

# Preaching Helps

**October–December 2020: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost to the First Sunday after Christmas**

## Endings and Beginnings in the Shadow of Elections

How can we preach at the end of Ordinary Time when nothing seems at all ordinary? This issue of Preaching Helps begins on October 4, just one month before U.S. elections on November 3. As this issue was going to press, there was no way of knowing whether congregations would be worshipping in-person or online in October. There was no way of knowing how many people will have died, beyond the 180,000 who had died by the time our writers were engaging the texts. How many people will still be unemployed? How many families will have been evicted? How will the violence of Matthew's late parables (chapters 21 and 22) echo the violence in the United States as we move closer to the presidential election? Will Jesus' vision of the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25 shape our decisions about voting? "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" (Matt 25:35–36). Jesus' calling in that chapter won't come until November 22, but his words are surely well known to people in most congregations and could be given to members in the weeks leading up to the election.

After Jesus' last teaching in Matthew 25, we move into the gospel of Mark on the First Sunday of Advent. This issue of *Currents* offers a rich array of resources on Mark—be sure to keep this issue handy beyond the Sundays of Advent as we return to Mark after the Sundays in Epiphany. Mark's ending seems so mysterious and enigmatic. "And [the women] went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In her book *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark*, New Testament scholar Joan L. Mitchell says that Mark shaped his ending on purpose: "the grammar and syntax of Mark 16:8 show a carefully constructed verse in two parallel parts...the two halves of v. 8a each have six words in Greek; the two halves of v. 8b wind down to four words, then two."<sup>1</sup> In Greek, the final word is *gar* ("for," in English). What a strange ending! But Mitchell

claims this abrupt ending is for us—"to bring the readers and hearers to their own thresholds of faith, to the limit of words to speak the unspeakable, to the limit of story to make the absent One convincingly present, and to the limit of human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death."<sup>2</sup>

I am grateful to our writers for this issue, including Erik Haaland and Stan Olson who revised their entries from three years ago to fill in for a writer who had to drop out. These writers span the country from East to West and include several familiar voices as well as some who are here for the first time. **Amy Lindeman Allen** is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. An ordained Lutheran pastor, she received her MDiv from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and PhD from Vanderbilt University. **Christa M. Compton** brings seventeen years of experience as an educator to the work of ministry. After graduating with a BA in English and a Masters in Teaching from the University of Virginia, Christa started her career as a high school teacher in Columbia, South Carolina. She was named the 2001 South Carolina Teacher of the Year and one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year. She holds a PhD from the School of Education at Stanford University; her research explores the intersections between theological education and teacher preparation. Christa graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in 2013 and currently serves as pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Chatham, New Jersey. **Caleb Crainer** (he/him/his) serves as pastor at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in Los Angeles, California. He is a product of Valparaiso University, The Graduate Theological Union, The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest, 4 billion years of evolution, friends, parents, and a fair amount of Star Trek. During Lockdown you might find Pastor Caleb playing the tuba, failing at baking, or creating the best Zoom background ever—but not at the same time. **Erik Haaland** is associate pastor at Christ Church Lutheran in south Minneapolis. Originally from Montana, he graduated from St. Olaf College and Luther Seminary and served his first call as pastor at Holden Village. He and his husband, Daniel, live in St. Paul, Minnesota. **Stan Olson** is finding great joy in his vocations as husband, father, grandfather, pastor, and gardener. He explored several aspects of the pastoral vocation: serving congregations in Duluth and New Ulm, Minnesota; teaching New Testament at Luther Seminary; serving as bishop of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod, and leading ELCA work with ministry, education, youth, and young adults. He was president of Wartburg Theological Seminary when he retired in 2015.

**Megan Rohr**, the first openly transgender pastor ordained in the Lutheran church, is the pastor of Grace Lutheran and the Community Chaplain Coordinator for the San Francisco

1. Joan L. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence: A Feminist-Literary Reading of Mark* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 14-15.

2. *Ibid.*, 114.

Police Department. Megan was a finalist for the Lambda Literary award, received honorable mention as an Unsung Hero of Compassion by Wisdom in Action with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and has been featured both on Netflix's *Queer Eye* and in Wittenberg, Germany, for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. **Bradley E. Schmeling** serves as senior pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota. A graduate of Ohio University and Trinity Lutheran Seminary, he did doctoral work at Emory University in ritual studies and pastoral care. He has served congregations in Columbus, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia, and now lives in the Twin Cities with his husband, Darin, learning to love winter and trusting the promise of spring. **Javen Swanson** is associate pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he has served since 2014. Prior to his ordination, Javen was a community organizer, first with OutFront Minnesota and the Minnesotans United for All Families Campaign, and later with the National LGBTQ Task Force. Ordained "extraordinarily" in 1990, **Phyllis Zillhart** has served as a hospice chaplain for twelve years. She admits that COVID-19 challenges ministry of compassionate presence at end-of-life. Phyllis lives in Minneapolis with her spouse, Ruth Frost, a retired hospice chaplain. They share their home with their daughter, her partner, and their four-year old son.

God bless you and your preaching as Ordinary Time ends, as the election looms and we move through Advent.

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

## **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost** **October 4, 2020**

**Isaiah 5:1–7**

**Psalms 80:7–15**

**Philippians 3:4b–14**

**Matthew 21:33–46**

### **Engaging the Texts**

October 4 is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, known as a friend of animals. Some congregations will include a Blessing of the Animals today, perhaps inviting people to bring their pets to the computer screen. Francis also loved God's whole creation as we sing in his hymn: "O brother sun with golden beam; O sister moon with silver gleam...O praise God!" (from "All Creatures of Our God and King.") That hymn sings a duet with the "Song of the Vineyard" in Isaiah 5. Even though that vineyard is a metaphor for Israel, it grows from real soil and vines that must be tended. God's pressing question becomes a larger ecological question in our own time: "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I

have not done for it?" (5:4a) What more can God do to call us to tend creation? What more can God do to awaken us to the realities of climate change? How many forest fires and floods will it take? The Isaiah reading could be the sermon focus for this Sunday.

But it will be hard for people to forget Jesus' violent parable! The parable begins with almost the same words as Isaiah's song: "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower." Jesus tells this parable at a particular time in his life. He entered Jerusalem at the beginning of this chapter and has already told his disciples what would happen to him there. After the procession into the city, Jesus went to the temple and chased out the money changers. When he returned to teach in the temple the religious leaders questioned his authority. It didn't help when Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (21:31). With this ominous backdrop, Jesus says, "Listen to another parable." The parable is violent in all three synoptics but most violent here in Matthew. In Mark and Luke, one slave is sent at a time. Here several slaves are sent and all are badly treated—one beaten, one killed, another stoned. He sends more slaves a second time—the slaves are dispensable. But why would the landowner think the tenants would respect his son? That seems naïve indeed. But the tenants are also naïve, aren't they? How could they imagine that the landowner would give them the inheritance after they killed his son?

For centuries, the traditional Christian interpretation seemed clear: the tenants are the unfaithful people of God who beat the landowner's slaves one after the other. (These were the prophets sent to Israel.) Then the owner sends his son. "Surely they will respect my son." (Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey. He has come to the vineyard.) The tenants seize the son, cast him out of the vineyard and kill him. (By the time Matthew wrote these words, it was known that Jesus was crucified outside the city.)

"When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parable, they realized that Jesus was speaking about them." For centuries Christians nodded their heads: the vineyard will be taken away from the Jews and given to those who could produce the fruits of the kingdom. But a word of warning: "Certainly preachers will not want to historicize the parable—Israel has been the wicked vinedressers and now the vineyard is turned over to us responsible Christian tenants....But any preacher who supposes that 'Christian nations,' by contrast, welcome prophets and are faithful to God's will have failed to notice the Holocaust or the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr."<sup>3</sup>

3. David Buttrick, *Speaking in Parables* (Westminster John Knox, 2000), 81.

## Pastoral Reflections

As noted above, this may be a day to focus on Isaiah 5, connecting that song with the song of St. Francis for a sermon on care of creation. But if that choice is made, the preacher needs to at least acknowledge the violent parable. That parable is the opposite of St. Francis' love for the earth and all its people, especially the poorest of the poor so dear to Francis' heart. This may be a day to preach the urgent message that God has not abandoned the Jews in favor of Christians. Anti-Semitism is below and above the surface in our country and around the world. Remember the White Nationalist march in Charlottesville? The torch-bearers chanted many hateful slogans, among them, "Jews will not replace us!" We need to argue against long-held interpretations of this parable that continue to demean Jewish people. If we chant anything, it needs to be, "Christians will not replace the Jews."

Treating the parable as an allegory is troubling. If the landowner is God, then God has little regard for the slaves. This landowner would never put up a yard sign that says, "SLAVES' LIVES MATTER." Jesus' parables often grew out of the lived economic realities of the Roman empire. There were real landowners who often usurped the lands of poor people who couldn't pay their debts. There were real tenants who could never own or inherit land, but worked the land to receive a portion of the harvest. There were slaves who were at the bottom of the economic heap. On this October Sunday, one month before national elections, this may be the day to preach on the economic realities in Jesus' time and our own.

*Barbara Lundblad*

## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost October 11, 2020

**Isaiah 25:1–9**

**Psalm 23**

**Philippians 4:1–9**

**Matthew 22:1–14**

### Engaging the Texts

Today begins with a sumptuous feast in the book of Isaiah. Some will remember this feast from All Saints Sunday (Year B) and from Easter Day, as an alternative to Acts readings. This is not a call to fasting but a "feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines" (Isa 25:6). Surely this is a feast fit for the wedding of the king's son in Matthew's gospel.

But those who were invited to that wedding banquet didn't send a positive RSVP. The king was so angry he sent troops to destroy them and their city. Some have explained the extreme violence as a reference to what had already hap-

pened: Jerusalem attacked and burned to the ground. Did Jesus forget his first sermon? "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer..." (Matt 5:38–39).

After destroying the city of those ingrates, the king sends slaves out again. "Invite everybody on the street—both good and bad—so the wedding hall is filled." We imagine homeless people going through the buffet line, their plates piled high with roasted oxen and the tender veal of fattened calves. Isaiah's vision is fulfilled!

Just when we are delighting in that scene, the king notices someone without a wedding robe. The man is bound hand and foot and cast into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. If we remember the previous chapters of Matthew, we know he won't be out there alone for lots of others have suffered the same fate. When Luke tells this parable there's no mention of the wedding robe. Why was that detail important for Matthew?

## Pastoral Reflections

Who would expect people on the street to be wearing a wedding robe or have one tucked away in their backpacks? Long ago I read that the host was expected to provide wedding garments for guests. But *The Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Matthew includes this footnote: "There is no evidence for the custom...an idea apparently originated by Augustine...representing an attempt to understand this text by importing Pauline theology into Matthew (cf. Rom 10:1-13, Phil 3:7-9)."<sup>4</sup> Other commentators say these newly invited guests would have had time to go home and find something more fitting to wear, if they had anything.

Others have suggested this is a baptismal robe though there's no indication of that. Yet, as Matthew tells the parable, being at the feast is not the end of the story. It's not enough to get in line and fill your plates; something more is expected of us. Matthew wants people to know that accepting the invitation to the banquet isn't enough. Matthew is the only gospel writer who talks about *ecclesia*, the church. For him, being part of the church is not the end of the story.

When I lived in New York City, Rev. Scott Black Johnston, pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, shared a story on his weekly blog. The producer of the TV reality show "The Kardashians" had called him at the church. The producer wanted to know if they could set up cameras and lights, and film Kourtney and Kim attending church at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian. Scott's own words:

I said, "No." I said it nicely. I said, "They're welcome to come to worship here, but no filming during our services."

4. Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, *The Interpreter's Bible*, 418.

The producer called back. “Listen, we really want to do this...I’m not Christian, so I don’t know how to phrase this, but couldn’t we just film the two of them walking down to the front and lighting a candle or something?”

I said, “No.”

As my Catholic ethics professor used to ask, “Sweet Mother of God, what is the world coming to?”

What is the world coming to when people have no idea what it means to be part of the church? Surely it means more than walking down to the front and lighting a candle or something! As Karoline Lewis says, “It is not enough anymore to call yourself a follower of Christ and then act as if you were sound asleep during the Sermon on the Mount. It is not enough to pledge allegiance to church membership without then vowing to live out that chosenness in the world. It is not enough to say you are a ‘Christian’ and then stay silent when life, liberty, and love are in jeopardy.”<sup>5</sup>

Grace is the invitation to the banquet: the wedding robe is what we put on when we accept the invitation to follow Jesus. But it’s not so simple, is it? How can there be so many people living below the poverty line in a nation filled with Christian churches? Why will one in four children go to bed hungry tonight? Why are unarmed Black people being killed by White police and vigilantes? These questions can make us pull the covers over our heads and try to shut out the political ads. We love coming to church, but just let us walk down to the front and light a candle or something.

*Barbara Lundblad*

## Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 18, 2020

**Isaiah 45:1–7**

**Psalms 96:1–9**

**1 Thessalonians 1:1–10**

**Matthew 22:15–22**

### Engaging the Texts

With the release of Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton* to Disney+ this summer, the terms Federalist and Democratic-Republican have become common place in our household and with them, a history lesson for our primary school children about the American party system and its shifting ideologies. Defining these parties and how they shaped the pres-

ent nation feels slippery at best, especially when any attention is given to the African Americans and women left out of both parties. The same can be said about political and religious parties in first-century Judea. While scholars have attempted to draw various lines, one’s definition of Pharisee or Herodian depends on who tells their story.

Pharisee was a religious designation within Judaism, akin to designations like Lutheran or Methodist within Christianity today. They were a reform group in the sense that they sought to broaden access to the divine beyond the Temple to the whole people. But due to their encompassing view of holiness, Pharisees were also considered conservative in their observance of both the written covenant and the oral traditions of the elders (later codified in the Talmud). Herodian was likely a political designation, referring to supporters of King Herod and the Herodian dynasty, which practiced a much looser interpretation of the covenant. By Jesus’ lifetime the Herodians were heavily enmeshed in both Roman politics and the Temple system. People associated with both groups held leadership roles in the Temple and across Judea. We might assume that it is such leaders Matthew has in mind; however, the terms themselves refer more to ideological affiliations than to any particular position. Josephus suggests that Pharisaic thought represented the religion of the people; whereas, due to Herod’s lack of popularity in this time period it can be assumed that the Herodians represented a relatively limited population. Nevertheless, just as Democrats and Republicans sit together in Congress today so did representatives of these various interests find themselves working together at the level of government in the Roman context.

From a political perspective, then, it is intriguing though not implausible that the Pharisees and Herodians have come together to question Jesus. Their own positions on the question of taxation were unlikely to have aligned. While the majority of Pharisees would have paid taxes in order to keep the peace, the most religiously observant in their ranks likely opposed Roman taxation because of the primacy of God. Herodians, on the other hand, would not only have supported taxation but likely benefitted from it. So the stage for Jesus’ quandary is set as he is challenged to choose sides without showing partiality (Matt 22:16).

### Pastoral Reflections

With mail-in ballots due in some states up to twelve days before election day, the intensity of this election year is increasingly in the air. While lectionary readings follow the liturgical rather than political calendar, U.S. voters are likely to hear in these readings questions related to the relationship between church and state and the authority/legitimacy of a leader. Nevertheless, while political conflict is implicit in the both the party conflict of Matthew’s text and the proclama-

5. Karoline Lewis, *Working Preacher* (Luther Seminary online preaching helps).

tion of Cyrus, a foreign ruler, as God's anointed in Isaiah, it is doubtful that such directly political concerns were at the center of the biblical authors' minds when they penned these texts.

Isaiah does not write to ordain Cyrus, a Persian, as king. Cyrus already *is* king and Isaiah's prophecies seek to make sense of how to live a faithful life under the rule of a foreign leader. Living himself under the rule of a foreign leader, Matthew would nevertheless have been flummoxed by questions of the separation of church and state, since the two remained intricately entwined. While the conflict between the Pharisees and Herodians hints at this, the destruction of the Temple after Jesus' death, but before Matthew's writing, brings the politics of religion front and center. Matthew, like Isaiah, is not interested in challenging this relationship, but rather, figuring out where God and God's anointed fit within it.

The answer on the first count is abundantly clear: God is in control. With vivid illustration in Isaiah, God declares to Cyrus, "I am the LORD and there is no other" (Isa 45:6). Similarly, Jesus sidesteps the partisan question by declaring, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21), all the while knowing that the two factions likely define these boundaries differently. In a twenty-first century democratic context in which at least some people possess the privilege to protest and to question political powers, these texts can read like a resounding endorsement of the sitting power—since neither Isaiah nor Jesus choose to protest directly. However, in their ancient contexts, a move to separate the religious from the political would have been near impossible since God, as poetically stated in Isaiah, was believed to be a part of every aspect of creation.

In this context, neither Isaiah nor Jesus affirms blind submission to authority, but rather encourages working creatively to re-center the God of Israel in the midst of powers and regimes that threaten to usurp divine sovereignty. The issue is not the separation of church and state, but rather, within each state, how one might most faithfully live out their religious convictions. This, it seems, is at the core of Paul's message to the Thessalonians also, who "in spite of persecution...became an example" (1 Thess 1:6-7). Israelite or Persian, Pharisee or Herodian, Democrat or Republican, these texts proclaim the sovereignty of God above all and for all and suggest that living and acting according to the gospel ought to take precedence over any other more partisan affiliations.

*Amy Lindeman Allen*

## Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Reformation Sunday) October 25, 2020

**Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18**

**Psalm 1**

**1 Thessalonians 2:1–8**

**Matthew 22:34–46**

### Engaging the Texts

In today's gospel account Jesus quotes Leviticus, naming the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" as the greatest commandment (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39). Jesus' citation of this law isn't a particular innovation. Although the context is somewhat obscured in the lectionary reading from Leviticus, this command comes at the end of a much longer extrapolation on the implementation of the Ten Commandments. This final commandment, amplified with a reminder that God is LORD, serves as a summary of all that has gone before. In the same way, Jesus concludes, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt 22:40). The point, then, despite antinomian tendencies that run strong on Reformation Day, is not to abolish the law but to frame the law in terms of what is most important. Christianity does not replace Judaism. Jesus, as a good Jew, affirms the central tenants of Judaism—love of God and neighbor.

Nor, indeed, is this command unique to Judeo-Christian Scripture. In various forms, this affirmation to treat others as we desire to be treated is repeated across all of the world's major religions. For this reason, it has come to be known as the "Golden Rule." The Pharisees who questioned Jesus surely knew this. The Babylonian Talmud records the story of Hillel, a rabbi in the Pharisaic tradition, summarizing the Torah with the command, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is its interpretation; go study." If their question to Jesus is a test, it would seem he passes.

The greater intrigue is what it *means* to love one's neighbor, and for that matter, who one's neighbor really is, as Luke's telling of a similar encounter emphasizes (Luke 10:29-37). A reading of the context around Leviticus 19 makes it clear that God is addressing the nation of Israel, an in-group identification that even Jesus' use of the Samaritan as an illustration in Luke's text does not refute. Samaritans, while considered heretics by most other Israelites in the first-century, were still descended from the nation of Israel. Paul extends this sort of neighborly love to the Gentile community at Thessalonica, but even here, his expression of care is focused on the Thessalonians as an in-group, brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Thess 2:1).

Such a distinction, however, ought not suggest that a Judeo-Christian ethic is *unconcerned* with neighbors outside of the religious community. The point, rather, has to do with love of neighbor as an extension of love of God. Neighborly love *within* the community of Israel is necessary, from a Jewish perspective, in order to maintain the holiness that sets this community apart as special to God. Perhaps it is in this context that the Pharisees question Jesus—whatever Jesus, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees may have against one another, the Pharisees may be looking for Jesus to at least affirm the general acceptance that they are all, as Jews, to love and respect one another.

### Pastoral Reflections

What does neighborly love look like in a twenty-first century context? We are increasingly global citizens, aware of and impacted by the needs and struggles of those both nearby and far-away from us. On the one hand, concern for how we treat those in our *in-groups*, whether defined religiously, geographically, or some other way, feels myopic. On the other hand, read in the context of legal battles in Leviticus that could lead even to the death (shedding of blood, Lev 19:16) of a neighbor, increasing tensions and disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees that do lead to Jesus' death, and persecutions experienced by Paul and the believers in Thessalonica, it becomes apparent that sometimes the grace of neighborly love is most needed among those with whom we might in some ways identify.

This Sunday, many Protestants across the world observe Reformation Day as a moment in which the grace of God triumphed over the legalism of the sixteenth century Roman Catholic Church. However, at the same time, we recognize and celebrate our unity together across denominations—both Protestant and Roman Catholic—as followers of Christ. In the United States, as we move ever closer to a contentious and partisan election, Democrats and Republicans display yard signs, bumper stickers, and otherwise advocate for their candidates; yet, at the same time, we do so together as fellow American citizens engaged in the same election with concern for the future of the same country. In the biblical world, religious and political distinctions were not so easily separated. To be an Israelite, even if one lived away from Israel in the diaspora, was at the same time a religious and a geo-political designation. As we read these texts for a new day, it is less important to determine who is in and who is out of the particular designations than it is to acknowledge that *whatever* our differences, we remain connected to the rest of humanity. Indeed, in our increasingly global and local interactions, we might do well to learn from the Pharisees to pause and remember that no matter how deeply we may disagree in

some things, we hold, at our core, a common inheritance as children of God.

Amy Lindeman Allen

## Reformation Sunday October 25, 2020

**Jeremiah 31:31–34**

**Psalm 46**

**Romans 3:19–28**

**John 8:31–36**

### Engaging the Texts

Acknowledging our sources for biblical wisdom is important, especially if we are going to talk about truth. In his excellent sermon collection, *We Be Jammin: Liberating Discourses from the Land of the Seven Flags*, Dr. Eleseo Perez-Alvarez points out that the word “truth” in Greek (*alethia*) at the root means “no-forgetfulness.” He goes on to connect this with Luther’s failure to condemn colonization, the 583 years of slave-trading that ran through The Virgin Islands, the modern day Crucians preserving their real history, and Jesus’ good news in John 8. The truth of the past informs our present realities. What about my own “truth”? As a white-male Lutheran in the U.S., my grasp of history is inherently tainted with white supremacy. Are there aspects of the text I am unable to access? Yes.

In the *African Bible Commentary*, Dr. Samuel M. Ngewa points out that liberation, even after establishing “freedom,” often comes with continued oppression from corruption and injustice. The disciples’ confusion in John 8 about their own oppression is familiar to him. In the *South Asian Bible Commentary*, Dr. Pratap C. Gine and Dr. Jacob Cherian discuss the Indian “guru-shishya parampara” (master-disciple tradition), the importance of carrying on the teachings of one’s master. The disciples’ conflicting allegiances to Jesus and to Abraham make sense to him. In the *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, Dr. Fernando F. Segovia helped me understand how envisioning the “other-world” (in contrast to “this-world”) decentralizes access to God. The new freedom Jesus preaches to the disciples makes sense to him. John 8 highlights the impending clash between “the authorities” who purport to control “truth” of God’s interaction with humanity and Jesus’ liberating message that does not forget the past.

Jeremiah and the Prophets are, frankly, impossible to interpret correctly from a privileged perspective. These truth-tellers risked everything. I on the other hand, face very little risk in my proclamation. In the *Global Bible Commentary*, Dr. Reneeta Weems identifies this portion from Jeremiah 31 as

“survivors’ literature,” grounded in the very real hope of a different future when the dominant powers try to maintain their control. What have I “survived”? She understands Jeremiah’s words are a dramatic departure from the way religion/law was done through traditional channels. Writing the law on our hearts undermines the people in charge of upholding the laws.

In *True To Our Native Land: An African American Commentary on the New Testament* Bp. Thomas L. Hoyt Jr. writes in the commentary on Romans 3 that “redemption” was a word borrowed from slavery that referred to the time when a slave heard that their freedom had been purchased. Hoyt has access to a dimension of this text I can never fully grasp.

### Pastoral Reflections

Saint Harriet Tubman once said “I grew up like a neglected weed—ignorant of liberty, having no experience of it.” It was not that she didn’t know she was enslaved and oppressed, instead she speaks about being born into the hell of bondage without an experience of real freedom. In the passage from John, Jesus tells the disciples “The truth will make you free” and they are pretty curious about what Jesus means. I am, too—and I know that I can’t fully understand the gravity of this passage. Whenever terms of “slave” and “free” come up in the Bible, my white-privilege keeps me from really understanding what they mean. (I am also treading lightly when invoking Tubman’s experience.) I have never known slavery and so I can only listen and learn. The disciples haven’t been slaves—or have they? I have a feeling Jesus is saying something VERY radical here; something actionable—but I do not have access to it on my own.

Jesus explains that they have indeed been slaves—to sin. Which is to say that they have been oppressed by the very religious system that keeps a tally of their transgressions. They haven’t been slaves to God; God bestows truth and dignity. They’ve been slaves to the concept of sin used in God’s name. The truth sets them free not just in a heavenly way that most white commentators direct us toward—but in an earthy way. Once they see that the whole system of sin-tracking isn’t how God loves us, the truth literally frees them from prior social-religious obligations. They don’t have to pay to be “healed” or “cleaned,” they don’t have to scrutinize their behavior to explain every misfortune, they don’t have to accept their place at the bottom of society because they are considered “impure.” If, like Tubman, they had never experienced actual freedom, then hearing this truth would automatically ignite a world of possibilities. This is a real liberation text, not just a theological one.

I have a challenge for this Re-formation Day: use preaching resources from scholars of color. See what you can find. Biblical scholarship that forms the base of much of modern Protestant theology is largely from a white-male perspective.

This error needs to be corrected if we ever hope to achieve any sort of authentic solidarity for racial justice. What do white males like me really know about issues like slavery and redemption and sin and truth? Not much. Please invest in BIPOC resources and also join me in writing to your denominational publisher’s editorial team to request more resources from diverse sources. (<https://www.fortresspress.com/info/submissions/>)

*Caleb Crainer*

## All Saints Sunday November 1, 2020

**Revelation 7:9–17**

**Psalm 34:1–10, 22**

**1 John 3:1–3**

**Matthew 5:1–12**

### Engaging the Texts

What is righteousness? How do we get it? What does it do? These are some questions I had as I read through these texts. The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 give us a short summary of people who Jesus said were “blessed,” but were they also righteous? Jesus’ list flies in the face of prevailing wisdom and even some biblical examples of signs of blessing that associates blessing with wealth and prosperity. (Prov 10:15). These texts might be a recycled version of Isaiah 61, where God’s blessing for the oppressed is assured because of their righteousness. In vv. 3-6 Jesus doesn’t place requirements on the receivers of blessing, instead they are blessed merely by their state in life. Those who have nothing, who have lost everything, who fear everything, who need anything will be restored and more so. The latter blessings, vv. 7-12, come as a result of behavior and choices. Is it true that being merciful will encourage people to be merciful to you? I don’t know.

The latter beatitudes pick up themes of righteous behavior that come through in the other texts. Innocence and purity are strong themes in 1 John 3:1-3. Deliverance for the righteous people is prominent in Psalm 34. But I think the passage from Revelation 7 is most helpful.

Many clergy understandably steer clear of The Revelation. It’s very confusing, full of strange imagery, and it’s been used to push some really bizarre theology. But when we read The Revelation as a text of liberation in the hands of down-trodden people, it becomes much more powerful than an apocalyptic future vision from religious fanatics. These words were important to their audience who understood much more of the symbolism than we do. The scene in chapter 7 opens with a multitude worshipping of God. Our observer tells us

that one elder asks about the angelic figures in white robes. They reply with respect “Sir, you are the one that knows.” What kind of exchange is this?! Then the elder goes on to explain in great detail that they are survivors (or victims?) of the great ordeal—the ones who have received God’s blessings because they’ve been faithful through hardship.

The multitude in robes have endured hunger, thirst, pain, and confusion. The great ordeal could be life itself because these experiences were so common. Likewise the Beatitudes don’t require allegiance to God for blessing to happen, it is bestowed on those who suffer because their plight is beyond their control. Those that have some measure of autonomy are blessed when they use it to assist others who are vulnerable.

### Pastoral Reflections

Righteousness literally means Justice—even though it is often taken as a stand-in term for someone who believes the correct things. Righteousness in a biblical context is not the same as the contemporary “self-righteous” descriptor. Fundamentalist theology blurs this line in an attempt to constrain wide interpretive possibilities in favor of tightly controlled “truth.” Jesus’ unexpected blessings lead us to see the deep pain of our world yearning for justice.

After the deaths of Saint George Floyd and Saint Breonna Taylor, anyone who has been trying to avoid issues of racial injustice simply must face the horror that black and brown people endure daily. There are so many videos of it. Justice can often seem like a matter of perspective, but when relative power is taken into account and evidence is irrefutable—justice cannot be denied.

In the wake of Saint Sandra Bland’s death while in police custody for a traffic stop in 2015 the African American Policy Forum released a document called “Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women.” This All Saints Day five years later, there are so many more names to say. The updated report lists forty-two black women killed by police between 1984 and 2020. The call to #sayhername brings attention to this injustice and I hope you include these names in your public prayers for saints this year. Justice will not be denied.

Black-transgender women are facing the highest murder rate since the Human Rights Campaign began tracking incidents of violence against them. Available data show that LGBTQIA+ individuals are twice as likely to be killed than heterosexual people, but for black trans women the murder rate is more than seven times higher. This is unacceptable and we must act now. Righteousness is more than knowing the truth. For those without agency, blessing is given freely. For those of us with agency, we are called to use our voice and our dollars to help others. Justice must not be denied.

This year we’ve seen a global pandemic claim the lives of hundreds of thousands of our neighbors. In countries where

leadership acted decisively to prevent the spread, the virus has not overwhelmed hospitals and death rates have remained comparatively low. The United States’ bungled response has become a cautionary example as our death tolls continue to rise. What a difficult All Saints Day this will be. My prayer is that by the time you are reading this, this global pandemic is subsiding and the plague of racism is being addressed at all levels. The visions of righteousness and mercy in this week’s pericope offer us a chance to bless others with our assistance, advocacy, and solidarity. As we serve others, justice will be served. We will get through this great ordeal together.

*Caleb Crainer*

## Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost November 8, 2020

**Amos 5:18–24**

**Psalm 70**

**1 Thessalonians 4:13–18**

**Matthew 25:1–13**

### Engaging the Texts

You can feel the apocalyptic anxiety running through these texts. When the day of the Lord arrives (whenever that might be), we want to be caught paying attention to the important things. We’re not supposed to be fretting about what will happen to those who have died or to be out shopping for oil. We’re told instead to “keep awake,” which strikes a note of irony in a year when many of us have found ourselves staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night more times than we can count.

The gospel gives us the familiar but perplexing parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. It would be quite appropriate to help our listeners understand why an apocalyptic urgency runs throughout this part of Matthew. We can remind them that Matthew’s first audience would have been wondering about Jesus’ return, expecting it to happen soon, especially as they longed to be free from the oppressive rule of the Roman empire. So far in my years as a pastor, I have not encountered anyone who is especially worried about the second coming of Jesus, at least not in an overt way, so I suspect that these themes will seem inaccessible to a modern audience. However, Matthew’s insistence that time is running out opens the way to a reflection about what is most urgent in our own time.

This moment in 2020 seems like an excellent time to remember Amos’ warning that God doesn’t really care so much about the trappings of our worship. All of our festivals and solemn assemblies, those burnt offerings and the noise

of our songs? The livestreams and the Zoom services, the pre-recording and the editing, the outdoor gatherings and drive-through communions? They matter, but they are not the most important thing. Justice and righteousness, Amos says. That's what matters to God. Justice that rolls down like waters, righteousness like an everflowing stream, both moving with a momentum that cannot be stopped.

### Pastoral Reflections

I'm writing this reflection in August with no way of knowing how the election will have turned out. There's a chance that we won't even know who has won the election by the time Sunday dawns. Whatever happens, our listeners will bring all kinds of emotions to today's sermon—hope, despair, anger, elation. Perhaps most poignantly in light of today's gospel, many will be asking variations of these questions: *From this point forward, who will be allowed "in," and who will be excluded? Who will be admitted to the places of power, and who will be left out in the cold?*

This year I am not inclined to work too hard to map the apocalyptic analogy of Jesus as the long-delayed bridegroom and the wise and foolish bridesmaids as different manifestations of faithfulness. What if we instead read this parable as a cautionary tale for our time? I am struck by how vividly the bridesmaids illustrate one of the challenges at the heart of our common life. We see resources as finite. When some people have more (oil, food, money), then others must necessarily have less (oil, food, money). We apply this scarcity mindset not just to tangible things, but also to other resources—power, justice, peace, and health, to name a few.

When we combine a scarcity mindset with a spirit of competition, we create the conditions by which we hold each individual responsible for success or failure. If you have enough oil for your lamp, you must therefore be a smart, self-motivated, and moral person. If your oil runs out and your lamp starts flickering, you are entirely to blame.

Never mind the systems that have been in place for centuries to block some people's access to the oil. Never mind that our economic structures allow a few people to hoard tremendous amounts of oil while others go without. Never mind the systemic racism that makes people of color confront barriers that no white person ever faces. Our country has been tragically creative in finding ways to drain the oil from the lamps of marginalized groups and then blaming those people when they are left without light.

If the allegedly wise bridesmaids had taken a moment to offer up the oil they had, then this story would have a much different ending. If they hadn't looked so dismissively upon the ones who had fewer resources, then everybody would have been able to enjoy some light.

If an apocalypse is an unveiling, then what is revealed here? Eventually time runs out. We run out of time to make

amends to those we've hurt. Our country runs out of time to make the ideals of our founding documents true for the people who have been historically abused and excluded. Our churches run out of time to embody fully the inclusive, boundary-breaking love of Jesus.

God's kin-dom will realize the ideals that we've delayed and denied for far too long, but what if we acted with urgency to provide a foretaste of that glory now? What if we splashed around in our baptismal waters with such wild abandon that the waves start spilling over the edge and run freely throughout the land? Then we might know a justice that rolls down like waters, a righteousness like an everflowing stream.

*Christa Compton*

## Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 15, 2020

**Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18**

**Psalm 90:1–8, 12**

**1 Thessalonians 5:1–11**

**Matthew 25:14–30**

### Engaging the Texts

I know I'm prone to anxiety these days, but I feel my blood pressure rising as I read these texts. Distress and anguish! Ruin and devastation! Blood poured out like dust! No escape! Weeping and gnashing of teeth!

There are some appropriately urgent themes here. As much as we want to be in control—of our time, of our resources, of our destiny—we have far less control than we think. Certainly 2020 has made that reality abundantly clear. The Zephaniah passage and Psalm 90 both put our mortality front and center. Our sinful flesh will end up as dung. The grass that flourishes in the morning has withered by evening. Nothing in this life is built to last, no matter how hard we try.

We don't know when our time will be up, either personally or cosmically. What we do know is that each day we can choose how to live as the people of God. We can pray the words of Ps 90:12: "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart." We can "suit up" in the spirit of 1 Thessalonians, putting on the faith, love, and hope that will help us encourage each other and build each other up.

The gospel serves up the immediate sequel to last week's parable, with more perplexing plot twists. This time our cast of characters features a master and his slaves. I know we're "supposed" to make some tidy analogies that connect the various characters to the kingdom of heaven. But what if we read today's gospel instead as a warning about the drawbacks of setting up systems of hierarchy and competition or the

dangers of using fear as a tool of manipulation? What if the parable also gives us a vision of what the kingdom of heaven is *not*?

As with last week's parable, it makes sense to help our listeners understand why this parable sounds so threatening. It can be useful to know why the vision of the end times in the gospel of Matthew is so terrifying. But we also have to concede that few people in our pews will share Matthew's eschatology.

Note that there are problematic images throughout these texts, most notably the language that associates light with goodness and darkness with distress. Preachers committed to antiracism will want to be cautious about leaning heavily into that imagery and might instead choose to disrupt it in the sermon.

### Pastoral Reflections

There's no way around it. This master is lousy at managing people. He makes assumptions about the slaves' potential by giving them different amounts "according to their ability." He offers no guidance about what to do with the talents. His methods of motivation rely on fear and intimidation, disorienting the slaves with arbitrary rewards and punishments. The third slave suggests that the master's reputation for manipulation is long-standing: "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

Predictably the slave with one talent acts out of fear. He's terrified to do more than protect what he's been given. His fears turn out to be well-founded. The master does indeed berate him in a way that seems entirely disproportional to what the slave has done.

Perhaps the harsh master is not just mad about the lack of a profit. Maybe, just maybe, the slave's burial of the talent is an act of resistance. By digging that hole, by refusing to go after a double-or-nothing investment scheme, the slave refuses to participate in a system that demeans his abilities and exploits his powerless status. The master's anger might be more about the slave exercising a defiant freedom than it is about the loss of one talent. After all, if everyone acts with that freedom, the system of control starts to collapse.

The good news might seem fairly hidden in these texts, but it's buried like a talent in 1 Thessalonians: "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him."

Our salvation is already secure. So why do we keep acting as if it's not? Why not embrace the freedom that comes with the assurance that we already have salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, no matter when he decides to make a return appearance? That promise is certain, so what have we got to lose?

Here's where the image of pregnancy in 1 Thessalonians proves powerful. The exact timing of labor pains might be unpredictable, but the one who's pregnant has been anticipating them for a while. We share that sense of anticipation. God is giving birth to something new, a realm in which everyone has a place—awake or asleep, rich or poor, wise or foolish. A place where we won't be defined by our investment portfolio, our economic status, or our place in the company hierarchy. A place where we do not have to prove our worth or exploit each other because we are beloved children of God.

Until God's future is fully realized among us, we are called to be midwives to the labor process. We bear witness to pain and do everything we can to relieve it until such time when there will be no pain at all. We encourage one another and build each other up. We share hope in the midst of suffering. That's what defiant freedom can look like in this life, even as we await the birth of something new.

*Christa Compton*

## Reign of Christ Sunday November 22, 2020

**Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24**

**Psalms 95:1–7a**

**Ephesians 1:15–23**

**Matthew 25:31–46**

### Reflections on the Texts

**B**efore the creation of the world, the Spirit of God swirled above the waters (Gen 1:2). After the creation of the world, God continued to reside above the world: physically, mentally, and spiritually. Omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, God regularly reminded humans that they were not gods (Job 38:4-7).

In Ephesians 1, Paul described Christ as "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church." (Eph 1:21–22) Jesus is an inseparable part of the top-down dominion of God.

Present at the time of creation, Jesus dwelled in the creative words that often began "let there be..." (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14 and 20) and helped transform chaos into order. Simultaneously, Jesus turned power structures upside down when he transformed from word into flesh (John 1). Word/*logos* is logical and predictable. Flesh is messy, smelly, and changes unceasingly.

Christ gave up most of their power and privilege when they became a divine newborn. Dwelling in the body of an

infant, entirely dependent upon others for safety, was a foolish (1 Cor 1:25) method of evangelism for a world that believed godly traits resided in the bodies of Olympic athletes.

Ponder the bravery required for God to knowingly enter puberty and weather the ever-changing embodiment that humans age into. Additional external changes shaped Jesus when his fame increased or he is given a new title (Rabbi, Messiah or King of the Jews). Memorable embodied changes to Jesus' body take place during the transfiguration (Matt 17:2, Mark 9:2b-3, and Luke 9:29) and the passion.

After the resurrection, Jesus remains fully embodied at the same time that his personal body becomes less and less important to his presence in the world. His body entered a locked room (John 20:19) without opening a door (John 20:26), but was also solid enough that it could be touched by Thomas (John 20:27). In other resurrection encounters, Jesus' body was less recognizable than his actions, like fishing and serving breakfast (John 21:12-13) or blessing and breaking bread (Luke 24:30-32).

After Christ's ascension, Christ's reign transforms to communal experiences of embodiment. For example, Christ continues to dwell in the bread and wine we share in communion and in our encounters with all other bodies. Christ's body "fills everything in every way" (Eph 1:23).

Dwelling in the ever-changing embodiment of Christ's birth, transfiguration, death, resurrection, and ascension also prepares faithful folk to encounter God incarnate in the bodies of those who look and act differently than the majority. While we are all sheep in God's pasture (Ps 95:7), Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25 remind us of God's preference for the hungry, lost, oppressed, injured, and weak.

Christ calls us not only to reconcile with neighbors who are ideological enemies, but also with those who physically embody scandalous differences. Matt 25:31-46 directs us to do what we can to minimize the shame and blame connected to extrinsic states of embodiment caused by systemic failures. For example, in Jesus' time nakedness shamed the viewer, not the individual who was naked. Clothing your neighbor vanquishes your shame and makes relationship possible.

The strangers Jesus calls us to welcome often embody both intrinsic and extrinsic differences. As a result, welcoming strangers requires both communal efforts to minimize systemic barriers and radical hospitality. Liberation theologies, centered in embodied storytelling, link Christ's incarnation to particular minority groups. For example, Robert Goss writes about the need to link God's incarnation to LGBTQ strangers:

If the Christ is not queer, then the incarnation has no meaning for our sexuality. It is the particularity of Jesus the Christ, his particular identification with the sexually oppressed, that enables us to understand

Christ as black, queer, female, Asian, African, a South American peasant, Jewish, [trans], and so forth. It is the scandal of particularity that is the message of Easter, the particular context of struggle where God's solidarity is practiced.<sup>6</sup>

Welcoming strangers with diverse embodiments opens our eyes to additional ways that the ever-changing embodiment of Christ is present in our world. When we encounter diverse individuals who seem outside of God's community, Jesus' divine nature reigns over us and reminds us that God's creative capacity is beyond our understanding. Simultaneously, Christ's ever-changing human embodiment calls us to account when work is needed to decrease our biases, to become anti-racist, and to better love our neighbors. Transfigured and scarred, we are called to focus the eyes of our heart on the hope (Eph 1:18) that springs from Christ's embodiment in the world.

*Megan Rohrer*

## First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2020

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

**Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19**

**1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

**Mark 13:24-37**

**W**hen God's hand is upon you (Ps 80:17), does it leave a mark?

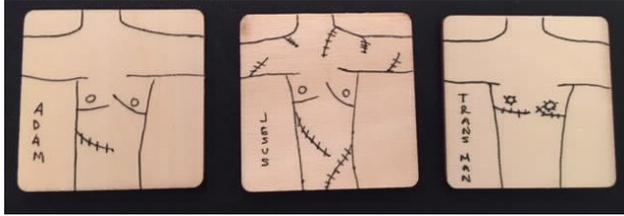
Jacob was left limping, after a night of aggressive touch (Gen 32:24-32). I envision burns and scars on the lips of Isaiah (Isa 6:6), after he was touched by live coal. Touch made Daniel wise and reformed his breath (Dan 8:18-27, 9:21, and 10:10-19). Touch woke Elijah and pointed him toward water and cakes that filled him with enough energy to last 40 days and 40 nights (1 Kgs 19:5-8). God's touch physically altered biblical bodies.

Is there still a scar in the place where God displaced a clump of Earth and formed it into a gender-neutral creature (Gen 2:7)? The earthling must have been scarred when God performed the world's first gender affirmation surgery (Gen 2:21-22). A few chapters later God's covenant was connected to an expectation that faithful men would bear the scars of circumcision (Gen 17:10-27). Jesus' body was scarred by whips, nails, and a spear.

My body is also scarred. To some, my scars are a sign that

6. Goss, Robert, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (Harper, San Francisco, 1993), 85.

I have drifted from God's path. But, when I was wheeled in for top surgery, I imagined the Creator anesthetizing Adam and surgically separating the bits that would later be named female. These clay creations, altered by plastic surgery, were the bodies God called "good." I smiled, wondering if my post-surgery body would look more like Adam's than cismen.



In the weeks following my surgery, I wondered how Adam recovered without pain medications. I wore a compression vest and tried to remain as still as possible, in hopes of minimizing my scars. I wondered how Jesus felt when people stuck their dirty fingers in his open wounds (John 20:24-29). Did Jesus' scars stretch when he walked for hours on the road toward Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)?

During a typical Advent, talk of scars may seem out of place. Yet, the chaos, turmoil, and death throughout this year, may have caused more scars than years past. We have been fed so many tears (Ps 80:5) that, for many, this year may be the closest to a "desolating sacrilege" (Mark 13:14) they can remember.

We yearn for the palpable presence of God to become as obvious and vast as the earthen stretch marks of the Grand Canyon. But, if the Advent of God is similar to Jesus' parable of slaves who are punished for sleeping (Mark 13:34), perhaps God's path is more like the deeply rutted scars that cut through Midwestern amber waves of grain. Historic wagon trails are the Earth's enduring reminder of not only the dreams carried by caravans of immigrants, but also the genocide and displacement of Native Americans.

Isaiah 64 imagines what would happen if God ripped through the heavens, bounded to Earth and made right all the wrongs of the past, present, and future. Isaiah expands the timeline assigned to God's creation, by declaring that restorative justice is the continued creative work of our potter parent. A similar text is found in Jeremiah, where potter God "reworked [a created being] into another vessel, as seemed good to [God]" (Jer 18:4). Advent, a time of spiritual gestation, compels us to look, listen, and sometimes wait for opportunities to join in God's unending creative activity.

A few years ago, I travelled to Sachseln, Switzerland, to learn more about my great, great, great—16 greats—grandfather. Bruder Klaus, or St. Nicholas von Flüe, is the patron saint of Switzerland. The illiterate hermit, credited with preventing civil war, remains so popular that throngs of pilgrims visit his birth place, home, hermitage, burial site, two chapels,

and the museum commemorating his life. Declared an indulgence during his lifetime, Bruder Klaus' desire to be a hermit was in direct conflict with the needs of those who believed that if they touched him, they would gain eternal salvation.

During my time in Flüeli-Ranft, I began to wonder why I had spent so much time apologizing for my embodied presence in this world. I am the direct descendent of a saint. Why was it so hard to imagine that I could be one, too?

What would happen if we spent the season of Advent dwelling in all the reasons God calls us beloved? Spend some time this week balancing the thoughts you have about your body: Each time a negative thought enters your mind, remind yourself that God knit you in your mother's womb or that you are fearfully and wonderfully made. Set a calendar alert throughout the day, reminding yourself that you are enough.

Although they are prominent in art, the Bible does not dwell on Jesus' scars. Conversely, there are countless stories about the miracles that occurred when he reached out his hand and touched other people's bodies. Jesus' divine touch was so powerful that the bleeding woman (Matt 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34, and Luke 8:43-48) was healed when she took matters into her own hands and touched the clothes Jesus was wearing.

God is near, reach out and be transfigured.

*Megan Rohrer*

## Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2020

**Isaiah 40:1-11**

**Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13**

**2 Peter 3:8-15a**

**Mark 1:1-8**

### Engaging the Texts

Each of the texts for this Sunday contain announcements of divine hope and promise in the face of human uncertainty and despair.

"Comfort, O comfort my people," says God to exiles in bondage in Babylon. These are the first words of the prophet known as "Second Isaiah," (Isaiah 40-55) introducing chapters filled with some of the most hope-filled preaching in all of scripture. The hope and comfort, however, is proclaimed amid one of the darkest periods of Israel's history. Jerusalem and its temple had been destroyed. Exiled in Babylon the very existence of the people of Israel seemed at risk. Yet this becomes the occasion for the prophet's words of tender comfort and hope.

Claus Westermann<sup>7</sup> points out an interesting translational issue: the placement of quotation marks in vs. 6-7 is purely speculative. Quotation marks don't exist in the Hebrew text and must be inferred. Westermann thinks it best to extend the second quotation all the way to the end of v. 7. "All people are grass..." then becomes the lament of the prophet rather than a declaration from on high. The divine answer to such despair then follows in v. 8: "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." The prophet stands with the people in the midst of their hopelessness and despair—in that very place the promises of God are made known.

This same theme of hope in the midst of uncertainty is present in Second Peter. The writer attempts to give comfort in the midst of the uncertainty caused by the "slowness" of God's coming. God's slowness is patience, the epistle writer asserts, and points to the hopeful possibility of lives lived in anticipation of a righteousness yet to come.

The selection from Mark's gospel contains something of the same contrast. The reading begins with the sudden announcement, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ," then goes on to describe how people "from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" were coming out to be baptized by John. Such a situation surely implies that all was not well in Jerusalem and its environs. What could have caused so many people to stream out into the wilderness to receive John's baptism? A sense of hopelessness under Roman occupation? Dread over the consequences of individual and collective sin? The story doesn't say. But the people were yearning for *something* as they came out in droves to John in the wilderness. Such yearning marks the beginning of the gospel story.

### Pastoral Reflections

Last Advent we had never heard of the novel coronavirus. But now, a year later, the reality of wilderness has been shaped by the pandemic. For some people "wilderness" has been a blessing, a chance to get away to the Boundary Waters or some other place of rest and renewal. For others, "wilderness" has been uncertainty and loss, a time of isolation from loved ones. Preachers will need to find ways into the biblical meaning of "wilderness" whether the word evokes loss and isolation or an experience of renewal and time away from lock-down.

The opening scene of Mark's gospel takes place in the wilderness—*outside* the holy city. The city is the place of power: the place of the kings, of imperial authority, of wealth, of official religion. The gospel of Jesus Christ begins *outside* all of that, in the wilderness. But the significance of "the wilder-

ness" is not something invented by Jesus or the New Testament writers. It is a critical theme throughout scripture. In Exodus, the people of God learn how to become the people of God in the wilderness. The Babylonian exile was itself a terrible experience of wilderness—and it is a highway through the wilderness that will lead the people home.

There is something about the experience of being on the outside—of wandering in the wilderness—that is critical for the formation of biblical faith, and for becoming the people of God.

Advent is a season of waiting and yearning—a season of anticipation acknowledging the great "not yet" in which we live. It's important to be clear that we're not simply "waiting for baby Jesus to be born." Such language may be useful for teaching children the rhythms of the church year. But for most of the household of faith this season's most profound meaning won't be found in pretending that Jesus hasn't yet been born. Advent waiting is about so much more than the coming of Christmas (as lovely as that may be). This season is an invitation to acknowledge that our world—and our lives—are so terribly far from the righteousness and justice that God desires. Advent invites us to yearn for "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home" (2 Peter). But in order to do that, we begin by acknowledging the truth of the wilderness in which we find ourselves.

In the biblical texts, our truest perceptions of reality come from the perspective of the wilderness, rather than that of the holy city or the promised land. We see the world more clearly "from below" than "from above"—through a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory. It is in the Advent practice of "calling a thing what it actually is" (Luther) that we find ourselves in a place to hear the truth of the law, and of the gospel. It's there, in the wilderness, that we hear the divine voice crying out with healing, comfort, and hope.

*Erik Haaland*

## Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2020

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

**Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55**

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

### Engaging the Texts

Like many biblical texts, these four consider encounters of our commissioning God with particular people. The texts acknowledge resistance and give hope.

In the Isaiah text, pay attention to the shifting speakers—

7. Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), 41.

the joyful words of the one commissioned to speak and act on God's behalf are interrupted by God's own words of justice and affirmation (vv. 8–9). What the people are announcing and celebrating is not merely positive experience or desired gifts. The commission is evidence of the nature and will of God. Note that the talk of commissioning and the celebration of God's victories carry the shadow of what has been defeated—oppression, broken-heartedness, captivity, imprisonment, opposition to God, loss, mourning, devastation. The joy here comes to those who have known the opposite. God is at work for good, overcoming evil, inviting thankful praise.

Psalm 126 also focuses on the nature of God's work with people, but I suggest using the lectionary alternative, the Magnificat, for a fuller commissioning story. [Be aware that the Magnificat is also appointed as the psalm for Advent 4; preacher and worship planners will probably choose Mary's song for one Sunday rather than both.] The poem sings Mary's response to Gabriel's annunciation and Elizabeth's affirmation (the gospel text for Advent 4). Mary experienced a life-changing encounter with God—an amazing promise of pregnancy which she understood in the context of God's disruptive, ameliorative work across the ages. This song is about the God who commissioned Mary to motherhood. It's not about her. It's not even prophecy about Jesus the disrupter—that word is left to Simeon (Luke 2:34–35).

With metaphors of sleep and alertness, sobriety and drunkenness, night and day, First Thessalonians speaks of encountering God and the complexity of response to that encounter. God's commission should and could lead to a community of encouragement and building up, of respect, peace, admonition, help for the poor, patience, prayer, rejoicing, and more. Paul didn't imagine this was easy or inevitable. His admonitions show awareness of tension, disrespect, and despising in the community. He saw the need for weighing various counsels about responding to God. The effort to stay awake is crucial, but Paul ends with promise, focusing on God: "the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this."

The John text is about Jesus and John the baptizer, of course, but it is fundamentally about God: John was a man "sent from God." There are unmistakable allusions to God's creation of light and, in omitted verses 9–18, to the rejection of God's light. People were given the power to be children of God, to be born of God. The glory of God was seen in the Son. The evangelist lets John summarize his own identity and message with, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the LORD (*kyriou*).'" Modern hearers may forget that for Isaiah "Lord" referred to God, but the evangelist and his readers would not have forgotten. John the baptizer was known as one who pointed to God made known in Jesus Christ.

### Pastoral Reflections

This third Sunday of Advent is only twelve days before Christmas. To maintain Advent tension, you might invite the congregation to hear all the texts through the Isaiah reading. God commissions, and God encounters reveal reluctance and resistance. Yet God persists.

The commissioning in Isaiah could be a starting point. In the midst of the growing Christmas joy and excitement that shape Advent in our culture, you might make good use of Isaiah. His words anticipate the joy brought through Jesus' birth but give substantial occasion to speak of the problems of life and world. The other texts for this day give entrees for illustrating the positive outcomes of God's work but also for illustrating God's opposition to evil.

I'm often concerned that I and others are careless and shallow when we toss the word "God" into our sermons and conversations, assuming we all know what it means. It is tempting to use the word with less content and power than it deserves. The texts for this Sunday might be useful for shaping and reshaping our sense of who God is by seeing again what God does. That might be an unspoken objective of your sermon. We sense commissioning in our lives and resistance and persistence, and all this tells us about God. We are all commissioned—be it a call to preach (I'd not focus my sermon on that one); a call to be a parent; a call to nurture a community of goodness, kindness and mutual respect; a call to point humbly beyond ourselves to the astonishing, persisting, light-giving work of God. Show also that God commissions communities, not only individuals.

What bits of history and real life stories might you use to tell of God-encounters and thereby encourage, admonish, and build up those who will be listening? What is dawning on you as you watch for God's commissionings today? Don't make the sermon about you, but you might prepare for preaching by reminding yourself of evidence, small and large, by which you know that God is commissioning you for daily life. This is a good Sunday to use the language of vocation. What stories will let your hearers encounter the God who calls?

*Stan Olson*

## Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2020

2 Samuel 7:1-11

Luke 1:45b-55 (or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26)

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

### Become a Home for Sacred Presence

Four years ago I was privileged to witness my grandson's birth. I laser-beamed prayers as my daughter vice-gripped her partner's hand, enduring labor without medications. By 6:26 a.m., mother and baby were well. Only then could we release our shouts of joy, brimming tears of relief!

Mary and Elizabeth leaned on each other in their pregnancies. They understood the power of the new life that stirred within them. The lectionary omits Luke 1:56, "And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home." But where was home? Was Mary bonded with Joseph? She would give birth on the road, in a makeshift shelter. Would mother and baby be okay? Would their long night end well?

### Engaging the Texts

Second Samuel spotlights King David pondering why he lives in "a house of cedar" while "the ark of God stays in a tent." The prophet Nathan delivers a spiritual response to David's literal question. "The LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever." God promises to make "a place [home] for my people." Psalm 89, if used as the second reading, echoes themes of a royal Davidic covenant. "My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him." We reflect on the paradox of where/how God makes a home with/through us.

Romans 16 concludes Paul's longest letter to a newborn church. Hidden for generations, the mystery of God is "disclosed" through Jesus Christ and all, even outsiders (Gentiles), have access to this good news. Is it possible that "insider/outsider" is superseded?

Luke 1 provides the second reading and the gospel—in reverse order. The second reading is the Song of Mary or the Magnificat. The gospel is the Annunciation when the Angel Gabriel announces that Mary will give birth to a son named Jesus who will inherit the Davidic throne. "The child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God." The verses we miss narrate Mary going to be with Elizabeth and how the baby in Elizabeth's womb "leaps for joy" when pregnant Mary arrives. Their maternal and spiritual "sisterhood" is profound as both women burst into poetic, prophetic utterance.

The Song of Mary extols her joy while revealing her inci-

sive critique of the powerful and God's propensity to turn the tables, familiar Lucan themes. J.B. Phillips freely translates, "My heart is overflowing with praise for my Lord. My soul is full of joy in God my Savior." With no social status, Mary does not gloat that "all generations will call me blessed" but celebrates her role as God's justice-love sets the world right. Responding to Gabriel, Mary questions the plan's feasibility and then whole-heartedly consents, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

### Pastoral Reflections

Stories of immigrants and refugees haunt us as families are torn apart and hope is scandalized. As unemployment skyrockets more people are losing their homes, desperately encamping in parks alongside nervous neighbors.

The ark of God, symbolizing God's holy presence, stayed in a tent for a long time and God was hesitant to have it confined to one place. What does this imply about homing? Where is home? Is it a place? A way of being? An invitation to become more, to include more, to care more? When we use our houses as fortresses against threat, I wonder if they cease to be "home" to us.

I think Mary and Elizabeth together show us the way. It is solidarity. We share our joy, our fears, and our resources. Our spirits and bodies dance when we are together. These two helped each other prepare for the dangers of childbirth. In the following years, when John the Baptist (Elizabeth's son) was imprisoned and beheaded, how did Mary walk that abyss with her? When Jesus was being executed on the cross, did Elizabeth share her bitter sorrow?

Lonnae O'Neal titled her moving commentary *George Floyd's Mother was not there, but he used her as a sacred invocation*. Her commentary goes on: "With his dying breaths, Floyd called for her as an assurance of memory. ... To call out to his mother is to be known to his maker. The one who gave him to her." Recognizing Black mothers, she affirms, "We are the ballast. The anchors. A way for those who are close to the edge to find their way back, on their way home."<sup>8</sup>

Black Mamas Matter Alliance: Advancing the Human Right to Safe and Respectful Maternal Health Care educates and advocates about the high rate of preventable deaths during childbirth and soon after. In 2018, Black women died 2.5 times more often than White women. In 2020, it was 3 times higher. Training doctors and nurses for implicit bias and distortions in communication *will* save mothers' lives.

The Incarnation declares that God homes with humanity! Not confined to temples or doctrines, God pitches a tent and dwells among us (John 1:14). Our hearts may "leap for joy" but now our call and commitment is to become homes

8. <https://theundefeated.com/features/george-floyds-death-mother-was-not-there-but-he-used-her-as-a-sacred-invocation/>

for the Sacred Presence who brings down the powerful, lifts up the lowly, and births a world of radical justice-love.

*Phyllis Zillhart*

## Nativity of the Lord December 24, 2020

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

**Psalm 96**

**Titus 2:11-14**

**Luke 2:1-20**

### The Baby Lived Through the Night

Christmas Eve evokes memories of snow-laden walks to church and star-topped trees. I love a fully harmonized, candlelit rendition of “Silent Night.” A typo forever inclusified “Silent Night” for me, changing the confessional phrase “Son of God” to “Song of God, love’s pure light.” Sheer grace!

But those sentimental images hang heavy these days. I live in South Minneapolis, about half a mile from the now defunct police station torched in the riots after the protest of George Floyd’s murder. Our charred and scarred neighborhood has not fully exhaled since George Floyd couldn’t breathe, did not breathe and still was pressed down. Charges were filed; we wait to see if and how justice will be served for George and his family. And beyond that: What names must be spoken? What reforms must begin? Can we even imagine communal healing? And yet ... we must dare to care.

### Engaging the Text

First Isaiah (pre-exile) celebrated God as the great king of heaven and earth. But the favored Davidic line fell in scandal. Our text revives hope through King Hezekiah’s coronation. Promises of “endless peace” and justice and righteousness “from this time onward and forevermore” ring hollow with history. Yet we hear echoes of another baby’s birth, stirring hope within us. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.”

Psalm 96 also focuses on God as royal ruler and judge. We are invited to “sing to God a new song,” declaring God’s “marvelous works among all the peoples.” But, as complicity to systemic harm is being unmasked around us and within us, when God comes in judgment will we join the chorus as “all the trees of the forest sing for joy”?

The letter to Titus, allegedly from Paul to his coworker, has authorship akin to Timothy’s letters. Titus’ “proper” behavior includes instructing slaves in submission to masters. Our text follows this offensive tutorial. Yet we may lean in

to hear the whisper of Christmas, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”

Our Christmas gospel unmasks this approval-seeking submission to hierarchy and domination! The author of Luke-Acts paints a vivid contrast, paralleling the lowly birth narrative of Jesus with the lofty birth story of the Roman Emperor Augustus (27BCE – 14CE). *Who Is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus* by John Dominic Crossan and Richard G. Watts recounts the story of Augustus’ mother falling asleep in the Temple of Apollo and being impregnated by the god via a snake. Augustus’ divine political power is symbolized through an earthly mother and a divine father. Under Roman rule, the New Year begins on Caesar Augustus’ birthday. Crossan wants that birth story ringing in our ears when Luke tells the radical story of Jesus’ birth, grown quaint with over familiarity. Mary and Joseph can’t afford a room so Jesus is born in a stable and sleeps in a feeding trough. Lowly shepherds herald his birth—not trumpets and monuments. Crossan concludes by asking, “Where is God to be found on earth? In Augustus the emperor or in Jesus the peasant? In imperial grandeur or in peasant poverty? In domination and subjugation of others from the top down, or in the empowerment and liberation of others from the bottom up? ... Where do you find the divine revealed on earth—in Caesar or in Jesus?”<sup>9</sup>

### Pastoral Reflections

Any mother cringes at the unsanitary conditions of an animal stable as a birthing center. Who was there to help this young mother, this inexperienced father, and this vulnerable baby? As I ponder this, I am appalled by a report published in August 2020 in the journal “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA.” It reports that Black newborn babies in the U.S. are more likely to survive childbirth if they are cared for by Black doctors, but three times more likely than White babies to die when looked after by White doctors. *Three times* more likely to die! For White babies the race of the doctor made little difference. We should be shocked and outraged that racial disparities affect even the first hours of a person’s life!

Jesus was born in a stable and slept in a manger. And Jesus lived through his first night on earth! That should not be a radical statement. He survived the night and saw the light of day! Why can’t we say that for these Black babies? White people of faith, myself included, have looked the other way when the policies of Caesar Augustus favor us and we don’t even recognize it. Institutional racism and implicit bias are not going away because it’s Christmas Eve. Neither is

9. John Dominic Crossan and Richard G. Watts, *Who is Jesus? Answers to Your Questions about the Historical Jesus* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 22.

COVID-19, which also hits people of color harder. Neither COVID-19 nor racism is taking a Christmas break this year.

The fevered night of oppression and blind harm doesn't have to continue. We can say their names. We can side with the radical peasant, Jesus. We can live through the night and into the day—together. We can dare to care! In harmony, we can sing the "Song of God" which is Love.

*Phyllis Zillhart*

## Christmas Day December 25, 2020

**Isaiah 52:7–10**

**Psalm 97**

**Hebrews 1:1–4**

**John 1:1–14**

### Engaging the Texts and Pastoral Reflections

I failed Christianity 101. When I walked a portion of the Camino de Santiago, everyone wanted to talk about their feet: the blisters, the aches, the cramps. They pulled off their shoes and began the commentary. I really didn't want to see their feet. This year, as we celebrate Christmas, our feet are bruised by the journey that has been 2020. Nothing on the path was expected or easy. We've just been forced to take one step after the next. Perhaps that's the beauty of our feet this year. Not that we're running with good news, but we're taking another step because we trust that God is walking alongside us. Isaiah is writing to exiles who were settled into their new routines in a foreign land. They had no idea how long it would last. Their old life was a ruin. Their faith had been challenged to its core. The old beliefs didn't function as they once did. In fact, the idea of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God was receding into the past. It was hard to imagine there had once been a vibrant sense of God's presence in a temple. Perhaps it even seemed naïve to believe that God's promise could last forever. As God's history settled into the past, Isaiah issues a call to the sentinels to lift up their voices, to sing together, "Your God reigns." With the ruins in plain sight, a new word of comfort and redemption is stepping toward them. This is an amazing announcement. In the sight of life's ruins, God is at work. This is not naïve optimism. It is realistic proclamation. It doesn't deny the ruins that lie around us but suggests that even the ruins can sing a new song. Our past cannot contain the God who brings peace. Wake up! Watch for it. A new life is on the horizon, perhaps not yet fully in our grasp, but close enough to change our perspective on what tomorrow means. Something is being born right before our very eyes, and all we can do is welcome it.

As it turns out, it has been God's intention all along to dwell among us. From the very beginning of time, God's wisdom has been at work in our ruins, in our past, in our future, in the Christ. On Christmas morning all we can do is enter this mystery, this gorgeous announcement that God's holy wisdom has become flesh and dwells among us. In the bright light of the morning, perhaps we see more clearly than we do on Christmas Eve. We see our lives, our families, our attempts at Christmas-making, a bit more realistically after the presents are unwrapped, the food eaten, and the relatives are snoring loudly in the guest room. By the next day, trees will already be on the curb, the twelve days of Christmas nothing more than a song about partridges and golden rings. Yet for the faithful few who gather on Christmas morning, we trust that there is more. There is always more with God; there is always light coming in the darkness; divinity in fleshy life. God in Jesus is God in all flesh. The rest of John's gospel is the recitation of this poetic and wise beginning. The story of Jesus is a sign because it is the type for God's story. It is the glimpse behind the scenes, the truth beyond the words; Word in word. John's gospel is the way to read all human stories, light shining in darkness, God embedded in bodies.

The poetry of Hebrews is particularly appropriate on this morning. Using the language of Jewish history and faith, the writer sees Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient hope. In these last days, God speaks to us through a child, the heir of all things. To borrow Isaiah's metaphor, he is the messenger stepping toward us with comfort and redemption. Reading Hebrews is like looking at an icon. It touches the world beyond the world. The face of Christ is the face of heaven, yet not far away, so near we can touch it, a reflection of God's glory. Jesus, the Christ, is the past and future made present to us. It is as if the entire Bible and the story of Jesus come together in the writing of Hebrews, itself an incarnation of the divine.

Perhaps preaching on Christmas day requires more poetry than explanation, more story than theology. Perhaps the preacher dares to risk in the brightness of morning's light the fleshy ways that God is incarnate, the ways God dwells in our bodies, the ways our "ruins" speak with holy wisdom. A pandemic teaches us new ways to be genuine and healthy community. Protests give us a vision of a justice that must be born. Elections make us take a stand, not for a party, but for the gospel. Scholars debate how John has used "logos" in his prologue. Does he mean it like the Greek philosophers? Or does he mean it like the ancient writers of the wisdom literature, lady wisdom standing in the marketplace, stepping into the dance, to sing with the angels, "God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father, through him all things were made."

*Bradley Schmeling*

## First Sunday after Christmas December 27, 2020

Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

### Engaging the Texts

When you've been waiting what feels like an eternity for some sign of hope, eager for the dawn to appear and extinguish the interminable night, it's impossible not to burst into praise when the light finally emerges on the horizon. But the path into a more hopeful future may be bumpier than we had expected.

Think of the return of the Israelites from the Babylonian exile—the context for today's first reading from Isaiah. Scripture doesn't capture the whole story so use your imagination. After the exile, there are two factions: those who are returning from Babylon and those who had remained behind in Jerusalem. Those who were exiled remember how much they had suffered, losing their homes, their status, and their identity, and how, in Babylon, they had pieced together a new understanding of the ways God works in the world. Meanwhile, those who had been left behind remember how much they also had suffered, how they had also lost their homes, seen their community's infrastructure destroyed, and almost starved to death as they watched their city burn. The two groups have spent generations apart, they have evolved independently, and they have had vastly different experiences of exile. Now they are reunited in a devastated Jerusalem, figuring out how to rebuild together. It must have been a great struggle. Then through the prophet Isaiah, the voice of God is heard: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch." For decades, God has been seemingly absent, but finally God is back on the scene and pledges not to rest until salvation is accomplished. Finally, hope is on the horizon! But the path forward will be complicated. Restoring the community and rebuilding the city will be messy. Salvation will not come as easily as the reunited Israelites might have hoped.

Only one verse separates the nativity story, usually heard on Christmas Eve, from today's Gospel. That verse tells us that on the eighth day, the baby born in Bethlehem is circumcised and named "Jesus" (Luke 2:21). In today's Gospel, Jesus is presented in the temple where we meet two elderly saints of God. Simeon and Anna have waited their whole lives for this day. Simeon had been promised he would not die until he had seen the messiah, and now, holding Jesus in his arms,

he is finally ready to go, "for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." But even as the dawn breaks, storm clouds are gathering on the horizon: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." The narrator continues on without commenting on these startling words, but the warning has been heard loud and clear. Salvation is coming, yes—but it's going to be a rough road.

### Pastoral Reflections

I'm writing in early September; who knows where things will stand by the time you read this. As of now, our coronavirus exile has lasted six months, but it may just as well have been six years. It feels like we have been waiting an eternity for life to return to normal. Glimmers of hope may soon appear on the horizon, but it will be a long, rocky road back from the brink. Some, mostly white-collar, workers will emerge from this crisis disrupted and shaken, but ultimately stable. Others who were already only scraping by will come out of it with much more lasting scars. In a country that was highly unequal before the pandemic, the disparities are sadly predictable, falling mostly along lines of race and class. Righting these wrongs and rebuilding our communities will require sacrifice across the board.

On top of that, we've just witnessed one of the most heated elections of our lifetimes. Americans are more divided than ever, civility is absent from our political discourse, and we've come to regard those who don't share our politics as enemies. As I write this, I don't know the outcome of the election, but presumably one side has prevailed and one half of the country feels marginalized and cheated. Today, the notion of compromise is politically unpalatable, a sacrifice too great to bear. But is there any other way to reach mutually beneficial decisions where all sides experience a win? God's promised salvation may be on the way, but a cross stands in our path and there is no way around it.

On the other hand, the first Sunday after Christmas is an awkward time to dwell on the difficult prophecy Simeon speaks. Maybe today it's enough to let praise be our song—praise to God for God's enduring faithfulness through exiles, pandemics, and even elections, trusting that God accompanies us along the stumbling path to salvation.

*Javen Swanson*



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