison." Some are visiting their mother or sister or daughter. No matter where we live, we can visit someone in prison. After all, the United States imprisons over 2 million people, more than any other country. Of all U.S. prisoners, about 67% are people of color, although people of color make up only about 30% of the population.⁶ Visiting someone in prison may change the way we think about prisoners and the system that puts more young African American men in jail than in college. Add to these numbers thousands of immigrants arrested and detained, 70% with no criminal convictions. As of June 2026, 65,765 individuals are in ICE detention facilities. Go to [ice.gov](https://ice.dhs.gov) and you can find a detention facility near you, listed alphabetically from A to W.⁷

"When will Jesus come again?" is the wrong question. Jesus is already here. We see him in those we may consider least among us. We see Jesus in the child going to bed hungry. We see Jesus in the stranger, someone who doesn't look like me, someone who is an immigrant. We see Jesus in prisons and detention centers. On this Reign of Christ Sunday, we're pointed not toward a king, but toward those considered least among us who are members of our family.

Barbara K. Lundblad

First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2026

Isaiah 64:1–9

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Mark 13:24–37

Engaging the Texts

November 29, the First Sunday of Advent, seems far from the Fourth of July. Yet here I am thinking about our poor Border Collie shaking as the fireworks echo through the night sky and flashes of light decorate and illumine the dark-

6. Department of Justice statistic cited by Rachel Herzing, "What Is the Prison Industrial Complex?"

7. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement web site: [ice.gov](https://ice.dhs.gov).

ness. Even with a “thunder coat” to provide an additional sense of security, a sense of fear strikes our beloved pet.

The Greek root-words *duna* (*dyna*) and *doxa* (*doxa*) used in the gospel of Mark provide alliteration and forceful imagery as they emphasize the “son of man” or the Greek variation on the Hebrew **בן אדם** “Son of Adam/Son of humanity/Son of earth” who will break through the heavens with power (*dyna*) and glory (*doxa*). As we engage with this week’s texts, we can feel the heavens booming and the lights filling the sky as we, like my poor dog, are likely given to frantic shaking.

And, if we want to believe that other elements of the gospel will provide relief, we find little. The gospel of Mark has woven together texts from the prophets Isaiah, Joel, and Daniel meant to pull us from comfort and shake us into a new way of being. In Mark, lodged between Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (a different proclamation of one coming to reign) and the teaching of the greatest commandment (centering love of God and neighbor) we are roused with the whole of heaven and earth to keep awake.

Now, there may be some with an innate sense, like the fig tree, that “the time is near,” or others like the servants in today’s parable who are desiring to throw a house party while the owner (or parents!) are away and are reminded that this may not be such a good idea. Yet what we come to realize is that all listeners are being told in unison that we can’t be certain of when it all will happen. So, it is best to pay attention—to stay awake!

If there is good news for us to cling to in this gospel passage it is that even when the heavens and earth pass away and everything falls apart, God’s words endure. God’s words are wrapped around us tightly to provide a sense of comfort amidst the challenges of unsettling times and events. Or if we lean into the first lesson, we are still God’s creation—God’s children—and trust in God’s remembering.

Advent ushers in a new year in our church and discomferts us precisely so we can sense the power and glory swirling around us, the words that hold us fast as the earth shudders. And the Son of Man/Son of Adam will remember and call out to God’s people as God comes with an entry that is more than we can imagine and at a time we cannot yet fully comprehend.

Pastoral Reflections

Around us we see signs: rivers flooding, part of a glacier breaking from a mountain causing destruction and loss of life, smoke billowing across North America in the intense summer heat, Europe having one of the hottest summers on record, the prospect of raging storms in the Pacific and Atlantic. Beyond nature, there are nations trembling. We are ever tuned into portents of a hurting and broken world.

In the text from Isaiah (found in a section often referred to as part of Third Isaiah), we stand on the cusp of a shat-

tered earth and longing people who hold out hope for how God will yet act. The people cry for God to tear open the heavens and come down. They pray that God’s presence will cause the mountains to quake; that the raging fire will make God’s name known; that the nations will tremble on account of God.

We are invited with Isaiah to see a creation leaning into God’s presence amid upheaval. And, as creation bears witness, the people remember that God has acted before. God did awesome deeds that the people of Israel did not expect—God has come down and has shown up in the past. The “Advent longing” is for God to do this again; that God would act for those who wait for the Lord, those who gladly do right, those who remember God’s ways—even when human attempts are so pitiful.

There is recognition that all have failed. Even the righteous have become like a filthy cloth. It is hard not to see us as a rag leaving dirty streaks in attempts to wash a window, or windshield wipers that smear mud across the glass of the car window. The people are trying to do what they are called to do but are utterly failing and making a bigger mess; and at this point God has looked away (has hidden God’s face). There is a harshness to this. Instead of hearing the Deuteronomic blessing of God’s face shining on them to grant them favor, there is abandonment.

Isaiah hopes to jog God’s memory, and simultaneously the people’s memory that they are God’s children—God’s very creation. Just as God has acted in the past, there is a plea for God to rend the heavens and come again. As our world shudders, it becomes our plea for God to remember and for God to act—again...and still!

Brad Froslee

Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2026

Isaiah 40:1–11

Psalms 85:1–2, 8–13

2 Peter 3:8–15a

Mark 1:1–8

Engaging the Texts

Preaching in Advent can feel like a warmup for the main event, especially when consumer Christmas begins immediately after the Halloween decor sales are over. After the last of the Thanksgiving leftovers are consumed, most congregants are ready to sing Christmas carols and hymns, long before we reach Advent 2. In my town, there is a multi-campus mega church that offers Christmas services starting

the week before Christmas, forcing the question of what purpose Advent serves.

Today's texts provide at least one answer to that lingering question. Advent is for preparation, for intentional waiting that is active and hopeful. Like soon-to-be parents experiencing the sudden urges of nesting, washing onesies, organizing diapers, and making freezer meals, Advent asks us to consider what preparations are needed for us to fully grasp the gift of the Christ. John the baptizer takes the center stage of our readings this week, and he does not want us to be passive recipients of this great gift. He proclaims that Christ is coming and therefore demands our repentance.

Repentance is not one of those words folks often like to associate with Christmastime (despite, of course, the fact it is still advent.) Rudolph, yes. Rum cake, maybe. Repentance? No, thank you. We can save that for Lent. While both Advent and Lent are indeed seasons of preparation and purpose, John the baptizer announces Jesus' coming presence with the call to repentance, and in Advent, we can do the same. As preachers, we can unpack this word made heavy with shame and invite people into the transformation it offers.

Episcopal priest and scholar Frederick W. Schmidt writes that the "spiritual discipline of repentance is not something we demand of one another or that the church as an institution exacts of those around it. Repentance is, for all of us, the process of letting go of those things which make it impossible for us to receive what God longs to give us."⁸

The psalmist poetically describes what it is God longs to give us; forgiveness, steadfast love, peace. To receive these good gifts, we best set down all else we so tightly cling to. Our egos, our anxieties, our grudges. The process of repentance forces us to reflect on our actions, relationships, and patterns of living, and commands us to let go of all that harms us or distracts us from God's good gifts, embodied wholly (holy) in the person of Christ.

Pastoral Reflections

This time of year, in nearly every realm, we are asked to believe the unbelievable. We are told to suspend our rationality to entertain the possibility that reindeer can fly, that the north pole is populated by skilled elves, that our paychecks can stretch to cover both rising utility bills and holiday gifts for our children... that the living God will be born among us. For us preachers, we are asked to trust another seemingly impossible feat, and that is the promise that our preaching can change the very landscape of life.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims an inclusive call of restoration for the people, a return to God, whose mercy clears a way

home for the exiled.

"A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken'" (vv. 3-5).

The leveling of mountains, the raising of valleys; these are impossible feats for the work of a single human. We face similar impossibilities when we look at the landscape of injustice that surrounds us: the economic disparities that kill, the ongoing climate disasters that destroy, the corruption of trusted leaders and the hate that occupy the public square. The weight of it all is crushing if we consider ourselves the saviors. Impossibilities, indeed.

But we are not the saviors, we are the servants of the living God. In this second Sunday of Advent, we hear of God's desire to welcome and restore all flesh, work that God desires to be collaborative effort with those who are called to serve God. As preachers, we recognize God's commands clearly: comfort, speak, shout, cry out. This is our work, preparing the way for Christ, from and within the unique wildernesses in which we reside.

I assume some of you are like me, a tired preacher, entering this busy season with a bit of hope and a lot of trepidation. Join me in suspending cynicism and stress long enough to believe that our work and words just might prepare a pathway for the glory of God to be made known in these strange times. Let us trust that the comfort we offer together can smooth the rough places within the lives of our congregants, that the peace we proclaim can cause an uprising for the downtrodden. And let us receive Isaiah's words as good encouragement, "lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid;" (v.9b).

Ali Ferin

8. Frederick W. Schmidt. "Preaching Advent: A Theocentric Approach in an Anxious World" *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XLI, Advent, 2017.

Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2026

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Psalm 126 (or Luke 1:46b–55)

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

John 1:6–8, 19–28

Reflections on the Gospel

John's Gospel starts cosmologically, with a prologue encompassing everything—all time and space—all the way back to the beginning of the world. Proclaiming that Jesus, the Word—the Logos—was in God's heart, God's bosom, from the very beginning of creation. In him is light, and life. Proclaiming that grace and truth come through Jesus Christ, God's word made flesh, dwelling among us. The sadness of the world is already there in the prologue, too—for the world that was made through him does not receive him. Yet the Word made flesh continues to come into the world. These opening verses of the Gospel are like an overture, a hymn of the whole universe, in deep and poetic cadences.

Then into that amazing cosmological Prologue steps this very concrete person, John, who came to bear witness—“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” And his ministry is concretely located at a place: “at Bethany beyond the Jordan.” News of the movement John is leading has traveled up to Jerusalem, to the leaders. His renewal movement had the potential to threaten state powers. So the leaders come to the Jordan river, not in order to be baptized but to interrogate John. Who are you?

“I am not the Christ.”

Are you the prophet Elijah?

“I am not.”

It's almost like a parody of an Advent calendar. Each time you open a door—the Elijah door, the prophet door, the Messiah door—behind each door is a big “NOT.” That's John's opening testimony, “I am not.” By testifying “I am not,” John is actually testifying TO the Christ, to the one who is God's “I AM” in this Gospel.

John gives his testimony truthfully, boldly. In John's Gospel, John (not the same John as the author) may more aptly be called “John the Witness” than John the Baptist. His witness continues all through the opening chapters. In the days that unfold after our text, he points his own disciples to Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He points people directly to Jesus: “He must increase, I must decrease.”

Near the border of France and Germany, there's a famous triptych painting of that scene painted by Matthias Grunewald some 500 years ago for the Isenheim Altar in a

hospital at a time of the plague. The painting shows John the Baptist pointing his finger toward Jesus. Art historians note that the length of John's finger is way out of proportion to his body. The effect is to make the gesture abundantly clear: John the Baptist, John the Witness, was pointing those sick people in the hospital, pointing all of us, to Jesus.

So where is he pointing for us to see today? What is it that John's testimony underscores for us? The key word in verse 26 is “midst”—the Greek “mesos.” “Among you—in the middle of you stands one you do not know.” Namely, Jesus Christ, God's word, God's wisdom.

With his long finger, John is pointing to Jesus in our midst—“one whom you do not know.” Right in your midst. John himself does not yet know him, he says twice in the verses that follow our text—until he sees him coming toward him the next day. It's by no means obvious how to recognize Jesus in the world, but that doesn't stop John from witnessing.

Then by God's spirit he DOES know him, although interestingly the two never speak to each other in this Gospel. John just points people to Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God... This is the One of whom I said, ‘After me comes one who ranks before me... For this I came baptizing with water, that HE might be revealed to Israel.’”

Where are we in world history? Are we living at the end of the world? When we hear unemployment numbers, the challenges for young people, global climate disasters, the increasing gap between wealth and poverty—the anxiety and uncertainty all around us—it's easy to feel that we're living at the end.

I was dismayed last year at the weak agreement on climate change announced in Belem, Brazil. It's easy for me to despair about the end of the planet's health, with the droughts and floods that so many are already experiencing from global warming. I had let myself hope. I was there, with young people, pleading with world leaders, for a binding agreement of serious cut-backs in carbon emissions. But hopes get dashed.

Things were bad—much worse in many ways—2000 years ago when John gathered people at the Jordan, when he testified to the 1% that Jesus was in their midst, with the 99%, although they do not know him.

Where are we in world history, this third Sunday of Advent? John tells us we are in the middle! John's message for us is the same as it was at the Jordan River 2000 years ago: that among us—in the middle!—stands one who is God's word, God's beloved, God's “I am.” He is the light of the world who still comes into our darkness when we can see no hope at all. He is the bread of life, feeding our deepest hunger. He is the resurrection and the life, bringing dead hearts back to life when all seems hopeless. He is the vine, in whom we all live as branches, drawing our life from him.

In the middle of our life, God is coming in Jesus to renew

our life. God is with us today, wherever hearts are breaking, wherever people long for light in the darkness.

God is with us all the way to the cross, building community, calling us “friends,” washing our feet, giving us to one another—just as, at the end of his life, Jesus gave his mother and the beloved disciple to one another as a new community, a new family.

God is with us in abundance as the story unfolds, right in our midst.

John the Baptist, John the Witness, points us to the one. It’s not always easy to see him. Read a little further in chapter 1 and you will hear John the Baptist say twice: “I do not know him.” But what he does is point us to that one. He tells us to look, to see.

That is our call this third Sunday of Advent: not “repentance” like the call of John the Baptist in Mark’s gospel heard last week. No, in John, our call is simply to follow John’s long finger, and to see the one to whom John is pointing: Jesus Christ. The word made flesh is dwelling among us, in our midst.

He comes to us today in the middle, in the bread at this table, as he broke bread so long ago. He comes to us in the waters of our baptism, as he came to the River Jordan, to a river flowing near you. “Behold, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.”

Barbara Rossing

Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2026

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:46b-55

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

Engaging the Texts

“**A**nd Mary said.” That is where this week’s appointed Psalm begins, although many of us probably imagine Mary singing, rather than saying, these words. Did Mary sing, or did Mary speak? Perhaps both can be deeply meaningful. Think of a poet reading carefully crafted words from the heart, or a blues singer telling a story not only through words but through musical tone, style, and quality of voice. Whether Mary sings or speaks, what she says is deeply moving.

But this is not where Sunday’s Gospel begins. A few verses earlier, an angel appears to Mary with a surprising announcement: “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son” (Lk 1:31). The angel connects this child with an ancestral promise: “the Lord God will give to him the throne of

his ancestor David” (1:32). The first reading from 2 Samuel echoes behind these words: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me” (2 Sam 7:16). Mary is being drawn into a story that began long before her. And she responds: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38).

Centuries of Christian art and interpretation have trained us to imagine this moment as Mary meek and mild: head bowed, hands folded, quietly submitting herself to the divine will. But perhaps we should keep reading. The same Mary who says, “Let it be with me according to your word,” will, only verses later, tell us what she believes that word means.

“My soul magnifies the Lord.” To magnify is to make something larger. Mary cannot make God objectively larger, of course, but she can make God’s activity loom larger in our imaginations. And what does Mary magnify?

God “has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” God “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” God “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” These are hardly meek and mild words.

Mary’s song participates in a much older scriptural tradition. Most obviously, it recalls Hannah, another woman who sings about a God who reverses worldly fortune: “The bows of the mighty are broken,” while the feeble receive strength; the hungry are fed; the poor are raised from the dust (1 Sam 2). Mary receives this vision from her ancestors and discovers herself within it. The angel’s mention of David similarly places her within an ancestral promise. Advent reaches backward even as it looks forward.

Something else is strange about Mary’s song. Observe its strong grammar. God has shown strength. God has scattered the proud. God has brought down the powerful. God has lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry. But has God? Mary lives under Roman occupation. The powerful still sit comfortably on thrones. The lowly remain lowly. Hungry people remain hungry. Yet Mary speaks/sings God’s vision as though it has already happened. Perhaps this is a reason the church has so stubbornly insisted on singing her words.

Pastoral Reflections

In January 2026, amid intensified federal immigration enforcement in Minneapolis, people gathered in the streets to sing. Hundreds joined gatherings organized by Singing Resistance, learning simple melodies by ear and adding their voices to one another. Later that month, clergy and faith leaders gathered at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport to protest the infrastructure enabling deportations. They prayed. They sang hymns. Roughly one hundred clergy were arrested. Their singing did not stop the deportation machine—the powerful remained powerful, detained neighbors remained

detained. Yet they sang. And, in their singing, another world appeared (and appears) possible.

This year also marks forty years since Marty Haugen composed what became Holden Evening Prayer during the winter of 1985-86 at Holden Village. Haugen composed the liturgy piece by piece, bringing portions into the worshipping community as he wrote them. Forty years later, Christians around the world know Mary's words partly because they know how to sing them: "My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you."

There is something about singing that exceeds speech. Singing takes deep breath, slowing our heartbeats and releasing neurochemicals that bind us to each other. We sing words from beyond us, on pages and learned from other voices, that become embedded into our bodies. When we sing together, we accommodate ourselves to fellow voices: someone else carries the melody when our own voice falters, our harmonies require difference and are still held together in community.

Perhaps this informs Mary's response to the angel as we read on. "Let it be with me according to your word" is not passive resignation to the world as it is. Mary has inherited songs of promise from her ancestors about what God is always already doing, and she chooses to place herself inside that promise. Then she draws from those songs to describe that world the promise makes possible.

The powerful are on their thrones, and Mary sings that God has brought them down. The hungry are hungry, and Mary sings that God has filled them. The child is not yet born, and Mary sings that God's promised future has already begun. She does not sing because the world already resembles the song. She sings, and we sing, so that we can, together, practice believing and becoming the just world God brings forth.

Aaron Musser

Christmas Eve December 24, 2026

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14, [15-20]

Meditation for Christmas Eve

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place which the Lord has made known to us." (Luke 2: 15)

What was that moment like—that moment when the angels had disappeared and the sky was dark again except for stars and a sliver of moon? If all of them hadn't seen and heard the angels, it would have seemed a dream. But could they all have had the same dream? Not likely. No, something had happened. They had seen something. They had heard something that—well, it sounded like a multitude of the heavenly host: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace..." One of the shepherds laughed into the silence: "Maybe it was Caesar's army singing a long way off and we just thought it was angels!" That was Caesar's line, after all. "I will bring peace throughout the earth." Peace through conquest. Hail, the Pax Romana.

"But Caesar hasn't been coming around here lately," said one of the others. "No, it's been ages since he's come to visit." They laughed at the absurd notion of Caesar sitting with them there in the mud. It was equally absurd to imagine that angels had brought good news to the likes of them. Now the angels were gone. They could pass it all off as a trick of their imagination, the moon playing with the clouds. They had work to do, after all. They couldn't leave the sheep with the servants—they WERE the servants.

That moment after the angels have gone away can seem like a lifetime.

"Let us go to Bethlehem." Maybe you're thinking, "Sure, I'd go if I heard a multitude of angels!" Maybe. Maybe not. There are always reasons for staying where you are.

I've got way too much to finish up before the end of the year.

I might have imagined the whole thing.

I can't tell anybody else about this, this—this feeling, this presence.

This candlelight service is magical, but after we blow out the candles, the street outside the church will still look the same.

Yet, some do go to Bethlehem even after the angels have gone away. Kate was a student in my preaching class. She was a member of Bethel AME church near Hartford. That wouldn't be so unusual—many seminarians go to some church! But Kate was the only white member of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and she planned to be ordained as an AME minister. In one of our last classes Kate told us about Jordan. He's four years old and was living in a shelter where Kate's daughter worked. One Sunday she brought Jordan to Bethel Church. He got into the singing and the clapping. The people welcomed him with abandon and when it came time for the altar call, Jordan marched up the aisle. Everyone thought it was cute, but few thought he knew what he was doing. On Monday morning, Jordan put on his coat and mittens and boots. "Jordan, where are you going?" asked Kate's daughter. "I'm going to church," he said. "But, Jordan, we won't go to

church until next Sunday,” she explained. “No,” he said. “I have to go back today. The people there love me.” No matter what anybody else said, Jordan had been to Bethlehem and he knew he had to go back.

Bethlehem is more than a place, but it’s also a particular place. It’s been several years since I went to Bethlehem with a group of Lutheran seminarians and pastors. It happened to be the day of Palestinian elections, when we joined other pilgrims at the Church of the Nativity. The building is ancient, started in the year 326 CE, its stone floor is worn smooth by centuries of pilgrim feet. The whole church was built around the cave where Jesus was born, at least according to tradition. We crowded into that tiny grotto lit with ornate silver lamps. If there had been a stable-cave here, it had long ago been covered over with marble. A fourteen-pointed silver star marks the spot where Jesus was born. One by one, people knelt down to touch the star, to pray, some leaning in to kiss the center. I tried to feel the sacred weight of the place, tried to make the connection with my fingers like a blind person reading Braille. I touched the star and I did pray. I prayed for Bethlehem, for Palestinian people voting that day, for peace in that troubled land. But I didn’t find Jesus in that marble manger.

I should have known—Jesus couldn’t be contained. As usual, Jesus was somewhere else. I saw Jesus in the faces of worshippers at Evangelical Christmas Lutheran Church. I saw Jesus in the face of Mitri Raheb, who was then the pastor of that church. He went on to found Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem and is now university president. He spoke to us about hope when there seemed no reason for hope. I brought home an angel from Bethlehem created by a young Palestinian artist named Heba Khawaja. She crafted the angel from broken glass—shattered windows, bottles thrown against occupying soldiers, shards of hopelessness. Palestinian artisans melt the glass to create works of beauty. “What difference will such art make?” people have scoffed at Pastor Raheb.

He doesn’t hesitate to answer them: “So that our people will know there is more to life than concrete walls and razor wire.” Tonight, the shepherds couldn’t even get to Bethlehem without going through checkpoints.

Bethlehem is a place. But it is not limited to one place. To go to Bethlehem is to believe in our bones that God calls us to a new way of seeing, a different way of being and acting in the world. Though some of us could tell Luke’s story by heart, we can easily forget that the heart of the story is strangely out of sync with the way the world works.

There is that moment, the moment after the angels go away. After we’ve experienced some glimpse of God’s presence, some hint that there is more to life than buying and selling. Tonight we are invited to go to Bethlehem. Four-year-old Jordan wants you to come—and he’s not one for waiting around. Mitri, the pastor, and Heba, the artist, are calling to us from Bethlehem. Still they hope against all the odds, gathering up broken pieces to create beauty. When the angels have gone away, when the candles have been extinguished, let us go to Bethlehem. The place will not be marked by a fourteen-pointed star, but by a new way of living. Some small sign of daring beyond our fear. This night can change us. Let us go now to Bethlehem.

Barbara K. Lundblad

Christmas Day December 25, 2026

Isaiah 52:7–10

Psalms 98

Hebrews 1:1–4, [5–12]

John 1:1–14

Reflections on the Texts for Christmas Day

This is a hard gospel text to preach on Christmas morning. Not because it isn’t beautiful or profound. But because many of the people in the pews really want to hear about baby Jesus and the manger and the angels and the shepherds (not to mention the donkey and the sheep and the cows and other stuff not in Scripture!). Some people may have worshipped on Christmas Eve where they likely heard the nativity story from Luke 2. But there will be some who have come to worship on Christmas Day, eager to hear about the baby born in Bethlehem.

Maybe there is a way to weave the Lucan story into these beautiful lessons for Christmas Day, without doing damage to any of them.

The prologue to John is a beautiful hymn of mystery, a concise theology of John’s theology and a manifesto for Chris-

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tians of his time, both Jewish and Hellenistic. It can surely be so for our hearers today! So put your best shoes on your preaching feet (Isaiah 52:7) and let's go!

Rudolf Boltman calls the prologue an "overture" to John's gospel "leading the reader out of the commonplace into a new and strange world of sounds and figures... (that) are half comprehensible, half mysterious."⁹ It surely contains both stirring poetry and a foretaste of the feasts to come. The repetition of "word," "life," "light," and "darkness" in the first five verses makes it one of the easiest passages to memorize. It probably was sung in many early gatherings of churches. As simple as those words are to understand on the literal level, one could spend hours—if not a whole lifetime—trying to understand them as metaphor.

John is declaring something both radically new and from the beginning. Jesus, the baby born like everyone else, is the Creator of everything. I won't go into debates about the distinction between the Word made flesh and God, and their essential unity. The church, in her wisdom (or her obsession) has spent centuries on that. I'll leave it as mystery, as John and the writer of Hebrews so eloquently do.

God, the most transcendent, becomes flesh, the most imminent. The Creator, who made everything that is, is born as one of us. In a manger, no less. The most powerful born powerless among the poor. This God made flesh will be rejected by their own creations, and yet will give those who receive them the power to become children of God.

Here's a little diversion into Luke: After Mary delivers Jesus into the world, she also has to receive him into her human arms. (As do Joseph, the neighborhood midwife, and whoever else showed up to celebrate the birth.) The One who created sheep is wrapped in woolen cloths. The One who makes grass to grow is lain in it.

And this particular little child, as vulnerable as you can be, is the very One who has comforted, and will comfort his people (Isaiah 52:9). This little one is the one who will lead "all the ends of the earth (to) see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10).

This beautiful hymn is also the manifesto of God's children freed by the Word made flesh. God incarnate, who will eat with sinners, become one with the outcast, be rejected, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered is the One who gives us the power (or the right) to become children of God. The Word who made us and all things will remake us. By extension of God being the creator of all, Christ will remake the world as well. As children of God, our calling to be a part of that remaking, while not explicitly stated in the prologue, will

be revealed throughout John's gospel.

A practical application of this amazing, mysterious, incomprehensible reality is that we, as full children of God, will do the same works of liberation that Christ does, "and, in fact, will do greater works than these," as Jesus will tell us in John 14:12. For our people who may be feeling powerless in the face of a world of corruption and violence, that is a powerful Christmas gift.

It may be helpful to point out that there is no contradiction between what the Word is and does and the words Jesus will proclaim throughout all of John's gospel. That integrity is so sorely missing in our world today, something we have the power to change.

The hymns in the Isaiah text, Psalm 98, and those quoted in Hebrews are beautiful examples of God doing a new thing, a new thing that is as old as the beginning. There is a tradition in the African-American church of preachers singing from the pulpit. Maybe you'd like to try it out this Christmas?

Merry Christmas, beautiful feet who announce the peace of God!

Patrick Cabello Hansel

First Sunday after Christmas December 27, 2026

Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

Reflections on the Texts for Preaching

Simeon's Nunc Dimittis coincides with the last Sunday in the calendar year. As we say goodbye to the old year, and jump or stumble into the new, it may be a good time to ask ourselves: Are we able to say to God, "Now you can dismiss me, for my eyes have seen your salvation?"

I don't mean that question in the sense that some door-knocking evangelist might ask you if you know where you'll spend eternity and if you are prepared for it. But rather, in the sense that God can now dismiss you into your daily life of loving because you know that God's salvation is sure. Traditionally, Simeon is considered old, like Anna. But there is no solid evidence for this. He may have been 20, which would make the relinquishment of his life to God even more poignant. Our daily surrender to a loving God can bring joy at any age.

Of course, all is not leftover pumpkin pie on this Sunday after Christmas. In Simeon's second prophecy, he is clear that the liberating power of the gospel will meet resistance, if not outright violence. The little one, this Word made Flesh, "is

9. Boltman, Rudolph, *The Gospel of John: a Commentary*, translated by Beasley-Murray, G.R. et al., (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 13.

destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed” (v. 34).

I write this from Minneapolis, where the 2026 New Year was rung in with violence and resistance. The so-called Metro Surge brought masked, armed men to our streets and homes, men who had no respect for the law, and no compassion for the least of these. People—and churches—had to make a decision: do we keep quiet, or do we resist? (Isn’t it interesting that much of the resistance was singing!)

This passage from Luke is about decisions. Mary and Joseph decided to follow the law, even though they had at least an inkling that the holy child they carried into the temple would free people from the law. Luke conflates the presentation of the first born with the purification of the mother proscribed in the law of Moses. It’s interesting that Luke writes “when the time came for their purification,” even though the law proscribed it only for the mother.

Simeon, who has been longing for the consolation of Israel, is moved by the Spirit to go to the temple, and he decides to go. He could have decided not to. He takes the child in his arms, incarnating the compassion of God, and intones the most hopeful hymn: God’s salvation is for all people. Zechariah’s and Mary’s canticles in Luke 1 praised God for freeing Israel; Simeon’s now leads us into Luke’s missionary vision of the Gospel for all people.

But there is a hard decision to be made for those who receive this great promise. The little child will be a sign that will be opposed” (v. 34). The liberation revealed in the baby will engender harsh opposition. It may be good to remind our hearers that all this took place in the time of Caesar, who demanded that a census of the whole world be done in his name, and Herod, who plotted violence out of fear.

Raymond Brown, in “The Birth of the Messiah” avers “the likelihood that the canticles of the Lucan infancy narrative came out of a circle of Jewish Christian Anawim, the pious ones totally dependent on God, who recognized in Jesus the long awaited fulfillment of God’s promises of help.” It is these poor ones, overlooked by temple and state lords, who see the salvation of God. In the temple, Simeon and Anna encounter Mary and Joseph, who are fulfilling the law of Moses. But it is neither the temple cult nor the law that moves the action. It is the Spirit, doing a new thing.

In troubled times, it is good to remember that we are still eagerly waiting for the fulfillment, but we have seen the promise. And we have the Spirit.

The Isaiah and Psalm texts for this Sunday were surely known by Simeon, and their beautiful poetry is echoed in his hymn. Paul sees in Galatians that Christ is “born of a woman, born under the law.”¹⁰ God incarnate does not seek to be free of what binds us, but rather, embracing it, frees us from its power. Frees us to be children of God.

One final word about the law. During Metro Surge, we had to confront the agents of the law doing unlawful things, including killing innocents. At Epiphany, we will see the Word made flesh flee from Herod’s law; a law made lawless by greed and fear. The Christmas story never stops.

Patrick Cabello Hansel

10. Brown, Raymond, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (Image Books: New York, 1979), 452.