

Gestation

by Christian M. M. Brady

This is a collection of essays and sermons from October 2016 to June 2017. Nine months of sermons. In the spring of 2016 I stepped down as dean of the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State University after a decade of service. I was granted a year's leave of absence; my first sabbatical in 19 years of life as an academic. (That is, as someone being paid for academic work as opposed to an undergraduate or graduate student who must pay for that privilege.) My intention was to compile my work on suffering a grace into a single volume entitled *Beautiful and Terrible Things: A Biblical Theology of Suffering and Grace*. That project is still in the works. About five months into my leave my friend and former rector, now Bishop of Tennessee, called to catch up. Two days later my friend and former curate, Canon of the Ordinary for the Bishop of Tennessee, called to catch up and to see if I would be willing to consider becoming the interim rector of a sizable parish in Nashville. And so I spent nine months with the wonderful community of St. Bartholomew's. I grew in many ways over this gestational period. These are the sermons I preached in that time.

These have not been edited in any significant way. Occasionally there is reference to listening to the audio for a better version. They can be found on [St. B's site](#).

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.”

I. Lamentations of Healing

Proper 22 (27) (October 2, 2016)

- First reading and Psalm
 - Lamentations 1:1-6
 - Lamentations 3:19-26
- Second reading
 - 2 Timothy 1:1-14
- Gospel
 - Luke 17:5-10

Thank you all so much for such a warm and generous welcome. It has been humbling and a great blessing to me at this time and it truly seems to be God's hand at work. Even down to our readings this morning, as we shall see.

Let us pray.

Lord God may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts always be acceptable in your site. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.* ✠

Babylonian siege –

In 586 BCE Nebuchadnezzar and his army finally took Jerusalem and burned down the Temple. But that was only after a 2-year siege that led to famine within the city. The horrors of living through that siege are difficult to comprehend. Our brief readings from Lamentations only hints at the deep tragedy that befell those who lived in God's holy city.

Lam. 1:1 *How lonely sits the city
 that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
 she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces*

has become a vassal.

Poetic and flowing but at times caustic and accusatory, the Book of Lamentations is a collection of five poems that recount and reflect the devastation and destruction of Jerusalem. The events were indeed so horrific that in chapter 2 the poet calls out to God and demanded he look at the destruction:

Lam 2:20 *Look, O LORD, and consider!*

To whom have you done this?

Should women eat their offspring,

the children they have borne?

Should priest and prophet be killed

in the sanctuary of the Lord?

Probably not what you normally expect to hear on a Sunday morning! In fact, this is the *only* Sunday that any of Lamentations occurs in our three-year lectionary cycle (and an alternative reading is offered!). The portions of chapter 3 that we just sang appear on Holy Saturday, but that is usually all of Lamentations that most Christians know.

Is it providential that this should be my first Sunday with you? I wonder because this is what I wrote my doctorate on and continued to study for a full 12 years, publishing articles and a book. I promise this will not be a lecture nor a scholarly discourse, but it does seem curious, doesn't it?, that out of all three years in the lectionary, these should be our readings for today, my first Sunday. And it is curious that as St. B's is in this time of transition, a time for many of grieving the departure of Fr. Jerry, that we should have these Scriptures about suffering and grief. Discerning God's will and guidance can feel challenging at times. At other times it seems so obvious.

So here we have five poems of lament that record the grief over the destruction of Jerusalem. Thousands of truly innocent lives destroyed in the most awful ways. Children of course, but men and women too who were not leaders, priests or royalty, and had nothing to do with the cause of this suffering. The poets of Lamentations cry out to God asking him to explain and account for the tragedies they endured. "Look, O LORD, and consider! To whom have you done this?" Such tragedies continue to happen... I wrote the forward to my book on Lamentations on the first anniversary of 9/11. Today, this day, Aleppo is a city under siege. In Sudan, Syria, and in our own cities – Suffering is all around us and *so many who suffer are innocent*.

I mentioned my prior research because I want you to know that this is not a new subject for me. For years I studied what we call "theodicy," questioning where God's justice is in this world of suffering and pain. And then:

Mack – New Year's Eve 2012.

The loss of our son was tragic, completely unexpected, and yet it was in no way unique. If you haven't already felt the loss of a loved one, if you haven't already suffered yourself in some

completely unjust way, at some point you will, and you may feel completely abandoned and cry out to God with Lamentations:

Lam. 5:20 *Why have you forgotten us completely?
Why have you forsaken us these many days?*

We all *know* about such unmerited loss and suffering. And we know it even though we are faithful people.

So when we read the Gospel today and hear Jesus say ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you’ **we can’t but wonder, “If I had more faith, would my child still be alive? If we had more faith, would our city be at peace? If I had more faith...!”**

This morning I will only briefly touch upon the causes of suffering in our lives, but to answer *why* suffering happens in this world we have to go farther back, beyond 586 BCE, to the creation of the world.

Why is there suffering in the world?

Why would God create a world in which there is so much suffering and hardship? It seems cruel. Of course, God did not. God looked at all that he had created and “he saw that it was *very good*.” One of those good things he did was grant us *free will*. The freedom to love him, which meant also the freedom to disobey him. And so...

The world is broken

Gen. 3:6 *When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.*

Think about the rest of Gen. 3 – God *curses* the serpent and the woman and the man. That whole **“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing” and “yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you”** was a curse. It wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. Yes, woman and man were created for each other and to be in a relationship together, but in harmony, love, mutual desire. Or when God tells man, **“cursed is the ground because of you ... 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” and never forget, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”** It’s a curse. This world was supposed to yield its fruit.

We live in a **broken world**. That is why we suffer, that is why some pregnancies never result in healthy births, children die of blood infections, and evil people manipulate the world to their own gain and the destruction of others.

But why do *we* suffer?

You heard the Gospel, if we but have faith! And we have all heard some preachers say that, if we are Christians, following Christ and loving God, we will never suffer. Rather we will flourish with health and wealth!

But we do, all of us, we suffer and those around us suffer as well the faithful and the atheist alike (and so too do many prosper, faithful and atheist alike).

Eccl. 9:1 Everything that confronts them 2 is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice.

Why do *we* suffer?

Scripture teaches us that there are three reasons why we might suffer hardship and loss. It could be that it is sent from God as punishment or the world attacking us for our faith. And it could be...well, we suffer simply because we live in a broken world. Looking quickly at each of these, beginning with punishment.

Sin: Certainly the Bible does teach us that there are consequences for our sins.

Deut 28:15 But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you...

This is the covenant that God made with his people Israel. This is what Jeremiah warns King Zedekiah as Nebuchadnezzar approaches: Judah has sinned and so the Babylonians attack as the hand of God's judgment. The poets of Lamentation acknowledge this, but still ask God, how could it be?

1:5 Her foes have become the masters, her enemies prosper, because the LORD has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions;

So while the poet insists that the active hand of Jerusalem's destruction is the Lord's, he also states that this was not how God intended to treat his people. In chapter 3, just beyond the portion we sang together, the poet says,

*Lam. 3: 31 For the Lord will not
reject forever.*

32 *Although he causes grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;*

33 *for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve anyone.*

There we have what would seem to be a clear-cut argument: we sin and we suffer as God punishes us. But it is not God's plan for us to suffer, **he does not willingly afflict us**, but we *sometimes bring it upon ourselves*.

Persecution: But is "suffering God's plan for us" as I have read in several theologies? Well, yes and no.

Phil. 1:29 "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well."

Rom. 5:3 "...we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance..."

It is vital to note that this sort of suffering comes from our commitment to Christ. What Paul and Jesus are talking about is when we are persecuted because of our faith. For most of us in the West that rarely happens. Our Syrian and Sudanese brothers and sisters, however, live with this every day. It is possible, and I want to encourage you if this is your situation, that in spite of all our comforts and securities in the US that you have felt persecuted and have suffered for your faith. Perhaps you have lost a job or had a boyfriend or girlfriend dump you because you would not compromise your faith. I commend you for that and do not want to minimize the impact that can have on our lives.

In the first century though, Paul is writing from JAIL to others who might be jailed or killed for believing in Christ. And today thousands continue to risk and give their lives rather than compromise their faith. THEY ARE SUFFERING FOR AND WITH CHRIST.

Unmerited suffering: But when your child dies or your mother is diagnosed with cancer, we should not say that *this* “suffering is God’s will for us.” This is suffering that comes because we live in a broken world.

This sort of unmerited suffering, where there can be no direct line drawn from a particular sin leading to a specific punishment, is due to the global impact of sin on the world. This is the sort of suffering that I think poses the greatest challenge to our faith because it feels so inexplicable and it is so pervasive and we feel so helpless.

So it could be that we have sinned. It could be that we are being persecuted because of our faith. Or it could just be...

Consider Job. Not the introduction with God allowing Satan to test Job, remember, Job knows NOTHING about that. Think about God’s response to Job: I am God, you are not. **Job never knew why.**

We want answers. It is in our nature. But so often we do not know the whys or the purpose. When it *is clear* it can help us to understand how to move forward, reflection, confession, is important and necessary. But we need to be careful that we do not allow ourselves to get trapped in a vicious cycle, to go down a dark corridor trying to find what we did “to deserve this.” Don’t fall into that pious trap. Some things we simply won’t know.

What is our response?

We may try and find some pattern or purpose in our suffering as a means of alleviating our pain, but that is not the normal order. I am not suggesting that God may not or could not intervene or guide history even with regard to suffering; clearly I believe he did most emphatically with the sending of his Son to suffer and die for us. But day in and day out the world turns, people get sick, they suffer, they die, we mourn and it happens to all the same.

We do a great injustice to God’s grace and mercy when we try to explain Mack’s death or your sister’s cancer as part of some grand manipulative plan. As we make our way outside of the Garden’s Gates, the presence of God is found not in the infliction of our suffering, but in the grace and peace to bear it.

The biblical view of the world is that it is broken and full of suffering and pain. Vanity, all is vanity! But that is not the totality of the biblical world-view. Because when God expelled humanity from the Garden he did not abandon us. He stepped in, time and again, God stepped in. So we find in Scripture words of encouragement and hope as well as models for bearing up under the weight of this world, even while *we wait expectantly for the world to come.*

I know Father Travis and David Madiera have been taking you all through a study of the Psalms. A few weeks ago Fr. Travis encouraged us to recognize that the psalms grow out of real life events and he also encouraged us to “pray the psalms.” I would add only that we should also make our own psalms.

Most who study the psalms are surprised to find that more than a third of the psalms are what we call psalms of lament. Like the Book of Lamentations, these psalms are astonishingly forthright

and even (seemingly) offensive. These psalms not only offer us models for when we are struggling and in pain they give us permission to talk back to God in our grief and pain. When the doctors of the ER decided that Mack needed to be sent to a hospital with greater facilities, they flew him in the Life Lion helicopter to Penn State Hershey Medical Center, a two-hour drive away. Elizabeth and I arrived sometime after midnight. The chaplain met us and took us to a “quiet room.” I had done my “clinical pastoral education” and I knew what that meant. We waited for the doctor to come and officially tell us that Mack had not made it, he had died on the helicopter. At that moment and over the next few hours, unbidden to my mind came the opening words of Psalm 22. I actually never said it aloud, though I wanted to scream them, because I didn’t want the minister to think I was “overly dramatic” or some such silly notion. How can we be over dramatic about our child’s death? But consider the words.

- 1 *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*
 Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- 2 *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;*
 and by night, but find no rest.
- 3 *Yet you are holy,*
 enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- 4 *In you our ancestors trusted;*
 they trusted, and you delivered them.
- 5 *To you they cried, and were saved;*
 in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Again, I want to point out that one of the most powerful things the psalms provide for us is the permission to be honest with God, to speak openly of our grief and pain. It is surprising how often I have heard and read of Christians advising other Christians that we are to “suffer in silence” all that God sends upon us. Certainly the psalmist did not!

When you look at the psalms of lament you find that they all have the same elements: an Address or Cry to God; the Lament/Complaint; Confession of trust; Invocation to God – do this!; Vow or Praise of God.

This is not just a literary device; it is a *healthy* model for own journey through grief. Cry to God, Lament, Confess our faith, call God to action, and praise God.

So our response to hardship and grief does not need to be pious silence, but outrage and anger are acceptable! God is big enough; he can handle our frustration and bitterness. Most importantly of all, God wants us to be honest with him, he wants all of us including our pain, and he wants to be *present with us* in our suffering.

Returning again to the Book of Lamentations. If Christians know Lamentations at all, as I suggested earlier, it is chapter 3 with its wonderfully affirming and uplifting central verses:

- Lam. 3:21** *But this I call to mind,*
 and therefore I have hope:
- 22 *The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,*
 his mercies never come to an end;
 - 23 *they are new every morning;*
 great is your faithfulness.

24 *“The LORD is my portion,” says my soul,
 “therefore I will hope in him.”*

But before you get to THAT you go through chapters 1 and 2!

Lam. 2:22 *You invited my enemies from all around
 as if for a day of festival;
 and on the day of the anger of the LORD
 no one escaped or survived;
 those whom I bore and reared
 my enemy has destroyed.*

There are some commentators who have suggested that the harsh language of Lamentations, calling God so directly to account for the tragedy that has befallen them, is evidence of a growing atheism, a disbelief in God. No! Far from it! They affirm God’s presence even in the midst of their suffering. I cannot think of a more **faithful** statement than this.

This is the faith that Jesus calls us to, to walk with him and allow him to walk with us through this broken and hurting world. The disciples wanted signs and wonders; Jesus counters, if that is what we needed then we *could* toss this tree into the sea. The faith we need, the faith Jesus calls us to is to serve God, to give our lives for *his* Kingdom even as he gave his life for us. **We serve God even in our grief, even as God saves us from our sorrows.**

The Lutheran pastor the Rev. Dr. Luke Bouman makes this point beautifully. “The journey of grief [is] never easy. But it [is] **faithful**. That is, it [is] full of faith. It [is] full of trust in the one who has known grief and death himself.”

In a moment we will affirm our faith: that God created a perfect world to be in perfect union with us, that in spite of our sin that brought pain and death into this world, his perfect Son came to die for us and in so doing has brought an end to death, and that we too shall be raised to eternal life in Him. *This* is the Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Christ.**

II. In the in-between

Proper 23 (28) (October 9, 2016)

First reading and Psalm

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

Psalm 66:1-12

Second reading

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Gospel

Luke 17:11-19

It is tempting to preach from the Epistle for today, but as a textual scholar, someone who studies the biblical text and its interpretation, Paul's injunction "warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening" (2 Tim. 2:14) hits a little too close to home. So, I will pass this by and we will consider this morning the Lord's admonition to the Jews living in exile and what it means to be made clean as we walk through this world.

Last week we read from Lamentations, those five powerful poems of grief about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. In faith, the poets challenged God, confessed their sin, and implored God to grant them mercy and grace.

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah is writing to those Jews who had been taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Babylonians. Before we get too far, however, I want to provide some further context. In fact, I want to go all the way back to when Israel first settled Canaan.

When Israel finally came into the Promised Land they were not supposed to have a king, they were to obey Law of the Lord and when a leader was needed, God would raise up prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15). That didn't work out very well and so it wasn't long before they demanded of the prophet Samuel that they should be given a king "like all the other nations." Although Samuel tried to convince them that this wasn't a good idea, pointing out that a king would take their strongest sons for war and their most beautiful daughters for brides, not to mention taxes, which Samuel *did* mention, the Israelites insisted and Saul was anointed king.

Saul's reign brought stability to Israel, yet he himself was decidedly unstable. God told Samuel he would take the kingdom from him and give it to "a man after his own heart." David was anointed king and God promised that a son of David should always sit upon the throne of Israel. David was a great military strategist and he expanded the borders of Israel and brought further stability. His son Solomon was a lover not a fighter, but he used that to his advantage, expanding the domain of Israel to its greatest limits through marriages and alliances. Unfortunately, his son Rehoboam did not learn the lessons of his father and grandfather and so lost the kingdom when the ten northern tribes rebelled, as they were wont to do. They formed the northern kingdom of

Israel and left Rehoboam and his descendants to rule over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the kingdom of Judah.

Perhaps 120 years. That is the entire length of time that Israel was a unified kingdom. That is all. The kings of the north were not descendants of David and in general were not committed to following the Lord and his Law. The truth is, the kings of the south, of Judah, were not much better. In 722 BCE the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria and while their elite were exiled, the Assyrians put in their place those they had conquered in other regions.

2Kings 17:24 *The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them **in the cities of Samaria** in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities.*

So this is the ancient origins (backed by modern genetic research) of the Samaritans. They were the Israelites who were *not* deported, who mingled with those from the regions of Babylon and Cuthah. The Samaritans that Jesus encountered and those living in Israel today, believed *they* were/are the truest followers of the Law of the Lord, but they believed the Temple was built on Mount Gerizim and not in Jerusalem.

Of course a century and a half after Israel was conquered, the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem and while they did not **import** prisoners from other lands to Judah, they did take the leaders, princes, and priests into exile in Babylon. And by the rivers of Babylon they laid down and wept.

The prophet Jeremiah is an amazing figure. He lived and preached throughout the buildup of the Babylonian empire against Judah and “until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month” (Jer. 1:3). He encouraged the good King Josiah to call Israel back to the Law and helped to lead the reforms of Josiah that promulgated the Law and saw places of idol worship torn down. And when Josiah died, Jeremiah continued to call the kings and people of Judah to repent of their sins and accept God’s punishment of being vassals, servants of Nebuchadnezzar.

This is what was so hard about hearing the prophecies of Jeremiah. Not only did he tell them that they were neglecting God’s Law that said they should, for example, forgive debts (the real, actual, financial debts) and release their slaves and servants every 50 years (7x7, Lev. 25), but that they should *accept* Babylonian rule over them. Their understanding of what it meant to follow God’s Law and be obedient to God’s rule was so warped that **they confused political pride and patriotism with faithfulness**.

Consider this exchange between Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah. Babylon had already laid siege to Jerusalem once, in 597 BCE. The city wasn’t destroyed, but the Temple treasures were taken, King Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) was deposed, and Nebuchadnezzar took 10,000 people captive to Babylon, including the prophet Ezekiel.

Jer. 28:1 *... the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon, spoke to [Jeremiah] in the house of the LORD, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, 2 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. 3 Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD’S house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. 4 I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles*

from Judah who went to Babylon, says the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.”

Jer. 28:5 *Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD; 6 and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles. 7 But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. 8 The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. 9 As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”*

Dueling prophets, you can almost hear the banjos now! But imagine if you were one of those priests or people listening to them. Would you prefer Hananiah’s prophecy or Jeremiah’s? After all, Hananiah seems to be the one with more faith in the LORD. He is saying that the LORD our God is strong enough to destroy the hold of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah is saying, NO this is God’s punishment and we must accept it and repent. Only when we return to God, will He restore our fortunes.

I cannot tell you that I would side with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah *was* inspired by God and was correct. In today’s reading, just one chapter after that exchange between Hananiah and Jeremiah, we find God’s message to this community living in exile: settle down.

Settle down. That is literally God’s message to his people.

5 *Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

The passage goes on with the LORD warning Judah not to listen to the prophets who are telling them to rise up and fight back against Babylon. Instead, they are to pray to the LORD on behalf of the city in which they are exiled! So much for the resistance movement!

So, nice history lesson Dr. Brady. But you are in a pulpit and you are supposed to preach the Gospel. Yes, indeed. And “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (1 Tim. 3:16, next week’s epistle, coincidentally).

Where do we find ourselves today? In exile.

No, we have not been besieged, plundered, and forced to live in a foreign land. But rather humanity has sinned and so we, all humanity, have *created a foreign land*, one in which we all, daily endure various hardships of physical and mental illness, financial inequality, war, and disease. This creation, not as God created, but as it exists now, is our Babylon. And God’s message remains the same. We are to settle down and “seek the welfare of the city (this world) where I have sent you into exile.”

As God's people we recognize that we are not yet where we will be. The Lord promised Judah that he would restore them and rebuild Jerusalem, after a "Jubilee" time. Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BCE and while it would take decades, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

We know as well that God will restore us and all his creation, establishing a new heaven and a new earth. This

Rev. 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."

Our exile will end and this time it won't end with a long 1,000-mile trek followed by the hard political and physical work of rebuilding a city. No, it will be the end of *all* suffering, death itself will no longer hold us and we will be raised, as Paul says, "in a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44).

In the meantime, we are to take care of that which he has entrusted to us, we are to pray and seek God's blessing on this world and all who live in it, because in its welfare we will find our welfare. We cannot simply ignore the needs of nature and ourselves, thinking "well all of this will pass away anyway." No! God tells us to settle down, build homes and families, build communities, and pray for the welfare of all. **We will be here for a while, so we must serve God in this time and place.**

Even as Judah was in exile God continued to speak to his people, just as he speaks to us today. Remember, I mentioned that the prophet Ezekiel had been sent into exile with that first wave of deportations. While he was living there "among the exiles by the river Chebar" God sent him that famous vision of the *merkava*, the throne-chariot of God.

Ezek. 1:4 As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber. 5 In the middle of it was something like four living creatures.

This amazing passage goes on and describes the throne of God, accompanied by his four angels with their four faces and four wings and each on a corner with their wheels within wheels. And **12** "Each moved straight ahead; **wherever the spirit would go, they went.**"

Groovy right? But what does it mean? What is God's vision for his people living in exile? It is that God is not contained in Judah or Jerusalem or the Temple. **God is with his people in exile.** People in antiquity tended to view their gods as connected to their homeland, to their special place. So when you migrated you might take some devotion to your god with you, but once in Babylon or Egypt you worshipped their gods because you were now on their domain. And the

wars of humans reflected the wars of the gods. The destruction of Jerusalem, the burning and desecration of the Temple, the very footstool of God, was evidence that Marduk, the great god of Babylon had beaten not just Judah, but their God Yahweh as well!

No! Jeremiah and Ezekiel tell us not only that Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar are mere agents of God's punishment of his wayward people, but that the LORD their God remains with them, even in their rebellion, even in exile.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are all living in exile. And yet **God remains with us, working in our lives.**

The Samaritan in today's Gospel offers us yet another example of how to live in this in-between time as we walk between two worlds. The lepers, from a distance, call out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Luke tells us that Jesus tells them – not "you are healed" or "be well" – "Go and show yourselves to the priests." This is what the Law requires. *Once you have been healed* you are to go to the priest (Lev. 14) to have him confirm that you are indeed clean and healed and offer the appropriate sacrifices and rituals. Luke tells us that, even though Jesus did not tell them that they were or would be healed, nevertheless, "as they went, they were **made clean.**"

The Samaritan realizes *as he is walking to the priests* that he has been healed and returns to Jesus praising God.

I cannot tell you for sure why the others did not come back and praise God. I suspect it is because they didn't realize that it had happened. How many other rabbis might have told them "get the priest to look at it" in hopes that this time the disease might have subsided? It is impossible to know. But as he walked along the way, the Samaritan *did* look and he *did* notice that he had been healed and he gave glory to God for his healing.

We live in exile moving ever towards that return and restoration that God has promised us in Christ Jesus. But as we walk along this difficult, dark path do we notice the healing that God has *already* provided us in our lives? Consider where you are today and it may not be the best day you have ever had. You may be hurting, you may be sad, you may feel that you are at your lowest point ever, but the cleansing and healing of Jesus's work in your life has already begun. Bring all your burdens to Christ in prayer, but take note as well of your blessings and give thanks.

The Judean exiles were no doubt bitter, angry, and deeply grieved. Their lives had been destroyed and yet God tells them to be at peace, to trust in him and his plan, and to **continue to live**. This message remains true for us today.

We are in exile...but only for a time.

We are to pray and work for the welfare of this world even as we wait expectantly for the world to come.

And as we continue to walk "between two worlds," we are to look, receive, and be grateful for God's healing.

2 Tim. 2:11 *"The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 2:12 if we endure, we will also reign with him."* Amen. ✠

III. What is Scripture good for?

Proper 24 (29) (October 16, 2016)

First reading and Psalm

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Psalm 119:97-104

Second reading

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Gospel

Luke 18:1-8

This week the parish search committee has rolled out the Parish Survey. At the announcements Father Travis and I will say a bit more about the survey and its importance for the process of selecting a new rector. Reading this survey this past week I was struck by one question in particular and its relationship to our readings this morning.

On this part of the survey you are to choose a response to the given statement on a scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Survey question 31 reads, “Scripture is the literal Word of God, without error, not only in matters of faith, but also in historical, geographical, and other secular matters.” As someone who has helped to create and administrate a number of surveys like this my first thought was, “what a terribly worded question.” Terribly worded because it left no room to truly discover the breadth of responses that this community might have. In spite of the sliding scale from strongly agree to disagree, there is no opportunity to capture the complexity of this issue. For example, one might strongly agree that Scripture is the Word of God and without error in terms of matters of faith, but might be neutral to disagree that it is “without error” with regards to “geographical and other secular matters.” And in all of this one needs to define one’s terms such as “literal,” “error,” and “matters of faith.” And, of course, this brought to mind our epistle for today.

“All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

When considering the role of Scripture, there are two extremes that we can fall into if we are not careful. On the one hand, we can slip into a kind of idolatry, setting up the text of the Bible (and in some cases a particular translation) as something to be worshipped itself. Indeed, there are some who, coming to an Episcopal or RC service for the first time and seeing the procession of the Gospel might feel that this is indeed idolatrous behavior as we stand and bow as the Gospel goes by. Our churches, however, rarely fall into this trap, rather it is more often the very conservative churches that seem elevate the text to a status of worship. The KJV only movement, whose slogan is “1611 Straight From Heaven!” It is not intentional, of course, but the effect is such that the concern is so focused upon the *reliability* of the biblical text that the message can easily be lost.

On the other hand, many churches move right to the other extreme, declaring that the collection of texts in the Bible are nothing more than human insights, by faithful people, to be sure, but

bound by their cultural and historical prejudices. This usually goes hand in hand with the assumption that we know “better” now. We have a broader and more enlightened perspective on the world and our historical knowledge, scientific advances, and personal experiences are more valid than the perspectives of a group of men from 2,000 plus years ago. This is where many in the Episcopal Church can be found, in fact, most so-called “main-line” churches in the United States take such a position. One of the primary difficulties of this position is that it leaves completely open and variable what should be considered authoritative and formative for the Christian community. The result is often a distillation down to simple and universal platitudes such as “God is love” and “who are we to judge others,” ignoring completely the context within which these statements should be understood.

Most of the debates found in western Christianity today, from the ordination of women to same-sex relationships to social and political views come down to this divide between those who see the Bible as without error “not only in matters of faith, but also in historical, geographical, and other secular matters” and those who view it as a helpful, but flawed guide. The fundamental question which underlies all of those debates is what *is* the standard upon which our church teachings and doctrines should be established.

So what lies in between? Well, first I should acknowledge it can feel as if it is a bit of a circular argument whenever we have this sort of discussion because we are asking the Bible itself to tell us what it is. Yet that is what is necessary. Good interpretation of *any* text of any kind requires the first step of considering what the texts purports to be. To take a modern example, when reading on the internet it is very important to consider whether a story comes from The Onion or The New York Times. (For those unfamiliar, The Onion is a satirical news site and The New York Times is an established newspaper of long standing.) Both should be read as intended, the former for humor and the latter for news, information, and opinion. Of course it is not always easy to determine what the intent is, but asking this question is imperative and of the first order. The Bible presents itself clearly as conveying God’s messages to his people Israel and the world. To be sure, it does this through a variety of genres, poetry, historical and legal texts, and so on. It is clear, however, that these are not just random, interesting texts collected for the sake of posterity, rather the community of faith believed them to be given by God through the authors and traditions to guide, teach, and encourage us.

This is stated explicitly in the epistle for today, “all scripture γραφή [written document] is God-breathed.” The written text was produced, Paul says, by God working in and through the human authors and “is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” So while we should not elevate the text to an object of worship, neither are we free to set it aside, assuming it is just another human-created product.

You know I am fond of referring to Ecclesiastes. Well the Teacher said there is “nothing new under the sun” (1:9) and it is true for these debates about Scripture as well. The reason Paul is writing to Timothy about these matters is because, just as today, there were those in the first century who were asserting that Scripture, which for them was what we now call the Old Testament, was not relevant or necessary for Christians.

2 Tim. 4:3 *For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.*

Paul is saying that it is *imperative* that we know and understand Scripture so that we are ready and able to respond to those who teach “comfortable truths,” that is not truth at all, but simply those things that we would prefer to hear. We might be more comfortable with a priest or pastor who tells us we don’t have to change the way we live our lives or that we don’t need to give our lives over to Jesus. “Just love and be loving, that’s all you need.” But Scripture tells us that we all must. Whether we are talking about jealousy, greed, lust, or simple apathy, the Bible tells us that we all need to repent and be transformed. Furthermore, Scripture – in fact, the very verse that precedes our reading today – tells us that our “salvation [comes] through faith in Christ Jesus” who “is to judge the living and the dead.”

For many today this is not an inclusive message, this is too hard a saying, and so they soften and interpret away such passages. Paul is telling us that we have to stand firm against such teachings. It is important to remember, however, that none of this means that we are called to be closed minded or bigoted. Far from it! We *are* to love and be loving, but we do so because Christ first loved us and gave himself a sacrifice for us. And how do we know this? Because this is the testimony of Scripture and the example of Christ himself.

We are talking about Scripture, the Bible that was written and collected by humans *through* the guidance and direction of God. But when I am asked what is “the Word of God,” I tend to refer to the opening words of John’s Gospel. They help to remind us that we have to be careful about how literally we understand the term “word.”

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John is harkening back to the very first chapter of Scripture, Gen. 1. The world was created by *fiat*, God’s command, he spoke and it was so. It was the Word of God that literally created the world. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The Gospel declares that the “Word” of God is not simply those words or documents (γράφη) written down in Scripture or even the spoken word of the prophets of God.

It is Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made flesh.

This is the New Covenant that Jeremiah declared in today’s reading and this is God’s provision for us and all humanity. That God should send his only son to live and die for us. We preserve and pass down the message of the Word of God, just as it was passed to Timothy just as we will do in baptism later this morning. As Paul wrote,

2 Tim. 3:14 *But as for you [Timothy], continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

This is why we continue to preserve, study, and proclaim the message of the Word of God. This is why we baptize Mabel and Hank (**VERIFY**) into the household of faith, that from their

childhood onward, they may know the sacred writings that instruct them for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Amen. ✠

IV. Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Lost

[Proper 26 \(31\) \(October 30, 2016\)](#)

First reading and Psalm

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalm 119:137-144

Second reading

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Gospel

Luke 19:1-10

Most of us, at least of a certain age, remember Zacchaeus from the flannel graphs and songs of Sunday School. “Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see!” This is unfortunate because there is more to Zacchaeus than his diminutive stature.

When we first approach the story, which is unique to Luke’s Gospel, it appears to be a simple account of yet another person eager to see and hear Jesus, this man of miracles that everyone is talking about. Jesus extends what one commentator refers to as “great hospitality” to Zacchaeus by inviting *himself* to Z’s house for the evening. (I think that usually works the other way around.) And Zacchaeus “was happy to welcome him.” If we really know our Bible stories we might also remember that Zacchaeus was moved to give away his money, but exactly why likely escapes our memory.

Before we look more closely at Luke 19 I want to remind us of the larger context in Luke’s Gospel. This story is in the midst of a series incidents and parables that focus upon who is to be considered righteous or not and how one can achieve the Kingdom of Heaven. The penitent tax collector is justified because he humbled himself and acknowledged his sins, whereas the pious Pharisee was not (Luke 18:13-14), and the rich man is less likely to enter heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Then, as he is going through Jericho Jesus heals a blind man who acknowledged him as the Son of David and then he invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house for the evening.

We are told that Zacchaeus was not just a tax collector, he was *chief* tax collector of Jericho and he was rich. Now you probably also remember from your Sunday School class that the Romans, like the Greek rulers before them, employed local people to be tax collectors, that means Zacchaeus was himself a Jew, not a Roman, and that the empire simply required that the tax collector give them a certain sum. Anything they collected beyond that amount was theirs to keep; that was their salary. So the fact that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector and very rich meant that his wealth came directly from the purses of other Jews in the region. And you think you don’t like the IRS!

But unlike the blind man who cried out to Jesus and wouldn't let others silence him until the Son of David heard his cry and had mercy on him, Zach was just a bit curious. He was just "trying to see who Jesus was." That's all. After all, it was no doubt a spectacle. People pushing and shoving, shouting, calling out "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Who wouldn't be curious? If you have ever been to a parade you know the challenge, even taller folks like myself can have a difficult time catching a glimpse of the main attraction. So Zach seeks out that now famous sycamore tree.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

The story doesn't tell us a lot, in fact, it doesn't tell us very much at all including the things I would most like to know. So we have no idea what Zacchaeus expected to see in this man, we do not know what his life had been like up until this point, if he had been religiously active even while a tax collector or anything like that. We are simply told that he was curious.

How many of you first walked into a church because you were curious? I was raised going to church, two services and Sunday school every Sunday! And the church was at least a 20-minute drive from our house and we listened to J. Vernon Magee preach on the drive in. But I imagine many of you did not, but one day found yourself sitting in a pew or listening to a preacher on the radio and decided to stick around, just out of curiosity.

And Jesus met you there and invited himself into your life.

It doesn't matter what our expectations are, if we are honestly curious and open to finding out "who Jesus is" then he will see us, no matter what tree, shrub, or hole we have put ourselves in, and he will tell us that he is coming to stay with us.

The response is up to us. "Oh, no! I was just curious whose robe you are wearing. That is a lovely shade of beige. No please, walk on by." We could push back, rejecting his invitation, insisting to ourselves that it was nothing, just a youthful indiscretion of interest. Or we can follow the model of Zacchaeus.

So [Zacchaeus] hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

Zacchaeus responded immediately and welcomed Jesus into his life. **He was curious, but now he was convicted.** Jesus had known he was there, interested in who the Son of David was, and reached out to Zacchaeus and said, "I want to be a part of your life."

At this point most skip verse 7 and immediately go to the next verse and the impact Jesus had on his life. "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'" But it misses an important bit of information and one that, frankly, Luke barely provides. *Why is it* that Zach suddenly decides to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay any (if) he has defrauded? In other Gospel stories there is a discussion of "go and sell all that you have and give to the poor in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven," but that is not what we have here. He seems to simply announce that he will give half of all his money away. Why? Verse 7 offers a brief discussion amongst the crowd, "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of *one who is a sinner*.'" I believe there are **two factors** that led Zacchaeus to suddenly give up his wealth.

The first was the realization that Jesus genuinely cared who he was and wanted to be with him, to get to know him more by staying with him. The second was Zacchaeus' realization of how others saw him. They viewed him as a sinner, an outcast, one who was a Jew and should have known and obeyed the Law, but did not.

Zacchaeus had been curious, but Jesus was serious about building a relationship. If Jesus could be that committed to Zacchaeus then Zacchaeus would follow Jesus' teachings. The people were right, he *was* a sinner, he had not taken seriously the Law's teachings that he should provide for those less fortunate, "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in your midst." And so he responded by declaring that he would fundamentally and materially change his life.

It is one thing to hang out with Jesus, it is another altogether to be transformed.

I could easily make this into a sermon about the importance of sharing our wealth with those in need and supporting the ministry of the church. And if you are convicted in that way then you will be particularly interested in this week's newsletter where I address our \$164,000 shortfall in St. B's budget! But this is not about money so much as it is about *who we are and who Jesus calls us to be*.

Zacchaeus' identity was as the chief tax collector of Jericho. He was a small man with huge wealth. He was most likely shunned by the community, perhaps even as a child due to his diminutive stature, but certainly because he was the one to whom they had to pay taxes. They *knew* that every nice piece of clothing, every luxurious meal, and every stone of his beautiful house were paid for with *their* money. What Luke does not make explicit but is implicit in the entire episode and throughout this section of his Gospel is that these desires of his heart and sources of his pride were standing between himself and the Kingdom of Heaven. He might be curious about Jesus, but he would never really know him until he was willing to give up what he considered to be his core identity, his wealth.

Jesus responds to Zacchaeus' declaration and the crowd's rumbling by stating,

9 *"Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that salvation came because he has given up all his wealth, but "because he too is *a son of Abraham*." Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham, a child of the covenant, and his declaration is not so much that he would be poor, no doubt he would still have plenty of money left over, but that he would live into that promise of his circumcision by keeping the Law, caring for the poor and the needy and loving the Lord with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. Today we will welcome into our household of faith another child of the new covenant as we baptize Walter Gabriel Stevens. Many of us have also been baptized and all of us are called through the rite of baptism and the recitation of the Nicene Creed to affirm again *our faith* and our commitment to be children of the covenant. Are we living into the heritage of our faith? Are we giving up of ourselves so that Christ might live through us?

Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home, his life, and in so doing returned to his true family and his true calling. What began as curiosity moved into transformation.

But that is where our Gospel leaves Zacchaeus, we hear no more about him. You might well have been baptized as an infant and confirmed as a teen or, like me, both of the above *and* received into the Anglican church at an even older age. From our perspective we might look at this story

and say, “Yeah, of course! He just met Jesus! He was full of energy and gratitude. But where was he the following week, month, a decade later?”

Perseverance is the true cost of faith. How are you holding up years into your walk with Christ? Do you even notice his presence in your life anymore? It can (it IS) hard to keep our focus upon the Kingdom of Heaven when we have very real, earthly duties to attend to in this life. Or when difficult and trying times come, it can feel easier to set aside those ideal principles and just try and get on with life. But the truth of the Gospel is that when we persevere in our faith, Christ remains with us and more active than ever...if we are willing to acknowledge his presence and receive his grace.

This is why Paul writes to the Thessalonians to encourage them, telling them how proud he is of their strength and commitment. Because he knows it can be hard to persevere.

*1:4 Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.... 11 To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call **and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith**, 1:12 so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

It is understandable to become tired and discouraged and sometimes reading the Bible doesn't help. I used to look at folks like Abraham and think, “It's easy for him to get up and move his family and upend his life because God was always hanging out with him, talking to him, and encouraging him.” But then one day while reading Genesis I realized that there were whole decades when apparently Abraham didn't hear a peep from the Almighty. Yet he still continued to live and act according to the promises God had given him. Even though I am sure some days were harder than others and sometimes he wandered rather than walked purposefully.

And that is why the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.

Zacchaeus was a son of Abraham, but he had lost his way. Many of us can say the same. Perhaps you came to church out of habit or because you are simply curious. Regardless of the reasons, regardless of whether you feel lost, found, or just tired, Jesus continues to seek us out *wherever we are* and to invite himself into our lives. Will you be happy to welcome him?

Ps. 34:8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; for happy are those who take refuge in him.

Amen. ☩

V. Remembering *all* the Saints

All Saints Day

First reading and Psalm

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18 and Psalm 149

Second reading

Ephesians 1:11-23

Gospel

Luke 6:20-31

You will have noticed on your (new, slim-line) bulletins that today we celebrate All Saints Day. Of course Tuesday was technically All Saints Day but in the church calendar we move festival and saint's days to the Sunday following. So today we not only have our readings from Daniel, Ephesians, and the Beatitudes, but this evening we will have a very special Evensong service at 4:30.

If you are like me, and I know many of you have similar church backgrounds, when you started attending an Episcopal church the idea of celebrating specific saints may have struck you as idolatry. In Protestantism we do not have a system of canonization whereby the church deems some Christians extra special, having attributed miracles to them after their deaths. But we do acknowledge that we are *all* saints, by the fact that we have been *sanctified*, made holy by Jesus our savior. So it is not so much that there is a problem with how we view St. Bartholomew or St. Paul, rather we need to recognize as well *all* the saints. But does that diminish what or who we consider a saint to be?

Shortly before I received the call from Bishop Bauerschmidt that led to my joining St. B's, I had been listening to the new album by Kerosene Halo, the duo venture of Michael Roe and Derri Daugherty. One song struck me particularly, *The Ghost of Johnny Cash*. (Doing a bit of online research I found that it was written by Phil Madeira.) Like many, perhaps even most in this sanctuary, I am a big fan of Johnny, not just his music but how he lived his life. Which is not to say that he was a particularly holy man. Quite the opposite, it is the fact that he was very real, open, and honest about his failings, his need for forgiveness and grace in his life. In this song which Phil wrote while going through a difficult time in his own life, the lyrics speak to a truth that many might share.

Some sinners need their saints to be
Survivors of the fall
'Cause when you're down here on your knees
Most angels look too tall

So I'll just live this life out
Dust to dust and ash to ash
With my guide from the other side
The ghost of Johnny Cash

I have often commented that the reason I like the Old Testament so much is that I can relate to the people and the stories found there. When I read the Gospels I find our savior, yes, but he is holy and without sin. That isn't me. And Paul provides us with the teachings of the New Covenant, enabling us to understand why the crucifixion wasn't simply capital punishment, but was instead the salvation of the world. But in the Old Testament I find Ruth, an outcast and an immigrant through whom God sent to Israel King David and ultimately Jesus. And David himself was a man flawed and broken, very flawed and very broken. Still, when he repented God had mercy on him. Then there was Nehemiah essentially an administrator and bureaucrat who encountered all sorts of political infighting and challenges while trying to rebuild Jerusalem. I am not a woman or a king or a Persian governor, but in their stories I find struggles and hardships to which I can relate. In Johnny's life too.

These are the saints we remember today. We remember *all* those who have gone before us in the journey of this life, seeking to walk with God in this world and often failing.

So what do today's readings have to do with All Saints Day? Why not stories of healings, miracles, and faithfulness? Because today we are reminded of the destination of our journey, we are assured that although kingdoms rise and fall, elections come and go, "the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever-forever and ever" (Dan. 7:18).

Paul reassures us, encourages, and promises us of the "glorious inheritance among the saints" that God has prepared for us. The sign, the evidence of his promises from Daniel to Paul is that *1:20 God put this power to work in Christ **when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.***

And we too, as often as we have been broken and rebuilt, will also be raised from the dead to join in that heavenly kingdom. This is the inheritance of the saints.

But while Daniel and Paul speak about the fulfillment of God's promises, Jesus also addresses of the realities of this world. I admit that I was surprised when I realized that the Gospel for All Saints Day is the Beatitudes. We hear them so often they have become banal, so commonplace as to seem like nothing more than a trite phrase. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Yeah, yeah. Cold comfort to those who *are* weeping now.

But Jesus isn't offering cold comfort. He is addressing the realities of this world, the struggles of poverty and abuse, war and domination, sickness and death. But he is also reminding us of a future, **the future** when we will not be hungry for food or justice or peace. Our "reward is great in heaven" even if on earth it is nothing but rejection and suffering.

This is the challenge of our faith and the encouragement of the saints. We live every day, every moment with the tensions that exist between the promises of God, the fulfillment of which began with the resurrection of Christ, and the reality within which we live and move and have our being. We live in this tension every day and so did Ruth and Esther, Rueben and Jonathan, Daniel and Paul, Johnny and Phil, Chris and Elizabeth, Steve and Tanya, you and me.

Chapter 6 of Luke's Gospel depicts Jesus and his disciplines gleaning from the fields, Jesus teaching and healing in the synagogue, going up into the hill country to pray, and healing all those who came to him with illnesses. Jesus was meeting their physical needs of food and health as well as their spiritual needs. Finally, we have the beatitudes, the beginning of the so-called Sermon on the Plain. (Not to be confused with the Sermon on the Plane given by the Jehovah's Witness leaving New Orleans.)

Looking around at the multitude of people who had gathered from all corners of the region, Jesus saw them in their hunger and illness, poverty and despair, and

20 *Then he looked up at his disciples and said:*

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.*

21 *"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*"Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh."*

Jesus addresses their current state and promises them that this is not all that there is. While they are in poverty now, they are royalty in the kingdom of God and all who hunger shall be sated when we sit down at the wedding feast.

Jesus encourages those of us who struggle in this world by reminding us that our true reward is to come. The struggles we have here will be replaced immeasurably with blessings in the world to come and what blessings we have in this world are nothing compared to the true wealth of a place in the kingdom of heaven.

And yet he also challenges us to make sure that we don't value what we can have NOW rather than "storing up our treasures in heaven."

6:24 *"But woe to you who are rich, **for you have received your consolation.***

6:25 "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

Those who **value** the things of this world have **already** received their reward. Jesus reminds us that the things of this world are important but fleeting.

That Jesus considered the concerns of this world important is clear because fed the crowds, healed the sick and the demon possessed, and calls us to love our enemy and give to those who are in need. And aren't these the traits we tend to think of when we consider "the saints?" Those who are patient with this world and its hurts, those who comfort the mourners, feed the poor, and love their enemy; aren't they the ones we consider saints? And rightly so, because that is what we are *all* called to do.

The true testimony of the saints is not of miracles or intervention, although I do not doubt the strength and the power of God and his Church Triumphant. No, the testimony of the saints is their perseverance. Presented with the brutal reality of this broken world, they respond by bringing healing, feeding, prayer, and the light of God's love.

When we are smacked about the head by the world, how do we respond? We can lash out with bitterness and anger, but that only serves to destroy ourselves (and those around us). Instead, we

are called to turn away the violence we receive with love and grace, the grace and love that we have been given by Christ.

Yes, the testimony of the saints is perseverance; the resurrection of Jesus is the promise of our inheritance.

So with Paul

1:17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give [us] a spirit of wisdom and revelation as [we] come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of [our] heart enlightened, [we] may know what is the hope to which he has called [us], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

Amen. ✠

VI. The Right Side of History

The previous week Donald J. Trump had been elected as President of the United States.

[Proper 28 \(33\) \(November 13, 2016\)](#)

First reading and Psalm

Isaiah 65:17-25

Ps. 98

Second reading

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Gospel

Luke 21:5-19

Karl Marx famously said, [History] “repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce.”¹ Someone else once said, tragedy is when it happens to me, farce [comedy] is when it happens to you. History is a funny thing. The word “history” doesn’t simply mean that which was occurred in the past. Technically it is from Greek ἱστορία, meaning “inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation.” That investigation of the past was usually through written documents and so we referred to time before writing as “pre-history.” So, history is what we know about particular events in a particular period of time and place through the investigation of extant sources. In the last few hundred years the creation of the disciplines of archeology, linguistics, and sociology have provided us with far more sources than just documents and helped to flesh out and complicate our view of the past. Today we have so much data one can be forgiven for thinking that “history” needs to be written at all. Simply look at the evidence for yourself. But when you start to think about it, history is still weird because we are constantly making it and, as Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, being made by it. When momentous things occur we

¹ *Der 18te Brumaire des Louis Napoleon.*

often say that we are living in “historic times.” This past Monday, people said that the next day would be an “historic election” as if other elections were not. Of course, it was an historic election since *every* presidential election is historic: once it has occurred it will be in the past and will be studied for years to come. One of the reasons to study history is so that we can better understand our present and perhaps even make some educated guesses about our future. For example, the history of the United States presidential elections tells us that while this was the most vitriolic election in our memory, it is not the most ever in US history. And that while many fear a Trump presidency and others view it as the great hope for our nation’s future, our history tells us that things are rarely as bad or as good as we think.

Of course, there is also the old saw that “it is the victors who write history” and so sometimes it is hard to really know what happened in the past. In fact, Winston Churchill understood it so well that he said, “History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.” Today we have many people seeking to understand and interpret our immediate past. It is not only the victors who are writing now. Personally, I have set that aside for the time being for two primary reasons: (1) there is too much emotion in it now, mine and others, which is why (2) history is best written from a discrete distance. And anyway, life is not lived in history, it is lived in the present.

As seems to happen so often, even though our lectionary was determined decades ago, today’s Scripture readings are directly relevant for this time in our own history. They too must be placed within their context, but what Isaiah and Jesus have in common this morning is that they call us to take a broader view of history. A view of history that is, in fact, outside of time, at least, outside of *our* time.

But let’s consider some history and the context of the words of Isaiah. The prophet is speaking to the people of Judah who had been exiled to the lands of Babylon. For decades now they had been living in Mesopotamia, fulfilling Jeremiah’s words we heard a few weeks ago, that they should settle down, build homes and families, because God was allowing the land of Israel and her people a time of enforced rest. The children of Judah, now adults, had known no life other than that of life in Mesopotamia. Jerusalem and the LORD’s temple were nothing but stories to them. And the LORD now speaks to them and declares,

65:17 I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

This is part of a larger declaration in Isaiah about the coming of Cyrus the Great who destroyed the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return to Judea to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. But Isaiah speaks not only of that immediate restoration, since the Jews now know that it is fleeting. They have learned through tragic experience that the walls of Jerusalem can be breached by a mighty army and the Temple itself can be pulled down. No, God also declares that the ultimate salvation of Israel will come at the end of all history. In that new and eternal Jerusalem God says,

*19 I will rejoice [in Jerusalem],
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.*

20 *No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;*

The message of the book of Isaiah is not an easy one to hear, it is long (66 chapters) and complicated. It opens with an accusation by God against *his* people, a “sinful nation, people laden with iniquity.” God punished his people, sent them into exile, and yet continued to work for them and with them, even through some of the most despotic people history has ever seen. Shalmaneser V, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus the Great, Darius, these were all brutal emperors and conquerors. Yet still God was present in their reigns to both punish and restore his people. It is the message also of our own exile. It is long and complicated and not easy to bear. Yet God promises us that his view of history, a view from above, not within, reveals that there will ultimately be restoration, justice, and lasting peace. But in the meantime...

Luke 21:10b “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11 there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.”

We live in a world that *should* grieve us. In fact, if there is one immutable truth that history teaches us it is that *this world* will disappoint us. Even as we live in arguably the greatest nation in history there is still hunger and homelessness, there are children and partners being abused, there is racism and sexism, bullying, greed, selfishness, and just simple wickedness. That doesn’t begin to take into account all the sorts of evils that are perpetuated in areas of the world that do *not* have our “freedoms and protections.”

In the first century, Jesus lived in a region under Roman authority and Jerusalem was run by a combination of competing Jewish interests. There were those who worked directly for the Romans collecting taxes and keeping order like Zacchaeus, there were those who were in the priesthood and controlled access to the Temple and religious life and duties, and there were the Herodian rulers who were vassals of Rome but hardly model Jews.

To offer that historical perspective again, aside from a very brief period in the second and first centuries BCE, the region around Jerusalem had not been under sole Jewish control for 600 years! This brief period of “home rule” was under the leadership of the Maccabees, who reigned for less than 100 years (140-63 BCE). (Further reason to read the Apocrypha!) In fact, it would not be until 1947 with the establishment of the modern nation of Israel that this region would again be a Jewish nation-state.

Jesus speaks of nations rising against nations, he says “you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends.” Neighbor will rise against neighbor, brother against brother, parent against child. Dare I make it obvious? Republican against Democrat. The history of humanity is the history of selfishness and greed. Why did Cain kill Abel? Do you remember?

Gen. 4:3 In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, 4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, 5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.

The Bible doesn’t tell us why God didn’t receive Cain’s sacrifice, we can guess, perhaps he hadn’t really offered the best bits of his crops, perhaps his heart wasn’t really in it. But God *did*

warn Cain. He saw that Cain was bummed that he wasn't the special, favored child and so God said,

"Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

We know the result. Cain took out his rage and disappointment with himself on his brother and the cycle of sin continued to turn. And when God asked where Abel was, Cain's smart-alecky reply "Am I my brother's keeper?" was intended to invoke the negative response. "No Cain, I don't expect you to protect your brother." Yet that is *exactly* what God expected.

"We don't make history, history makes us," said Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He is right, of course. We don't choose what era or economy we are born into, what race or gender, nation or culture. And often, very often, we don't have a choice about who the Romans and the High Priests are that rule above us. But we are able to choose how we respond to the actions of those around us. We can push back against the history that has preceded us and as we are making our own, we can choose what kind of history it is that we are making.

The human named Joshua and the people who hung out with him did not have *many* choices. They were mostly working class folks who had the burdens you would expect: working to feed their families, trying to be good people, and wondering if and praying that things would get better. They were fed up with the Romans, the Rabbis, and the Priests.

But that day they were feeling fairly proud, feeling good about their expression of devotion to God. They were admiring the beauty and craftsmanship of the Temple that was dedicated to the LORD their God. "As for these things that you see, [said Jesus] the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" (Luke 21:6).

Jesus is reminding them and us that the things that we have built, not just Temples and churches, but institutions and empires, will come and go. We need to have the longer view of history that realizes that this world is fleeting. No matter how strong, sacred, and enduring it seems to us, it will all come down and be replaced with the perfected heaven and earth. While this might be depressing to some, to think that all we have accomplished will fade away, the message is of hope and promise. Not just the fact that we and the world shall be restored, reunited with God and all the blessed saints who have gone before, but that there purpose as well to our time here, now.

Because in the meantime we are still here, still in exile, still hearing of wars and rumors of wars. The Lord told the Jews living in Babylon to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:7). We are to continue to work for the welfare of our community, even if we feel that it is a place of persecution and exile, for that is what Babylon was to the Jews.

And Jesus tells us that in this time we have much to do. These very times of trial and persecution **that we wish to avoid**, Jesus says, "*will give [us] an opportunity to testify.*" (Luke 21:13) What will we testify? How will we testify?

We are to be the witnesses to the love and justice of God through our *daily lives*. How we choose to respond to the powers around us is our testimony. Will they know we are Christians by our love? We will be living representatives of God's grace and love, his forgiveness and mercy in

this world? Will we also be willing to stand up as witnesses *against* the wickedness of this world?

The prophet Isaiah not only proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom, he also consistently challenged Israel to live up to God's Law. This was the role of the prophets that has been inherited by the church, to be the conscience of our community, to speak against injustice, to work for peace in this time, even as we declare that our ultimate peace comes only through reconciliation with Christ.

For some this past week has been a time for mourning and sadness. Others see it as a great hope for our nation. Prophet and Messiah, Isaiah and Jesus, remind us that **the Church must stand outside of government and politics**, we must stand for the eternal message and truth of the Gospel. Jesus is the savior of the world and when we accept that truth in our own lives not only are we transformed but the world is transformed through us.

Yes, there is still so much work to be done in our world and that will always be the case. But this history will end. And its end with a new creation.

Almighty Father, who gave your only Son to die for our sins and to rise for our justification: Give us grace so to put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, that we may always serve you in pureness of living and truth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen. ✠

Advent Essay 2016

For many people the two months after Halloween are anxious, waiting times before Christmas arrives. For the kids, or the kids in us, it is the building excitement of presents, food, and general silliness. For others, especially those of us whose loved ones have moved beyond this world, it can be the anxiety of going through yet another season of celebration feeling alone or adrift. That the days are shorter often only adds to our melancholy. But this time in the church calendar is not Christmas, that *starts* on December 25th, rather in December we enter the season of Advent.

You will not be surprised to learn that the term “advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*. But while many believe it means “waiting,” it actually which means “arrival.” The Latin is itself a translation of the Greek *Parousia*, which is found in the New Testament to refer to Jesus’ return, his “second coming.” For example, John encourages the early church to remain firm in the faith, saying,

1 John 2:28 *And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.*

So it is that while over the next month we will read in the Daily Offices and on Sundays portions of the Bible that refer to the Israelite expectation of the coming of the Messiah, we are also preparing ourselves for Christ’s second arrival and the full establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. This time is an ideal reminder that we are living in-between two worlds: the already and the not yet. As we remember the anticipation that the ancient Jews felt as they awaited the Messiah, the anointed one that God had promised, we also look to the future, second coming of

Christ when this broken and hurting world will be replaced with the New Heaven and New Earth.

Advent then is a time of preparation, not of waiting. As John said, we should “abide in him” and a first step of that preparation is the study of Scripture and prayer. One of the great strengths of the Anglican tradition is the lectionary, the regular reading of all of the Bible in our services, and the Daily Offices. I encourage you this Advent to add to your schedule the discipline of daily readings, perhaps subscribe to the St. B’s Daily for morning prayer or join us on Facebook in the evenings as members of the St. B’s community lead us in Compline, the final prayer service of the day.

Let us strengthen and encourage one another as we journey together in this land between two worlds, knowing that the Messiah has come and brought salvation to the world and that he will come again and bring an end to all suffering and death.

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.* ✠

VII. We are the Temple of the LORD

First Sunday of Advent Year A

- [Isaiah 2:1-5](#)
- [Psalm 122](#)
- [Romans 13:11-14](#)
- [Matthew 24:36-44](#)

This morning is the first Sunday of Advent. We have sung our “O Antiphon,” lit the first candle on our wreath,” and we have recited the collect, which begins, “Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now *in the time of this mortal life* in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility.” Welcome to Advent!

Advent is a time when we cannot help but think about Christmas with its trees and lights, presents and feasts. So I think for many of us it always comes as a surprise when we get to our Gospel reading.

24:36 But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ... 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Why all this apocalyptic talk? Why all of this end times stuff? That makes many uncomfortable at any time (“haven’t we moved beyond such language”?) but this season is about the baby Jesus! Actually, no, it is not. Advent means “arrival” and is about our expectation of Jesus’ *second* coming. In fact, the Latin *adventus* is the translation of the Greek *Parousia*, the term used in the New Testament to refer to that time when Jesus will return. Advent and our

readings in this season focus not so much upon the coming of God in the baby Jesus and the incarnation of God in man, that is the season of Christmas, but rather our attention is directed to preparing ourselves for the *risen* Christ coming again in glory to judge the world and finally established his kingdom in the new heaven and new earth.

Jesus' disciples were waiting and expecting the arrival of the Messiah as well. In fact most Jews of the time were anxious and eager for God to intervene and send his promised anointed one who, as Isaiah said, would "judge between the nations, and ~~shall~~ arbitrate for many peoples; they [would] beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation [would] not lift up sword against nation, neither [would] they learn war any more."

Some believed that the time was so close that they went out into the wilderness and established a community by the Dead Sea, they even had their own scriptures depicting the final battles between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Others took a more pragmatic approach and believed that God would support them in an armed revolt. Never did they suspect that God would send a human sacrifice, an offense to their ancient sensibilities as much as it is to our modern ones.

Jesus knew all of this. He knew that he was the answer to their prayers and that many would find that answer woefully inadequate. He knew that they would get impatient, waiting for the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah's words. And he knew we would too. "How long O Lord, how long?" Jesus and the disciples were already 700 years from the time of Isaiah and we are now nearly three times that from Jesus himself. His message to his disciples then is just as relevant today. "*Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*"

As a brief aside, I think it is important to address our ignorance. Jesus tells us very directly that we will not know the day or hour when he will come again. That is something that

we know that we don't know. We should also remember that there are also many other things that the Bible does not tell us. We do not know the exact details of creation, for example, or what happens at the precise moment when we die, or any number of other things. It is understandable that *we want to know*, but we must learn that it is OK not to know some things. Why do I bother to mention this? Because far too often we allow our quest to know the unknowable to distract us from what we know. And what we DO know is that we are to "wake from our sleep," as Paul says, and to always be ready for the Son of Man's arrival.

So, we are awake. What do we do now? We prepare ourselves and our world for his coming. On my second Sunday at St. B's I preached on living "[in the in-between](#)." What it is that we are to do as we live in this foreign land; a part of this broken world, yet saved and redeemed knowing that this is not all that there is and that we will be restored by God. Our readings that Sunday showed us that we are to spend this time praying and working for the welfare of this world even as we wait expectantly for the world to come. We are also to continue to live, not to give up on ourselves or this world so that as we continue to walk "between two worlds," we are to look, receive, and be grateful for God's healing.

Today's readings lead us to think about our corporate role in this intermediate time, to consider what it means that *we are the Temple of God*. As Paul elsewhere makes it plain, "you are God's Temple and ...God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Cor. 3.16).

So the prophet said, (*Isa. 2:3*) "*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*"

And the psalmist (Ps. 122:1) I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

Isaiah and the psalmist offer the future vision of all nations coming to the Temple in Jerusalem to hear God's teaching and receive his justice. We, the community of saints, we the community of St. B's are God's Temple.

But what does it mean for us as individuals, as a community, and as an institution to be God's Temple? It seems a fitting question to ask, not just in Advent, but also in this time of transition and reflection. Of course Paul is using a metaphor, but if we extend that imagery, what does this Temple look like? What makes up its structure and character?

The Temple in Jerusalem was high up on a platform that was built on a mountain. Isaiah says,

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

The Temple is to be set high up where all can see it and so should we be. As Jesus said, (Matt. 5.14) "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid." St. B's should be prominent, not in its physical location, but as a place that is known as *light*, as *the Lord's house*. So we need to make sure that our friends and neighbors know that we are here and that this is a place for them to come and be welcomed. I think St. B's does a very good job at this, through programs like Room at the Inn and our engagement with various local ministries, not to forget the pre-school and soccer programs. But what will they find when they are here?

Teaching Truth and Justice

The House of the Lord is the place from which truth and justice must flow. A moment ago we heard Isaiah say that all nations would stream to the mountain of the Lord. Why? So "that he

may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” If St. B’s is to be the Temple of the Lord then we must ensure that it is his word that is spoken here. That those who come and visit hear the Gospel of Christ proclaimed loud and clear so that they might “walk in his paths.”

But we must be ready to recognize that the Gospel is life-changing and many will not like the look of God’s path. So we must be strong and firm in the face of those who would compromise God’s word, because the nations are not streaming to hear simple “Have a Nice Day” homilies. They have come to hear the word of the Lord, God’s instruction, his direction for their lives.

When and where God’s word is proclaimed there comes judgment and justice. Consider again Isaiah’s words. In the final days, when God’s rule is firmly established, the nations will come to his mountain to hear his word and “he shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples.” Just as Jesus proclaimed, when he comes again *God* will judge, he will punish the wicked and reward the faithful and the result, says Isaiah, is “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” Notice that peace, true lasting peace where nations will no longer fight wars, nor even teach warfare, occurs *only* where God’s justice reigns.

We are not God and we cannot dispense judgment and justice to the nations as God will do. But we can and must work for justice where we are through the teaching of his Word and our obedience to his instruction. God’s house must be a place of peace and justice, where people of our community know that they can come to receive love, aid, forgiveness, and healing.

The Place of Love

We as individuals are also God's Temple. We are the stones of the structure, if you will, and God's spirit lives in each of us. In the verses just prior to today's reading in the Epistle, Paul reminds us of the second greatest commandment. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." As Jesus said when confronted by the Pharisees and Paul reiterates here, all other laws given by God to Moses can be fulfilled if we simply and completely love God and love one another. This is the final hallmark of the Temple and its holy city is that its residents are constantly giving themselves for one another in love.

In the psalmist's ideal vision "Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity with itself." Jerusalem has never been a city fully at peace or in unity within itself, not in the psalmist's day or ours. St. B's, I would hazard to guess, is like Jerusalem in that the inhabitants of this community are not always loving one another. Christian communities are ironically and sadly often the worst at showing love for each other. There are fights within churches, within denominations, against denominations and so on. In my brief time here I have found St. B's to be an exception to this expectation, but I know it was not always so and this strength of love can change in an instant if we do not foster it.

Sadly division within the community of Christ is nothing new. Most of Paul's letters were written to churches who were engaged in fierce internal conflict. But the answer always remains the same: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself." If we, the living stones, do not begin with this love, then the Temple will be nothing more than a whitewashed sepulcher. But when those stones are touched by God a building becomes a Temple, a group of people become a church, and his Kingdom draws nearer.

We do not know the day or the hour that Jesus will come again, but we DO know that we are to be God's holy people, a royal priesthood serving in the House of the LORD. We know also that God's Temple is to be set apart, known in the city and the world as a place where the Gospel

of Christ is proclaimed, where God's justice reigns, and where those who worship also seek to love others as themselves because God loved them first.

Lord, in the time of this mortal life, in this time of darkness, let us be your House, your Temple set upon your holy mountain.

“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!”

Amen. ☩

Weekly Devotional - 28 November 2016 - 3 December 2016

Dates: 28 November – 3 December 2016

First Name: Fr. Christian

Email: cbrady@stbs.net

Monday, {28 November 2016}

AM [Psalm 1, 2, 3](#); [Isa. 1:10-20](#); [1 Thess. 1:1-10](#); [Luke 20:1-8](#)

Reading

Isa. 1:11 *What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?*

says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams

and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,

or of lambs, or of goats.

...

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;

remove the evil of your doings

from before my eyes;

cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good;

seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan,

plead for the widow.

¹⁸ *Come now, let us argue it out,*

says the Lord:

though your sins are like scarlet,

they shall be like snow;

though they are red like crimson,

they shall become like wool.

Reflection [267 Words]

This passage in Isaiah marks a turning point in Israelite worship; the prophet pronounces that the Lord does not simply want sacrifices, the giving to him things that we value, but he wants us to *willingly* offer them from a pure heart. As the psalmist says, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51:17). Our attitude matters. We cannot simply continue to go to church and study our Bible, offering a monthly contribution to some ministry and expect God to be pleased unless we also wash ourselves and make ourselves clean.

If you are anything like me, you are probably already rationalizing, saying, “I am not really doing anything *evil*. And after all, I confess my sins at least once a week in church.” That is a good start. But remember that Isaiah was speaking against the great hypocrisy of the kings of Judah *and* the people of Judah whom he called “a sinful nation, people laden with iniquity” (Isa. 1:4). The prophet reminds them and us *all* are complicit when we fail as a community to care for those most vulnerable, defenseless, and in need. So while we may each individually be mostly good people (and we each can *always* live a more holy life), we are still called as the People of God

to learn to do good;

seek justice,

rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan,

plead for the widow.

We are not to stop offering sacrifices to God. Rather God wants them to really matter. What really matters to you?

Collect for the Day

Almighty God, who created us in your image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

TUESDAY, {29 November 2016}

[Psalm 5, 6](#); [Isa. 1:21-31](#); [1 Thess. 2:1-12](#); [Luke 20:9-18](#)

Reading

*Ps. 6:1 LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger; **

do not punish me in your wrath.

*²Have pity on me, LORD, for I am weak; **

heal me, LORD, for my bones are racked.

...

*⁶I grow weary because of my groaning; **

every night I drench my bed

and flood my couch with tears.

*⁷My eyes are wasted with grief **

and worn away because of all my enemies.

*⁸Depart from me, all evildoers, **

for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.

*⁹The LORD has heard my supplication; **

the LORD accepts my prayer.

Reflection [221 Words]

My first Sunday with the St. B's community [I spoke](#) [NB: link] about the Book of Lamentations, Psalms of lament, and the need we have (but often don't acknowledge) to lament. Psalms 5 and 6 are just such laments and notice again the form. The psalmist begins with his honest plea to God: "Have pity on me, LORD, for I am weak." In his words we may well hear our own, the anguish and despair that we sometimes think is too much for us or even for God: "My spirit shakes with terror; how long, O LORD, how long?"

We need this sort of honesty in our lives. It enables us to recognize and acknowledge our wounds, our needs, our sins, and then offer them up to God. The psalmist also demonstrates that we can be demanding of God, that is when we are demanding his justice and mercy. "Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me for your mercy's sake."

But we are not to stay in that place. Confessing our sins, our pain, our suffering is vital, but we cannot wallow in our misery. Instead we declare with the psalmist

*⁸Depart from me, all evildoers, **

for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.

*⁹The LORD has heard my supplication; **

the LORD accepts my prayer.

Amen.

Collect for the Day

If you'd like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

WEDNESDAY, {30 November 2016}

Insert the list of daily office readings here.

Reading

[Psalm 119:1-24](#); [Isa. 2:1-11](#); [1 Thess. 2:13-20](#); [Luke 20:19-26](#)

Isa. 2:2 In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be raised above the hills;

all the nations shall stream to it.

³ *Many peoples shall come and say,*

'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

to the house of the God of Jacob;

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,

and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ *He shall judge between the nations,*

and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

*they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

Reflection [253 words]

This passage from Isaiah is the also the Old Testament reading from this past Sunday, Advent 1. Living in the second half of the 8th century BCE (c. 750-700 BCE) Isaiah son of Amoz prophesied at a time when both the southern kingdom of Judah *and* the northern kingdom of Israel existed. He also lived through the Assyrian expansion that saw the destruction of the northern kingdom and the dispersion of her people. In the midst of this deep political turmoil God spoke through Isaiah words of hope, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore.”

God declares that in this future all will seek out his holy mountain and that from it “shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord.” The teaching of the word of the Lord is the reconciliation of all humanity to God through Christ. It is in Christ that all wars and conflict cease, true peace is found through his victory over sin and death on the cross. And *we*, as individuals and as St. B’s are the temple of the Lord. Does his word and instruction flow from us? Are we his agents of true and lasting change? Are all nations draw, not to us, but o his place of holy worship to hear God’s word proclaimed? If not, how are we being led to establish his church as “the highest of all mountains?”

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!

Collect for the Day

If you’d like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B’s in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

THURSDAY, {1 December 2016}

[*Psalm 18:1-20*](#); [*Isa. 2:12-22*](#); [*1 Thess. 3:1-13*](#); [*Luke 20:27-40*](#)

Reading

Luke 20:27-40

27 Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.'

34 Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.' ³⁹Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' ⁴⁰For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Reflection [261 Words – Cut first two sentences if needed.]

“The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, therefore they were sad, you see?” (Say it out loud if you didn’t get the very bad pun.) This was a deep divide in Jesus’ time. The Sadducees, whom most scholars think were a priestly sect (descended from the Zadokites), did not find enough evidence in the Bible (our Old Testament) to believe that the dead would be resurrected on the Day of Judgment. The Pharisees, who accepted not only Scripture but also the various traditions of interpretation that were passed down, understood passages such as Isa. 26:19 and Dan. 12:2 as clear evidence that God would indeed restore his people and establish his justice.

Dan. 2:2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. **3** Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Jesus refused to be taken into the Sadducees argument about Levirate marriage and instead affirms that we will indeed be raised from the dead and those who are righteous will live forever. “Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being

children of the resurrection.” His word is true and affirmed because Jesus himself rose again, the “first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20).

This Advent meditate on the fact that he lived so that he could die so that we all might live forever.

Collect for the Day

If you'd like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

FRIDAY, {2 December 2016}

[Psalm 16, 17](#); [Isa. 3:8-15](#); [1 Thess. 4:1-12](#); [Luke 20:41-21:4](#)

Reading

¹ 1 Thess. 4:3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; ⁴that each one of you knows how to control your own body in holiness and honour, ⁵not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one wrongs or exploits a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness.

Reflection [242 words]

We have been “sanctified” by God. When something is “sanctified” it means that it has been set aside for a holy purpose. For example, the silver chalices and patens that we use in the Eucharist are just a cup and a plate, very nice, silver ones, to be sure, but they would still function just fine for any beverage or food item. Yet they have been blessed, prayed over, and then set aside, only to be used in the worship of God in the memorial of Christ’s sacrifice, that is Eucharist.

We have been sanctified by God. We have been made holy by and through Christ and set aside for the holy purpose of serving God. Therefore, says Paul, we must stop behaving as the rest of the world does and refrain from the sexual immorality, the cheating and lying, and the exploitation of others. We are a “royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9) and while we are forgiven of our sins, yesterday, today, and tomorrow’s sins, we are to strive always to remain holy and pure.

Remember the woman caught in adultery. Jesus challenged those who would stone her to death say, “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” But remember also his words to the woman, “Go and sin no more.” And so we too are forgiven of our sins, made holy, purified by Christ’s sacrifice, sanctified, and set aside for service to God.

Collect for the Day

Grant, Lord God, to all who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, that, as we have put away the old life of sin, so we may be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and live in righteousness and true holiness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B’s in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

SATURDAY, {3 December 2016}

[Psalm 20, 21:1-7\(8-14\);](#) [Isa. 4:2-6;](#) [1 Thess. 4:13-18;](#) [Luke 21:5-19](#)

Reading

1 Thess. 4:13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

Reflection

(Since [I recently preached on the Gospel](#) for today, I will turn instead to the Epistle.)

When our son Mack died, 4 years ago this New Year's Eve, our friend, former rector, and my spiritual director gave us a slim volume called *Good Grief* by Granger Westberg (available in the St. B's bookstore). Pastor Westberg wrote this years ago as part of a larger work and it grew out of his ministry in hospitals, caring for those who were dying and those who were survivors. In his introduction he comments that often well-meaning Christians will incorrectly quote 1 Thess. 4:13, attempting to encourage fellow Christians in their mourning saying, "Grieve not!"

The sentiment often expressed, is that we should *not grieve* as Christians because we know that death does not have the final victory any longer. This is a true statement, death is not the end and we shall also be raised from the dead with our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters who have gone before us.

But Paul is not telling us that we should not grieve, that we should not miss those we love who are no longer here, he is saying, that we should "not grieve *as others do who have no hope*." We *should* grieve, as Jesus himself did, but not as those without hope because we know the great mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. And when he does he will call *all of us* to himself.

Collect for the Day

Eternal Lord God, you hold all souls in life: Give to your whole Church in paradise and on earth your light and your peace; and grant that we, following the good examples of those who have served you here and are now at rest, may at the last enter with them into your unending joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

VIII. Lessons and Carols

Second Sunday of Advent Year A

The First Lesson: Genesis 3:1-15

The Second Lesson: Isaiah 64:1-9

Psalm 119:81-96

The Third Lesson: Isaiah 40:1-11

The Fourth Lesson: Baruch 4:36-5:9

The Holy Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

The Arc of History

The readings today map out the arc of history, from humanity's rebellion to God's restoration.

They can be framed with God's question to Adam and Mary's response to God:

But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

We live history as we have gone through this service, one event after another. We cannot help but take each moment as they come, in a line day after day, year after year.

God is outside of history, from his perspective he can see all time, all possibilities.

Yet still he granted us both free will and his grace.

This history we find in these readings is ours, both collectively and personally: We seek our own way in the world, we insist we can do it on our own, **seeking out wisdom apart from God**, and apart from God we find only our own mortality.

Yet throughout our personal and world history God calls out to us, asking "Where are you?" and promising that he will still care about us and for us: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." No matter where we are in our own lives, "Look towards the east... and see the joy that is coming to you from God."

Because as Gabriel tells Mary, "Nothing will be impossible for God."

God continues to call out to you and to me, "Where are you?"

Let your answer be, "'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'"

Amen

IX. Do you see what I see?

Signs and Wonders

Third Sunday of Advent (December 11, 2016)

First reading

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm

Psalm 146:5-10

Second reading

James 5:7-10

Gospel

Matthew 11:2-11

What are you expecting for Christmas?

The season of Advent is a time of expectation. Our lectionary and liturgy attempt to direct our attention to Christ's second coming, preparing ourselves, our community, and our world for the coming Day of the Lord. This is when evil will be destroyed, God's justice established and, as the prophet Isaiah declares, 35:5 "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."

In practical terms of course, for most of us it means looking expectantly towards Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. If we are children, that expectation is the pent up energy and excitement of presents, days off school, and just general silliness like our Family Christmas Concert this evening!

But as adults our feelings are often more complex. If we have young children we may be infected with their joy and I urge you to embrace and not question that. But for most of us, as we age we also have more and more friends and family who are no longer with us to join in the celebrations. With God's grace they are now made whole in Christ, truly healed, but we remain here, in Advent, waiting expectantly.

Here in the northern hemisphere nature itself seems conspired against us. The days are shorter, the nights long and dark, and it can be a time of sadness and depression as much as joy. I remember when we first moved to England getting to late December and feeling down not just because that is what grad school will do to you, but because the days were so short, less than 8 hours of daylight. Then I looked at a globe and realized that Oxford and Anchorage Alaska were on almost the exact same latitude!² Seasonal Affective Disorder is real, I can tell you!

² Oxford: 51°45'N – 1°15'W; Anchorage, AL 61°13'N – 149°54'W

All of this does bring home to us the true nature of Advent. We are waiting, eagerly expecting the Lord's coming because we know, through our own lives and experiences, that we need his return, we need him to heal us, to bring justice to this world and our own lives. We are living literally and metaphorically in "dark days." Yet this is when we must remember John the Baptist and the purpose of his ministry.

***John 1:7** John came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. **8** He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. **9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

Indeed, he *has* come into the world and he will come again. But the world did not know him.

When John and Jesus were born the people of their own time were as eager as we for the Messiah to come. The prophets had declared that one anointed by God, a Son of David would come and establish God's kingdom forever! And so they waited.... But what were they waiting for? What were they expecting for "Christmas"?

Some were expecting that it would be a son of David, a man of royal descent who would rally an army to him and drive out the Romans and bring self-rule back to Eretz Yisrael. Others, like those who left us the Dead Sea Scrolls, believed that God would not only drive out the military rulers, but that the Temple rulers were also corrupt and had to be destroyed. They apparently were expecting *two* messiahs, a Son of David on the throne and a Son of Aaron to reestablish the sacred High Priesthood. His cleansing of the Temple would make Jesus's up turned tables look like a fraternity party! What we know with great certainty is that no one expected a humble teacher who would die as a sacrifice for our sins. Paul's describing the crucifixion as a "stumbling block" is an understatement. The very notion was heresy.

If we try and place ourselves into their time and thinking, even as faithful followers of the LORD, studying and knowing the Tanakh with great humility, I doubt if any of us would expect *Jesus* as the Messiah. Their expectations were all completely reasonable and well-reasoned from Scripture. But they were so focused on their readings and traditions that they did not *hear* God when he spoke, first through John the Baptist and then Jesus himself.

Matt. 11:7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?"

11:8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

11:9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet."

We tend to look for what we want to find and discount what doesn't fit our expectations. When people went out to hear John's message many clearly believed a man of God should be more respectable, dressed more appropriately. Many more were offended that he should be telling them that they needed to repent of their sins, who was the wild-man that he should tell *them* that *they* were sinners? We all have this great ability to discount anything or anyone that doesn't meet our expectations. In the verses just beyond our reading today Jesus points this out.

18 “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

How often do we “make God in our own image”? Republican, Democrat, liberal-progressive, conservative-traditionalist, pacifist, warrior, hippy... We can always find a text here or there (and ignoring all others) to support our preconceived ideas. In so doing we run the risk of missing who God *really* is.

So rather than asking who we are expecting Jesus to be, we need to ask what do we hear and see about him? What is the testimony, in Scripture and in the lives of those around us, of Jesus?

11:3 [JB’s disciples] said to [Jesus], “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

11:4 Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Listen and look and whom will you find? The savior of the world, the one who can bring peace not just ultimately when he ushers in the new heaven and earth, but even in our lives today. **Listen and look; hear and see.**

I know it is not easy. We can say, “I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...” but then receiving that grace and peace, being transformed, can be so incredibly hard and always painful.

I am no psychiatrist or psychologist. I am not a therapist or a trauma counselor. I just read texts and try and understand them even as I work through my own struggles and griefs. Or I should say, I *try and allow God* to work in me through my struggles and griefs. I am certainly not perfect or even fully healed. It is hard, I do not dismiss the real struggles of depression, grief, and mental health issues.

My senior year in high school I was depressed. All sorts of factors were at work, but there is no doubt that I was experiencing depression. A caring friend gave me a book, which I still have, called *Happiness is a Choice*. Maybe, but depression is not a choice, schizophrenia is not, joblessness is not, death is not. The choice that does remain for us is how we *respond* to these very real forces in our lives.

What I have found in reading Scripture is a description of our world that is applicable to our personal lives as well. God created the world and it is *very* good and perfect. God created *us* in his image, perfect and with the freedom of choice. Yet we, like creation itself, are broken and in need of the healing that only God can bring. It is a healing that will never be fully complete until, as Paul says, “this perishable body [and mind] puts on imperishability, and this mortal body [and mind] puts on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:54).

So we could say that we always live in Advent, in a constant state of expectation, anxious for Christ’s return when all things will be made whole. Yet here we remain for this time and God desires for us to live fully here *and* now.

Once we have recognized and acknowledged Jesus is our God and Savior, the question that remains is what are we expecting from God in our lives. God has not left us alone with our fears and hopes. He has sent us his Spirit and one another to comfort and support us, to bring us healing and strength. But do we recognize his grace when we see it? Or are we like those who saw in John the Baptist only a madman or in Jesus only a glutton and drunkard?

Over the 9 years we lived in Louisiana there was at least one tropical storm every year and, of course, Hurricane Katrina. In our second year Tropical Storm Francis dumped an impossible amount of water in just a few hours. As I waded waist deep (I am 6'3") back to the house I saw neighbors in canoes and bass boats going up and down the neighborhood making sure everyone was all right.

There is a story about an old woman in just such a storm. The water began to rise and neighbors came by in a boat. "Miss Emmy, get in, we will take you to safety." She replied, "No, the Lord is going to save me!" The water continued to rise, she moved to the second story. The emergency services came by in a zodiac boat, "Ma'am please get in the boat." "No! The Lord will deliver me!" Finally, she had to climb out on the roof and when the National Guard came with the helicopter she again refused, "The Lord will save me!" After she drowned and opened her eyes in the presence of the LORD she said, "Why didn't you save me?!" God replied, "I tried! Three times! But you refused every time."

Perhaps it is not the most sophisticated sermon illustration, but it has always made me ponder and ask myself, do I recognize God's provision when he sends it? Do we accept God's grace in our life? Or are we constantly looking for "more"?

I can only speak for myself, but I have found that growth and healing tends to be slow, painful, and step by step. It is easy for me to write off the call of a friend as just a coincidence, rather than the grace of God, the moving of his Spirit. Too often, in fact, I keep praying and saying, "God speak to me, give me guidance and wisdom" without actually *listening* and realizing that God *is speaking to me* through those around me, like my wife, for example. Or even an old friend from Louisiana who just happens to now be a bishop in Tennessee.

What are you expecting this Advent? Listen and look, hear and see, for God is at work in your life.

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ bring us light and life.

Amen. ☩

X. The day your heart became Bethlehem

[Nativity of the Lord - Proper I \(December 24, 2016\)](#)

First reading

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm

Psalm 96

Second reading

Titus 2:11-14

Gospel

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

Isa. 9:6 For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This night, December 24th, around the world women and men gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus that occurred over two thousand years ago in the town of Bethlehem. For those of us in the northern hemisphere it is always a dark and usually a cold night. Even in Bethlehem this week the temperatures at night have been just barely above 40°. It is fitting that the light of the world should enter during our darkest days.

Jesus' coming was the event that the prophets foretold, angels declared, and shepherds witnessed. To us "is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord!" And so we celebrate and join the angels in singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Today we celebrate that God has remembered his people and his promises, he has sent the Messiah, the one anointed by God to bring salvation, hope, peace, and joy, to all the world!

This is a time of joy and celebration! And yet still bloggers keep watch over their stats by night and ask, was Jesus really born on *this* night? Every year, without fail, some wag writes that whatever we know about Jesus' birth "It probably wasn't on December 25th." That was the subtitle of last year's Time magazine article. As a scholar of early Judaism I am drawn to these sorts of discussions and debates. It is true that our Gospel accounts share very few precise details about Jesus' birth. For example, they do not even give us a clear statement of the *year* in which Jesus was born. We are told it was during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, "during the time of King Herod," and under the governorship of Quirinius, but that covers a broad swathe possible years. Even the season of the year is vague in the accounts of Luke and Matthew.

Some scholars will point out that the shepherds were "keeping watch over their flock by night" which might seem inconsistent with the deep winter months. Hardly conclusive evidence that it was spring, to be sure, but the winter would also seem a dangerous time of year for Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to make such a journey. And so on. There are various points of debate and the result is that many will say that Jesus was not born in December and their blog will get a

spike in hits and their stats will go up. The truth is we simply don't know when Jesus was born. We don't know the precise year, month, or day. The *fact* is, he was born.

All this vagary about the actual date of Christ's birth is one of the reasons why for the first several centuries the Christian church did not have a specific festival for the Nativity of Jesus. The "high holidays" of early Christianity were (and should remain so today) Good Friday and Easter. *When* Jesus was born is not nearly as important as *why* Jesus was born. He is Emmanuel, God with us, sent to earth as a human so that he might live and die as one of us for the forgiveness of our sins. The early church knew and understood this and so debates about the date of Jesus' birth remained largely academic. (As has this sermon so far, but bear with me.) It is not until the time of Constantine in the 4th century (336 CE) that we first find December 25th being granted official status. Prior to that, dates from November to April and everything in between had been suggested, but not, curiously enough, December 25th.³ St. Augustine, who lived in the late 4th and into the 5th century, advocated for the December date, coinciding with the shortest days of the year, the winter solstice, saying,

"Hence it is that He was born on the day which is the shortest in our earthly reckoning and from which subsequent days begin to increase in length. He, therefore, who bent low and lifted us up chose the shortest day, yet the one whence light begins to increase."⁴

There are debates as to how exactly the church ended up with the 25th of December as the date of Jesus' birth. Ancient authorities calculated that Jesus' crucifixion was on March 25th and it was thought that his conception and death were on the same day. Nine months after March 25th is December 25th, thus the date of Jesus' birth.

Modern critics will point out that, as St. Augustine did, that this date is close to the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, and a day observed by various pagan traditions.⁵ The assumption by many is that Christians appropriated the pagan festivals and simply dedicated it

³ Clement, *Stromateis* 1.21.145. "There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar] ... And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the 16th year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Pharmuth [March 21]; and others on the 25th of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on the 19th of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21]."

⁴ Sermon 192. (I have not been able to verify this.)

⁵ "The Romans had their mid-winter Saturnalia festival in late December; barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times. To top it off, in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun), on December 25." <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/how-december-25-became-christmas/>

to the birth of Jesus. On balance I think the earlier argument is likely what led to the choice of December 25th. Regardless of how we ended up at this date, there is no doubt that the manner in which we celebrate Christmas today has a number of formerly pagan elements. Our beautiful Christmas tree, for example, is directly descended from Druidic practices.

So, is it wrong that we should celebrate the birth of Jesus in this way or on this day? No, not at all. But I do think that there are two lessons for us in how we have arrived at this point. The first is a lesson in sanctification and the second is about celebration.

Whether it is the date or the way in which we celebrate Christmas, over the centuries the church has adopted, adapted, and appropriated various dates, traditions, and elements of other cultures. This was not accidental, but rather quite intentional. Think of it in this way, when we seek to share the Gospel with people in another country where they do not speak English, do we simply SAY THE WORDS VERY LOUDLY? Or do we translate them into their own language? And in so doing, we often need to adopt different metaphors that will be understood in a new context. For example, wine and bread were staples, fundamental elements of sustenance in the ancient Mediterranean and so are central to our Eucharist as we remember Christ's Last Supper and Sacrifice. In West Africa, while explaining the fundamental nature of these elements, a missionary might rightly replace those elements with Saabu instead of bread and, I am reliably informed, Fanta instead of wine.

When the earliest missionaries moved out from the Mediterranean they encountered all sorts of religious peoples who had festivals and sites that were holy to them. Pope Gregory, in writing to Abbot Mellitus and St. Augustine of Canterbury (601 CE) encouraged them *not to eliminate* these festivals and sites completely, but rather to sanctify them to the living and one true God.

“...the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. ...that they [may] be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God.”

Pope Gregory's rationale is simple, **“because the one who endeavors to ascend to the highest place, rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps.”**

Some of you know of my own love for 80s contemporary Christian music. Like most culture of the 80s, it was not always of the highest quality, but it was an important part of some of the most formative years of my life. Christian artists then and now come under criticism for seeming to mimic or copy other contemporary music. But I wonder how many people realize that all American pop music has its roots in the music of the church? Rockabilly, MoTown, the Blues, they all came out of the church. We all borrow, adapt, and adopt culture, language, and expression all the time. The issue is *intent*.

Why are we gathered here tonight? Why do we have the decorations of red on a green Christmas tree? Why do we share presents? If we do it because...well, we just do it, then it is nothing more than tradition and, at worst, paganism. BUT if we do it because we are *setting aside* this time to worship God, to thank him for the gift of his Son and the new life that comes only through Him, then it is, as Pope Gregory said, in the service of the true God.

This is the process of sanctification. When we intentionally aside a specific time, ceremony, clothing, and traditions to honor and worship God then they have been sanctified, made holy.

Today is no longer December 24th it is the Eve of the Mass of Christ's Birth. Tomorrow is not December 25th, or the festival of Saturnalia or Sol Invictus, it is the Mass, the celebration of Christ's Birth.

Why? Because we, along with millions of Christians throughout history and around the world have set aside *this time* to remember the amazing and fearful news that God has become human, that the Savior of the World was born, and his birth marked the beginning of our sanctification. We have now been set apart for God. As Peter said,

1Pet. 2:9 ... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

So we gather in the darkness on one of the longest nights of the year to proclaim that God's child has been born and that "in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4-5).

But it doesn't have to be December 25th. It could be November 17th or May 30th, it could be January 16th or August 14th. Because Christmas is the day that Christ is born in us. The *historical fact* is that Jesus was born during the reign of Emperor Augustus in the time of King Herod. The *spiritual truth* is that he continues to live in us today.

When was Christ born in you? When was it that you realized that this historical figure was also the Son of God who died for you and in so doing bought and brought you eternal life? The day your heart became Bethlehem, *that* is Christmas.

If that hasn't happened yet, know that God works with us "just as we are." We do not need to get to the top of a mountain in a single leap. We take it step by step. Allow this old temple to be swept clean by God, sanctified by Him and for Him, and Christ will be born in you this night. The day your heart became Bethlehem, *that* is Christmas.

As I was preparing this sermon and knew that this was the message I needed to share, a song started playing on iTunes that I had never heard before. It was by an artist I had known for years, one of those 80s CCM artists I mentioned earlier, but the album was new, I had just downloaded it. It is by Terry Scott Taylor (of Daniel Amos fame) and it is called, "May I Be Your Bethlehem." When I heard this song it seemed a fitting, providential closing prayer. The refrain is "Please Holy God come fill my soul and set this captive free; May my heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me."



Most high and holy lord was born so meek and mild

God with us, Emmanuel, became a little child

Please Holy God come fill my soul and set this captive free

May my heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me

The Son of God came down to us and walked the blood soaked earth

Where he died on Calvary's poisoned tree to give us second birth

Please Holy God come fill my soul and set this captive free

May my heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me



Holy God abide within, keep me in your perfect plan
Form Christ in me Lord, may I be another Bethlehem

Lord make my heart a manger, birth in me your Son

Place in my flesh the evidence Emmanuel has come

Please Holy God come fill my soul and set this captive free

May my heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me

May my heart become your Bethlehem when Christ is born in me

Amen. ✠

X. And There Was Light

[Nativity of the Lord - Proper III \(December 25, 2016\)](#)

First reading

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm

Psalm 98

Second reading

Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12)

Gospel

John 1:1-14

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר: And God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.

I wish you all a warm and happy Christmas Day! It is a brisk morning and one that I hope has been filled with joy. It is not always so, of course. The holidays are actually some of our busiest and most fretful times. Adults doing last minute shopping for gifts and meals to be prepared; many have traveled a long way to be with family; and for the children it has been perhaps the longest day of the year, matched only by how long last night seemed to last! Of course some of us will also be remembering our loved ones who cannot be with us. The expectation and anxiety that we all have is palpable.

It is curious to think about *who* was expecting *what* on *that* night. Mary, a young girl, her first pregnancy and birth, do doubt all the encouragement of the angels would bring her little solace when the contractions came. Joseph, well I am sure was on edge as well. Their world was now turned upside down; having children will do that to you, whether they are the savior of the world or not.

So we may think of that first Christmas with stars and angels, anthems and wise-men, but the actual events were much less grand and festive. So while today our stores and radios, bumper stickers and cable talk shows proclaim “the reason for the season,” remember the angels came in secret to Mary and Joseph, there were few shepherds and those that were there were terrified, and many ignored the prophets or, when they paid attention to them, they feared their words.

As we have discussed in previous Sundays, most Jews of the day had some idea of the messiah, the anointed one from God who would somehow restore God’s order. They disagreed, however, with exactly what that meant. Most thought *or hoped* he would be a king, a warrior who would drive out the Romans and the corrupt leaders of the Temple and would restore the Davidic dynasty. The community at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered expected *two* messiahs, one from David’s line and another of the line of the High Priest Aaron to restore the Temple to its pure line of leadership. No one expected a baby born of a normal, middle-class tradesman and his wife.

All of that being said, the world that Jesus was born into was not very different from our own. There were corrupt political and religious leaders; there was oppression by the authorities; there

was poverty, sickness, and suffering. At our best days we can ignore how little the world has changed, but in truth it really hasn't.

This is the world into which Jesus was born. It was not the world that he and the Father created.

ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי-אור: And God said, "Let there be light." And there was light.

This world was created by God through his Word (the Word that tonight we celebrate having become flesh) and when he had created it he saw that it was good. But of the many gifts he gave us perhaps the greatest was the ability to love him freely and, correspondingly, to disobey him.

As we pushed God away we fractured this world and pain and suffering entered in.

The birth of Jesus marks the beginning of God's *new creation*. Just as God had walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve, now he walks among us again, this time as a man, as the New Adam who brings light and life to the world.

And this becoming a man is perhaps the most challenging and fundamental of Christian beliefs.

The birth of Jesus is nothing less than the *incarnation* of God. The term "incarnation" is understandable enough today thanks to the flourishing of Mexican restaurants. *Carne a sada, chile con carne*, and so on. *Carne* is "the flesh." "Incarnation" is the "indwelling" of God in the flesh. Jesus is "Emmanuel," God with us.

This notion that somehow Jesus was both fully God and fully man, that the child Mary gave birth to was nothing less than the Son of God, has challenged us all over the millennia. Theologians and thinkers far better than I have wrestled with this notion but on this day when we remember that moment of the incarnation I would like to offer some suggestions as to why God became flesh and dwelt among us.

What we cannot lose sight of is that this is a *mystery*. I mean that in the original sense of the term; the incarnation is not a mystery like an Agatha Christie mystery where we are eventually able to figure out how something happened, rather it is something that is only knowable through revelation. So while we may not be able to understand *how* God could be contained within human form I do think we can each come to understand *why* and what it means for us.

First and foremost the coming of the messiah was foretold by the Israelite prophets. Our reading from Isaiah tonight came from a time when the nation of Judah was in great peril of invasion.

And yet in the midst of that uncertainty the prophet Isaiah declared that God would establish his *eternal kingdom* that would bring endless peace, justice, and righteousness. The advent of Jesus declared that God's promises have been kept and that his kingdom was near.

Yet God becoming human is not just a theological concept or words uttered by religious men long dead. The very notion of God's humanity is about bringing *to humanity* those things that words cannot express.

The fact that Jesus lived and walked among us, that he had friends and followers, that he was a child growing up with hunger and sleeplessness, weariness and pain, temptations and troubles conveys to us the relational aspect of God's love. **He is not only transcendent, looking down on us from afar, but he is immanent, here with us, feeling and knowing what life is like for us human creatures.**

Jesus' presence on earth provides us with God's *living* Law, the prime example for us to emulate. Think about this as we go through the next year. Listen to the Gospel readings each Sunday, read them on your own, and consider what example it is that Jesus has left for us, not just in his

words, but in his actions. Jesus demonstrated what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself as he sat at meals with those whom others would not even let in the door. He touched and healed those whom others would not even look upon. He fed the hungry and directed those who followed him to offer not just their coats, but even their hoodies to those who needed clothes. (Well, the equivalent of hoodies.)

The day-to-day life of Jesus as seen in the Gospels shows us also the companion that he was to his disciples and still is to those who follow him. He lived, slept, and ate with those men and women. He cried with them and held them.

In other words, *Jesus lived in this broken world, endured it even as we endured it, and loved us as he did so.*

Again, this is our example to follow, to hold and comfort those around us and to receive their comfort to us. Most of all, to simply *be with them* in their joy and grief, love and anger, hunger and feast. Jesus was their companion and **he remains our companion even now**. The presence of the Holy Spirit is never absent. Remember, Jesus promised us that if we love him and keep his commandments he would send "another Comforter [Advocate]," that is the Holy Spirit (John 14.16) to remain with us always. The physical presence of Jesus presaged the eternal presence of the spirit dwelling in all those who call upon his name. ***We will never walk alone because Jesus walked the earth.***

I have only been to Israel once and it was for a very short time; I barely left Jerusalem. Many Christians told me how amazing it was to know that they were in the very places where Jesus walked. I have to admit that I did not find that striking, at least not in the sense that he was in "this" or "that" place. What humbles me is the **fact** that Jesus was here on this earth. Whether Bethlehem or Jerusalem or State College PA or Nashville Tennessee, ***he was here just like me, just like you.*** This is why the baby was born, why the Word became flesh, to show us what it *really means* to be human, created in the image of God, and to once again make us at one with God.

And while we are *not* God we can love, care, and share as he did. Most importantly, we can share *his love* to the entire world. His birth was the light struck in the darkness and, like one candle lighting another, his light is passed on to each one of us without diminishing its own light in the least.

"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Amen. ☩

XI. What's in a name?

[Holy Name of Jesus \(January 1, 2017\)](#)

First reading

Numbers 6:22-27

Psalm

Psalm 8

Second reading

Galatians 4:4-7

Gospel

Luke 2:15-21

Numbers 6:27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

Luke 2:21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. [Luke 1:31]

The name I was given at birth is Christian Mark Brady. My family and friends all called me Chris. People who weren't friends found all sorts of rhymes for "Chris" that I think you can guess. When I was in elementary school Ms. Nichols refused to teach me how to spell my full, first name, saying that "it might offend the Jewish students in the class." After my grandfather, John William McNamara, died, survived by his wife and two daughters, I added a second "M" to my middle names to honor him. I am now known formerly as "Christian Mark McNamara Brady." After Elizabeth and I married and moved to England, everyone there called me "Christian" and I liked the fuller form of my name. I continued to use "Christian" when I arrived at Tulane University as a visiting assistant professor of Jewish Studies. As I was applying for the permanent position (which I was offered) I was encouraged by an adjunct professor and local rabbi to just use "Chris" if I wanted the permanent job. I was named after a German uncle. What is in a name? Today parents might name their children for all sorts of different reasons. It might be a family name like our children. Others look for something truly different and unique like Moon Unit Zappa, daughter of the musician Frank Zappa, or Sylvester Stallone's son, Sage Moonblood. Names can be important, powerful, and can often shape us in more ways than the parents or child might know.

In the Bible, Adam is the name of the first male human and the term for all humanity. He is also so-named because he is from the earth *'adama*. And he in turn "named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living things." The name Eve sounds like the term for life, חַי. Jacob was so-named because he was born grasping the heel (Heb. *'āqēḇ*) of his brother and later his name was changed to Israel because he had striven (שָׁרָה) with God, thus *yīsrā'ēl*. And we could go on for many other people in the Bible. Not everyone, but many names have significance.

In antiquity, the name of a deity often indicated the god's power or domain. So the Canaanite deities for the sun and the moon were called *Semesh* and *Yareach*, the Canaanite (and Hebrew) words for sun and moon. Not coincidentally, that is why in Genesis 1 the Bible states that God created the "greater and the lesser lights" as a statement that these are nothing more than the *creations* of God and not themselves gods. And my favorite, the Philistine deity Dagon, is famous in the Bible from 1 Samuel 5 when his idol comes crashing down before the Ark of the Covenant. Dagon is most likely associated with fish (Hebrew דג), fitting for a sea people's god, and the comic Bible I had as a child depicted the priests as wearing fish robes. Love it. In today's reading from Numbers God tells Moses that he will bless Israel by putting "my name on the Israelites."

6:23b Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

6:24 The LORD bless you and keep you;

6:25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

6:26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

6:27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

But what is God's name? You might say "the LORD" but what does that mean? In English "lord" means a master, someone who rules over another, not necessarily an inappropriate name for the God of all creation, but it is not an accurate translation of the Hebrew. In fact, it isn't a translation at all, it is a substitution.

The Hebrew for the name of God are the four letters *yod, heh, waw, heh*, "Yahweh." We sometimes refer to it as the "tetragrammaton," simply meaning "four letters," and in Jewish tradition, already by the time of Jesus, it was believed that it was inappropriate to utter or say the Name of God. The fact that here in Numbers God commands Moses and Aaron that they should utter the name over the nation of Israel tells us that this was not always the case. But in order to avoid saying the name of God, Yahweh, they would instead pronounce the word for "lord," *Adonai*. This was likely because in the Psalms, such as today's, the name of God and the word *Adonai* were placed as complements to one another. Thus Psalm 8 actually begins יהוה אֱדֹנָינוּ "O Yahweh our lord." Today orthodox Jews will not even say that and instead will replace the word with *HaShem* which means "the Name."

But again, what *is* God's name? What does "Yahweh" mean? Do you remember when God reveals his name? It is at the bush that burns and yet is not consumed.

Ex. 3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" **14** God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM אֶהְיֶה has sent me to you.'"

15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD יְהוָה, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,

and this my title for all generations.

The name of God is a verb. In fact, it is the verb of existence, the verb "to be." (And I should point out that in Hebrew and, as it happens, in Greek the verb "to be" is not used as we do in

English.) The name of God is the verb “to be” and so God’s name is conjugated. When God is speaking he tells Moses that his name is “I AM.” But of course Moses isn’t God so when he speaks to the Israelites he is to say that the God who sent him is יהוה, “HE IS.” This is where all our English translations let us down. Where they render אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה as “I AM WHO I AM” (or “I AM that which I AM”), which is reasonable since the first person of the verb “to be” is “I am!” But when we get to the 3 person masculine singular they default to the traditional “LORD” (in all caps) and we miss the fact that this is the *same word, the same name* as in verse 14.

So, I will say it again, the name of God is the verb of existence. “He is.” Contemplate that for a moment, for days, contemplate that for a lifetime.

God *is* existence. God *is* being. To borrow John’s phrase from last Sunday’s Gospel, (1:3) “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” God, our God, is not the sun or the moon, the fish or the grain, fertility or death. God *is*. And God always has been. Did you ever notice that the Bible, unlike all any other religious stories and myths I know of, the Bible does not provide us with an explanation for the origins of God? He was not birthed by the great chaos, he is not the product of some battle or cosmic familial spat, God is not an alien from another planet. God *is*. (And notice present tense! Not past or future, God *Is*.)

God *Is*. And we and all creation are sustained by him. We exist because He *Is*.

This is *not* to suggest some pantheistic notion that “God is *in* everything,” that we all “contain God,” or any other such heretical notions. Rather it is to affirm that all things have come into being *through* him and *without* him is nothing. He *Is*. Full stop. In fact, just as the opening to John’s Gospel makes these statements about Jesus, Jesus himself declares that He *Is* God. In eight instances in the Gospel of John, Jesus says clearly, “I am,” ἐγὼ εἰμὶ. This is the Greek rendering of that passage in Exodus where God tells Moses his name, I AM. In John 8:58, for example, when challenged how he could possibly know Abraham, Jesus replied, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, **I am.**”

Jesus *Is*. Just as God *Is*. He *Is*.

But his name is not “Jesus,” at least not in Hebrew. It is Joshua or “*Yehoshua*.” Can you hear it in that first syllable, the name of God? Yah. And the second portion is from the Hebrew root יָשַׁע meaning “to deliver or save.” Thus the name of the boy born to Mary, circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the Law, was named “Yahweh saves.” Just as the angel declared to Joseph when he said that Mary “will bear a son, and you are to name him *Yehoshua*, Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins*” (Matt. 1:21).

This is Jesus’ name and his purpose. God so loved this world that he gave his only Son to save the world, through belief in him and his sacrifice for us. The Lord Saves through his Son.

Shortly before Christmas you might have seen the NY Time’s Nicholas Kristoff’s interview with the Evangelical pastor Tim Keller.⁶ One Christian blogger declared that Keller “*highlights in a*

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/opinion/sunday/pastor-am-i-a-christian.html?_r=0

single sentence what is fundamentally deficient in American Evangelicalism.”⁷ What single sentence could be so damning? Kristoff was asking Keller what he considered the most fundamental beliefs of Christianity.

Kristoff: And the Resurrection? Must it really be taken literally?

Keller: Jesus’ teaching was not the main point of his mission. He came to save people through his death for sin and his resurrection. So his important ethical teaching only makes sense when you don’t separate it from these historic doctrines.

This, to the blogger Steve Hackman, was the smoking gun. The problem with Evangelicalism was present in this single sentence, the assertion that Jesus’ “teaching was not the main point of his mission.”

I am not going to be an apologist for American Evangelicalism, I have my own list of concerns and issues, but I think it is Hackman who has misunderstood the mission of Jesus. It is right there in his name, The LORD Saves.

Or to look at it another way around, the ethical and moral teachings of Jesus are completely in line with the Law. Jesus’ teachings affirm that which was given by God to Israel. The most important commandments, as Jesus said, are to love the Lord you God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourselves. This is straight out of the Law. And there were many great teachers of the same during Jesus’ own day; the most obvious to Christians is John the Baptist. But Jesus wasn’t just a teacher.

What *was unique* about Jesus and his teaching was the his assertion, his declarations that he was the Son of God, the Messiah sent by Yahweh to save the world, and that he would do so by offering himself up as a sacrifice for our sins. This is why Rabbi Jesus was not just any rabbi. He was the One who Saves. It is right there in his name, Yahweh Saves.

As we go through this new Church year, listen to the words of Jesus as we read them each week in the Gospels. Hear his teachings and the challenge they present to us. When you read the Old Testament consider also the example of those saints who sought to follow God as children of Israel, children of the Promise, how the Son has fulfilled the Law, and in so doing has allowed us to be adopted into God’s family and are now co-heirs with Christ. Listen also to the Epistles as Paul, James, and John give us guidance and direction to understand and live out this new Promise, the new Law, the new Covenant that has been given to us through the Son.

Since...

Phil. 2:7b ... being found in human form, 2:8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. 2:9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 2:10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 2:11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen. ✠

⁷ <http://www.stevehackman.net/tim-kellers-n-y-times-interview-reveals-american-evangelicals-problem-in-a-single-sentence/>

יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ: ס Num. 6:24

יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנְךָ: ס Num. 6:25

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם: ס Num. 6:26

6:24 The LORD bless you and keep you;

6:25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

6:26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

XII. "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

[Second Sunday after the Epiphany \(January 15, 2017\)](#)

First reading

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm

Psalm 40:1-11

Second reading

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Gospel

John 1:29-42

When my brother and I were growing up we were involved in 4H and FFA. Our father had grown up on a ranch in central Texas and wanted us to have some experience beyond our suburban DC setting. My brother, being older, led in most areas and so he was the first to get a lamb one spring to rear through the summer, halter train, show at the county fair, and then sell at auction. It wasn't long though before I also had a lamb each summer. I remember one Shropshire ewe in particular. I called her "Kathy" after a friend who was flattered, but never realized it was because Kathy the lamb was as recalcitrant as Kathy the some-time girlfriend.

Sheep and lambs are found throughout the Bible and have all sorts of uses and meanings. Like bread and wine, sheep and goats were staples of life in the ancient Mediterranean. A sheep can produce wool for soft clothing, leather for shoes, armor, and parchment for writing, milk for drinking and making cheeses, and meat for eating. They were one of the most valuable possessions a person could have and so were also one of the most common sacrifices God asked his people to make.

This morning we hear John the Baptist tell us that Jesus is "the lamb of God who takes away the **sin** of the world." It is a phrase we hear and use a lot in our liturgy and worship, but what sort of lamb did John the Baptist have in mind? I don't mean what sort of breed of sheep, of course, but what does it *mean* that Jesus is "the lamb of God"?

As odd as it may sound, in the time of John the Baptist one image of the lamb was as a figure of God's judgment who trampled and destroyed evil in the world.⁸ After all, John the Baptist preached "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Matt. 3:2) and the coming of the kingdom of heaven is the coming of God's judgement of the wicked and justice for the righteous. This image of the Lamb of God as trampling on the beasts of wickedness might well be in the mind of John the Baptist as he looks up and sees Jesus striding towards him. Certainly the Book of Revelation understands the Lamb as the one who conquers: Rev. 17:14 "they [the kings and the beast] will make war on the Lamb, and **the Lamb will conquer them**, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

This may be what John the Baptist has in mind, but he says something more about the Lamb he sees before him. He is the Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world*. This might call to

⁸ See The Testament of Joseph 19:8. May be Christian interpolation.

mind the imagery from Isaiah of the suffering servant who was “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities,”

Isa. 53:7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
 yet he did not open his mouth;
 like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
 and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
 so he did not open his mouth.

That might be brought to mind, but certainly one would think of all the different sacrifices in the Law that required a lamb. Every day—twice daily—lambs were offered as sacrifices at the Temple (Exod. 29:38-46) and when a sin offering was needed a female sheep without blemish would do (Lev. 4:32). The sacrifice that is most often called to mind, certainly for Christians, is the Passover sacrifice since it was during that festival that Jesus was executed and Paul declares “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us!” (1 Cor. 5:7-8) The curious thing about Passover is that the lamb was not technically a sacrifice. That is to say, while it was killed to save the Israelites (you will recall that while the family ate the lamb, the blood was spread over the doorposts so that the Angel of Death, the last plague on Egypt, would pass over their homes) it was not an animal offered up *by the priests* to God. And it certainly was not a sacrifice for the sin of Israel or the world.

I will return to this in detail at Easter, why it is that Jesus offered himself up at Passover rather than at Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement which *is* the festival at which sacrifices *are offered* for the sins of the nation. Suffice it to say now that Paul’s quote from 1 Corinthians, Hebrews 2:15 (Jesus came “to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people”), and the declaration of John the Baptist make it clear that the Lamb of God, Jesus, offered himself as a sacrifice for the sin of the whole world.

This is what we might call a “hard saying” for many. This core and fundamental doctrine of Christianity, that Jesus came, took the form of a man in order to offer up his own life as a sacrifice for the sins of those who believe in him, is offensive to so many, even those who are devout and faithful Christians. The primary concern is that it seems so barbaric and offensive that God should demand a human sacrifice. And it is offensive! It *should* be offensive to us. But rather than attempt to rewrite or ignore what the New Testament says we should consider *why* God would have done such a thing.

The rabbis have a wonderful phrase לשון הקודש לשון האיש, “the language of God is the language of man.” It means that God speaks to us in language that we can understand; he meets us where we are. Throughout most of history humanity in all regions, countries, and cultures understood that in order to show your obedience to your god you offered up sacrifices, you gave up something you value deeply to show your god that you are faithful. Correspondingly, when crimes had been committed it was understood that they were not just to the individuals harmed, but to the gods as well. So in addition to any fines and restitution to be offered to the injured party, one also had to offer sacrifices to the gods.

When God gave Israel the Law, he was speaking to them in a language they would understand, the language of sacrifice. The biblical legal system was advanced in many ways. While “an eye for an eye” (Lev. 24:20) might seem harsh to us, this concept of equivalence kept people from

demanding that a life be given for the loss of an eye. And in practice, rather than requiring an actual eye when you put out another person's eye, one could simply pay them for the value of that eye. (Our legal system is essentially still the same. We have simply removed God and the gods from the equation.) In addition to the various laws that governed their day-to-day lives, Israel also was to show their devotion to God by offering sacrifices of Thanksgiving and devotion, for purification and restitution. The first fruits of the harvest and the flocks were given over to God in thanksgiving and recognition that all good things come from God. Even when a human son was born, a lamb was offered *in place of the child*, a sacrifice to redeem the child (Exod. 34:20). Over the centuries individual prayer and the study of Scripture developed in parallel with Temple worship, but every day, throughout the day, sacrifices were offered to the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem. For the ancient Jews this *was the language of man and God*. So when John the Baptist tells his disciples "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" they may have thought about the conquering eschatological lamb or perhaps even the servant who would suffer for the iniquities of the nation, but there is little doubt that the daily sacrifices offered for the expiation of sins would be the first to come to mind. At that moment I don't think even John the Baptist would have fully understood what his own words meant, but they knew that the Lamb of God was present and the Kingdom of God was near.

While most do not need to learn Hebrew or Greek in order to understand the Bible, we all need a greater appreciation for the language of sacrifice if we are to understand what Jesus did for us and asks of us. If the notion of Jesus as a human sacrifice for you, for me, and for the world is abhorrent to you, it should be! It is not a new offense. After all, Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, just a little beyond our reading today, "we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles!" So even in the first century, even in the days following Jesus' death and resurrection, people found it a hard concept to accept. Since we no longer live in a world that operates with daily offerings and sacrifices of animals and grain, it is appropriate to consider other analogies that can help us to better understand and explain to this modern world what Jesus' offering means. **What we cannot change is the work of God in Jesus on the cross.** Translating the language of sacrifice does not change its meaning, it makes the message comprehensible to all the world.

This is the vital work of the church because it is "the lamb of God who takes away *the sin of the world*." This isn't just about Israel anymore. As God declared through Isaiah (49:6) "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

God, in ways that are unknowable in detail but not in result, made himself human in the form of Jesus in order to teach us, to live with us following God's Law, so that he could offer himself as the one true and final sacrifice that would abolish the sacrificial requirements of the Law even as he baptizes us with the Spirit.

When John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "behold, here is the Lamb of God!" His disciples went and followed Jesus, they pursued him to see where he would lead them. They did not yet fully know who Jesus was and so when Jesus turned and met them and asked what they wanted, they asked where he was staying so that they might listen and learn from him. And Jesus

said, “Come and see.” When they had spent simply *one day* with the Lamb of God they knew that he was the one anointed by God to deliver Israel and the world and they could not help but go and tell those they loved that they had found the Messiah.

By the very fact that we are here this morning, we each are walking after Jesus to see where he might lead, to learn more about who he is and why he has come into this world and our lives.

Perhaps you have already come to know and realize that he *is* the Messiah in which case our task is to go and bring others to him. Perhaps you are still just curious. To all of us at all times, Jesus turns and meets us where we are on the road and says, “Come and see.”

“Christ our Passover *is* sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.”

Amen. ✠

XIII. Same Mind, Same Purpose, Same Message

[Third Sunday after the Epiphany \(January 22, 2017\)](#)

First reading

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

Second reading

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Gospel

Matthew 4:12-23

I have often contemplated writing a commentary on 1 Corinthians and calling it “Paul’s Letter to the Episcopal Church.” It is perhaps the most relevant text in the Bible for our modern church setting. Not only does it deal with issues such as divisions due to doctrinal and leadership conflicts, its moral setting in first century Corinth is probably more like our own modern, western context than any time in between. As it happens this year our lectionary provides us with seven weeks of this challenging letter! Over the course of the next month and a half we will consider what God is continuing to say to the church of God that is in Nashville, even as he spoke to the church of God that was in Corinth.

Corinth was a port city that has been active and important almost continuously since the 8th century BCE. Located on the Isthmus of Corinth, the ancient city was roughly half way between Sparta and Athens and was at the crossroads of commerce. The population was one of the most diverse in antiquity, not only in terms of ethnicities (Greeks, Romans, Jews, Egyptians, Parthians, etc.), but also in terms of religion. Ancient histories and modern archeology reveal temples to the Roman, Greek, and Egyptian gods as well as Jewish synagogues and Christian churches. By the time Paul arrived in Corinth the worship of the Roman emperor had been established as well. The great and recently deceased scholar and Jesuit priest Joseph A. Fitzmyer summarized, “Diverse, then, would have been not only the sociological and economic character of Roman Corinth, but also the religious character of its cosmopolitan population.”⁹

It reminds me of a U2 lyric from their song about New York: “Irish, Italians, Jews and Hispanics / Religious nuts, political fanatics.” People from all the world converging and bringing with them all their beliefs, practices, hang-ups, vices, foods, and passions; that was Corinth and that is the modern, western world we live in today.

⁹ {Fitzmyer 2008@33}

And if you consider where humanity has come in the last two millennia, while we have made seemingly innumerable scientific discoveries and we have developed all sorts of new technologies, we have not advanced morally. Many will disagree with that statement, and certainly societies around the world have been more repressive than first century Corinth. But if one believes that today's pluralistic and relativistic western society is the current height of human moral evolution, the Corinth of Paul's day was its equal and so his letter remains just as relevant. So as we read Paul's letter to that ancient community, I believe we will find it immediately pertinent to our own circumstances. Even more so since in today's passage, the day after our diocesan convention, Paul's appeal is

“...that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

I have to say that even with disagreement it was a very agreeable convention. Everyone was warm and hospitable, but we were not of one accord and certainly were not of “the same mind.” “No divisions,” being “united in the same mind and the same purpose.” It almost sounds like it belongs in the Book of Revelation, in a description of the new heaven and new earth. But Paul is all too aware of how difficult this is in reality, hence the need for him to write this letter. The Christian community in Corinth was *already* being torn apart. And remember, this was just a few years after the movement had begun! Already people were taking sides, aligning themselves with one preacher or another, and finding reasons to tell other people that they weren't worshipping God properly.

So right at the top of his letter Paul offers what seems a completely unreasonable request, that there be no divisions. When are there ever *not* divisions? Surely Paul can't be serious! So it is that we usually soften or modify his language in an attempt to make his appeal something achievable. For example, Eugene Peterson's marvelous paraphrase *The Message*, renders the first verse of our reading in this way,

¹⁰I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You *must* get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common.

Peterson's idiomatic rendering conveys a vital message and may well serve as an appropriate summary of my sermon by the time we are done, but it obscures the direct and challenging words of Paul.

“I appeal to you... **that** all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Paul's words are a stark challenge and we must hear them for what that are, the call to ideal Christian living. It sounds like a description of what it will be like to live in the world to come, because it is. Where the city of God “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ...Nothing accursed will be found there any more” (Rev. 21:23, 22:3) There will be no strife or division. The vision of the City of God is the perfection of our Christian life. We are not called to be “good enough,” we are called to be “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people” (1Pet. 2:9; the theme of the convention). Just because Paul's words are hard doesn't mean we can ignore them. The words of Jesus are no easier

Matt. 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ **22** But I say to you that if you are *angry* with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you *insult* a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

Who *hasn't* been angry with another person, who hasn't insulted someone, or said that someone else was a fool? We have just come through a grueling presidential campaign where it seems no one had anything nice to say about the other party's candidate and everyone felt justified in calling the other a fool (or worse). Did you ever consider that Jesus would consider our behavior sinful?

This is the tension between the holiness that God calls us to and the reality of our human, frail and flawed lives. *This* is the tension of the challenge of living the Christian life. To seek to achieve now what will only be fully accomplished in the world to come. To seek to bring God's kingdom as near as possible while knowing that only Christ will bring it to fruition. We must constantly strive to be of the mind of Christ while knowing that we are all too human.

We all know the issues that divide us today: politics, sexuality, economics, personalities. I ill *not* go into details on any of them today, but we will and we must begin those conversations. I also will not do that today because there are *always* issues that we will be at odds over. Delving into the specifics of this or that issue are important, but what Paul offers us today is not an answer to a specific conflict but rather the answer to all conflict. That answer is to be of the same mind and same purpose which is *the same message*: the cross of Christ.

As we read through 1 Corinthians we will see that there were *many* issues with which the church was wrestling. Paul opens with the debate over who to follow, who is their true pastor Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), or Christ? His response is sarcastic and direct.

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

He then digresses into a stream of thought about who he has or has not baptized, but he refocuses his message again by declaring,

Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

Anything, anything at all that empties the Cross of Christ of its power should be set aside.

Arguments about who is the better preacher, how to worship, what to wear when we worship, the authority of scripture, the authority of the bishop, who to vote for, who to marry, and who to call as your rector must all be set aside when we come to the cross.

Don't misunderstand me! These are all important issues and if a particular issue isn't important to you, you can be certain it is important to someone else. They deserve the same respect that you expect. I am thankful that we as a diocese were able to exhibit this at the convention yesterday. There were several resolutions brought forward that sought to comment and counter the fact that our bishop has not allowed the trial liturgy for the blessing of same sex couples. There was much discussion and debate and in the end, the committee on resolutions brought forth a single resolution that acknowledge that we are of different minds on this issues in the

Diocese of Tennessee. It also recognized that we must pray and discuss this within our individual communities and as a diocese and so that is what will happen over the course of this year.

This was important work and certainly the most contentious issue at convention, but it wasn't the only one. There were a number of pink hats and, once I walked outside the cathedral I saw *lots* of pink hats with ears. Even so, no matter how passionate and vital we feel any of these issues are, they must *all* be set aside, laid down on the path as we climb Golgotha to worship at the Cross of Christ. *This* is where we are of one mind, one purpose, and without division.

Because it is on the cross through his sacrifice that Jesus reunited us with God. He restored our relationship with the Creator. In so doing Christ has made possible for us to strive to be without any division and of one mind. In so doing Christ has called us to live in that beautiful and painful tension of Christian living: to love the unlovable, to call no one fool, even the foolish, and to lay aside our priorities for God's priorities.

It is hard. It is difficult and we are not perfect. But we draw closer to unity the closer we are to the cross. Look up and see there the face of our savior.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

Therefore brothers and sisters of the church of God in Nashville be united, of the same mind, same purpose, same message: Christ and him crucified. *Amen.* ☩

XIV. The Cross is Foolishness

The first Sunday after President Trump's first full week in office. He issued many executive orders, specifically banning refugees from entering the US. It was also the Sunday of our Parish Family Meeting.

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (January 29, 2017)

First reading

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm

Psalm 15

Second reading

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Gospel

Matthew 5:1-12

- Prov. 2:1** ... if you accept my words
 and treasure up my commandments within you,
5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD
 and find the knowledge of God.
6 For the LORD gives wisdom;
 from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians has indeed proved timely for our church and community, as it has for two thousand years. He opens his letter with his primary concern: that there are divisions among the body of Christ. He calls us to unity! When has there not been such divisions? As we discussed last week, we have been called to exist in that beautiful and painful tension of Christian living: to love the unlovable, to call no one fool, even the foolish, and to lay aside our priorities for God's priorities. It is hard. It is difficult and we are not perfect. But we draw closer to unity the closer we are to the cross.

1 Cor. 1:23 "...we proclaim Christ crucified."

This is the heart of the Gospel and the center of all Pauline theology. Throughout all of Paul's teaching on how we are to treat one another and ourselves, how are to worship and the nature of the gifts of the Spirit, it is all grounded and returns to the fact that we, all of us, are to proclaim Christ crucified. It is not just Jesus the teacher, the pacifist, the healer of the miracle worker, it is *that* Jesus who then gave himself up to be the sacrifice for the sin of the world. This must be our central point, our axis about which everything else rotates.

Yet it is *so* offensive. As we discussed two weeks ago, the idea of Jesus as the lamb of God that is sacrificed for our sins defies and offends our sensibilities. Paul understands that and says, that is why "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." They are perishing because they insist that they cannot accept the gift of Christ's sacrifice because it makes no sense

to them. It makes no sense, says Paul, because human wisdom fails where God's power conquers.

21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. Salvation is not something that we can discern or understand fully and solely through our own intellect. It is not something that we can fashion for ourselves. This is not to say that anything and everything which "the wise of the world" have discovered and discerned is useless or meaningless. Paul is not saying that Richard Dawkins and Steven Hawkins are wrong about biology and astronomy. What Paul is saying that our pride in our own ability to discern truth will keep us from hearing and understanding the message of the cross.

22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, **23** but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. We all do it; we all want a sign from heaven or we feel we need to reason it out ourselves before we submit to God. And when we come to the cross our sensibilities are offended. *It makes no sense.* Until and unless you understand that God's wisdom is not the wisdom of *this* world. God's priorities are not the priorities of this world.

This world and its wisdom tells us that it is the strong that survive, those that are optimally adapted for their environment are the ones who thrive and then can dominate and make the rules for others. The world says we are supposed to strive to be the wealthiest, the strongest, and the smartest. To be "great." Those who are jobless or in need simply haven't worked hard enough. They're losers and not worth the trouble. And anyway, we have enough troubles of our own, we should just focus on ourselves. Sadness and suffering are hateful conditions to be eradicated by any distraction that will do. *This* is the wisdom of this world, the goals and priorities of self-satisfaction. The wisdom of the world is foolishness to God.

God says

5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

This is the message of the cross. It is the weakness of God under the cruel might of this world and yet that "weakness" destroyed death and suffering. It is a paradox that perplexes the mind because it is counter to all that our selfish desires. It is the selflessness of God, offering himself to save us. It is utter foolishness to the world, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

What is your stumbling block? How many more signs do you need? We need to let go of our pride that requires *us* to save ourselves. Set them aside and accept the gracious gift of the cross, that is the power of God. In so doing this world is turned upside down as God chooses "what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God [chooses] what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

Imagine... what will happen when we do so, not just as individuals but as a congregation, a community, a nation. As we draw closer to the cross we are unified in the power of God that is

the message of Christ crucified. It is a message that turns this world upside down and God's priorities become the world's. The meek become the noble, the hurting become the comforters, the powerful become the humble, the rejected become the honored, and the lowly become great. So let us remember our own calling, brothers and sisters, because God chose us who were lowly, who were not wise or powerful or *great* by human standards. God chose us for a purpose, to shame the wise, to shame the great, and to bring this world to the cross that will turn it upside down.

God chose you.

All this comes through "Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

Amen. ✠

Weekly Devotionals - Jan 30 - Feb. 4

Monday, {Jan. 30}

Psalms 56, 57, [58]

Isa. 51:17-23; Gal. 4:1-11; Mark 7:24-37

Reading

Mark 7:24-37

24 From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'²⁸ But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'²⁹ Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.'³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

31 Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.³² They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue.³⁴ Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.'³⁵ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.³⁶ Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.³⁷ They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Reflection [266 words]

This passage in Mark's Gospel contains two very challenging elements. The first is his treatment of the Syrophenician woman who "begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter." No parent cannot fail to appreciate the depths of anguish that mother must have had when she came

and begged Jesus to heal her child. Jesus' response seems harsh and offensive. There are various ways this passage has been interpreted, but I suspect the most accurate is as a challenge. Often we find Jesus responding to those who seek his blessing, power, or healing not with immediate compliance but challenge (e.g., the rich young man, Matt. 19:16-22). Is this woman looking for a "quick fix" or does she persevere? Her faith is evident in her statement that even a crumb, a small morsel would be sufficient. Jesus acknowledged her faith and the demon left the child.

The other difficult of Mark is the so-called "Messianic secret." After performing miracles, "Jesus ordered them to tell no one." Why? Again, various answers have been given, the most likely is that Jesus knew that he had much work to do and the more the word of his ability spread, the less freedom he would have to do that holy work.

We are called to continue his holy work, even if all that we may have to offer are crumbs, they are life and light to those who receive it. We should be ready and willing to offer such help without any expectation of recognition or praise "and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:18).

TUESDAY, {Jan. 31}

AM Psalm 61, 62;

Isa. 52:1-12; Gal. 4:12-20; Mark 8:1-10

Reading

Mark 8:1-10

8In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, ²'I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. ³If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.'⁴His disciples replied, 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?' ⁵He asked them, 'How many loaves do you have?' They said, 'Seven.'⁶Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. ⁷They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. ⁸They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. ⁹Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. ¹⁰And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

Reflection [189 words]

I still remember the first time I heard a preacher explain the feeding of the four thousand as an example of “[stone soup](#).” The idea is that while no one person has enough food to feed everyone if each person shares just a bit of what they have, when combined it is enough for all. The “miracle” is that Jesus showed the crowd the importance of sharing in common for the good of the community. Except that is not what the Gospel says.

Jesus gave thanks to God for the provision of seven loaves and they distributed them to everyone. Jesus blessed the fish and they too were shared with all gathered. Thanking God and blessing the gifts that God had given them that day yielded the miraculous provision and more. That is the nature of a miracle. There is no natural explanation. It is from God.

God has blessed us, individually and corporately, with much. When we give thanks to him, bless his Name for his provision, and then set about the work he has given us to do we will have all that is needed and more.

Collect for the Day

Almighty God, to whom our needs are known before we ask: Help us to ask only what accords with your will; and those good things which we dare not, or in our blindness cannot ask, grant us for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, {Feb. 1}

AM Psalm 72;

Isa. 54:1-10(11-17); Gal. 4:21-31; Mark 8:11-26

Reading

Mark 8:11-26

11 The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. ¹²And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.’ ¹³And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

14 Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. ¹⁵And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and

the yeast of the Herodians.’¹⁶ They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread.’¹⁷ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?’¹⁸ Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?’¹⁹ When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’²⁰ And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’²¹ Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’

22 They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, ‘Can you see anything?’²⁴ And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.²⁶ Then he sent him away to his home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village.’

Reflection [278 words]

This passage opens with Jesus not only refusing to offer a sign to the Pharisees but telling them that “no sign will be given to *this generation*.” This seems a very odd thing to say since he has just fed the four thousand and following this exchange with the Pharisees and his disciples on the boat he heals a blind man. Surely these are signs!

The key to understand this passage is the term translated as “generation.” This term also means “family” and the “generation” who will not receive a sign is not all the people alive at that time, but this “family” or group in question, i.e., the Pharisees. In other words, Jesus is saying that there is no miracle or sign that will satisfy them and he refuses to provide them on demand, but rather meets the needs where they are truly required such as healing the blind man.

Yet he warns the disciples and us that we must be careful that our lives are not corrupted by such cynical demands as that required by the Pharisees. Even though the disciples had seen all that Jesus had done, especially the miraculous feeding of the crowds, they still doubted.

God has and continues to work in our lives. If we refuse to remember what he has done and accept his grace when it appears, then no amount of miracles and signs will convince us. There are times of hunger and hardship in all our lives, of that there is no doubt. We are sustained through those times by remembering his provision and grace in the past while expecting and being willing to accept it in the present.

Collect for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

THURSDAY, {Feb. 2}

AM Psalm [70], 71;

Isa. 55:1-13; Gal. 5:1-15; Mark 8:27-9:1

Reading

Mark 8:27-9:1

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’²⁸ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’²⁹ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’⁹ And he said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.’

Reflection [251 words]

Present here in this one reading is the nub of the Gospel, not just the Gospel of Mark, but the Good News of Jesus the Christ. Who is this Jesus? Many have different answers: a wise teacher, a mystic who connected with God, a man who showed us humility, a pacifist who taught the world the value of self-sacrifice, a prophet. But who do you say that he is? He *is* the Messiah. Even Peter could see that...and still get it wrong.

Jesus was the anointed one (Messiah) of God, the very son of God and son of Man, fully human and fully divine sent to die for our sins. Jesus says that “the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” And when confronted with that reality Peter cannot accept it. Matthew’s Gospel tells us that he said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” And Jesus chided him saying, “you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Setting our minds not on divine things but human things. We want it to be easier, cleaner, nicer. But Jesus had to die for the sin of the world to reconcile us to God. These are the “divine things,” what God is most concerned about is not his own suffering, but the salvation of the world. So...

Who do we say that he is?

Collect for the Day

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FRIDAY, {Feb. 3}

AM Psalm 69:1-23(24-30)31-38;

Isa. 56:1-8; Gal. 5:16-24; Mark 9:2-13

Reading

Mark 9:2-13

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ ⁶He did not

know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. ¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. ¹¹Then they asked him, ‘Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ ¹²He said to them, ‘Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt?’ ¹³But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.’

Reflection [253 words]

In chapters 8 and 9 of Mark we have Jesus’ ministry clearly laid out. He teaches, heals, and then explains that he, the son of Man, must suffer and die and yet will be raised from the dead three days later. At the beginning of this chapter exposition gives way to imagery as Elijah and Moses appear and talk with Jesus on the mountain. They appear because in Jesus is the fulfillment of both the Law and the Prophets. Finally, if there was any doubt, it is removed when the voice of God declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

And poor Peter. He has been with Jesus every step of these two chapters and frequently he is right with the program, “You are the messiah!” But just as often he doesn’t quite get it. In this section it is almost comical. He doesn’t really know what to say at this miraculous moment so he says, “Let’s build some tents for you, Elijah, and Moses!” And yet Jesus remains with Peter and Peter remains with Jesus.

Peter is not perfect, he has his doubts and his priorities are not always God’s, but he remains faithful. Even his most momentous denial of Jesus (Mark 14) occurs because he refuses to be far from his master, following as they took Jesus to the High Priest.

We are not perfect, but like Peter, let us remain faithful, following the master wherever he leads, and listening to him for he is God’s beloved Son.

Collect for the Day

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

SATURDAY, {Feb. 4}

AM Psalm 75, 76; PM Psalm 23, 27

Isa. 57:3-13; Gal. 5:25-6:10; Mark 9:14-29

Reading

Mark 9:14-29

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.’ ¹⁹He answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.’ ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ ²³Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’ ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ ²⁶After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ ²⁹He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’

Reflection

Throughout this week in the Gospel of Mark we have seen Jesus healing, miraculously providing food, and God himself declaring that Jesus was his “beloved Son.” In spite of all of these signs people continue to question, to doubt, and to demand more proof from Jesus before they will believe that he is the son of Man. Where is their faith?

When Jesus, Peter, James, and John return from the mountain they find a crowd gathered around a distraught father seeking healing for his beloved son. The disciples were stymied. Everyone is frustrated, even Jesus. “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.”

Here we find the crux of these chapters, the heart of our own journey as well. Do we believe? I believe, but do I *enough*? Often my cry has been that of the father, “I believe; help my unbelief!” And Jesus responds. That is the point We do not have to do it all ourselves. If we believe, even haltingly or imperfectly, and acknowledge our need of help to close that gap, Jesus will meet us.

What signs are you seeking? What proof do you insist God must provide before you will believe? How much more do you need? All we really need is the merest speck of faith and God will do the rest.

Collect for the Day

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your works and sanctified a day of rest for all your creatures: Grant that we, putting away all earthly anxieties, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our rest here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

XV. God Gave the Growth

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (February 12, 2017)

- First reading
 - Deuteronomy 30:15-20
- Psalm
 - Psalm 119:1-8
- Second reading
 - 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
- Gospel
 - Matthew 5:21-37

1 Cor. 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but **God gave the growth**. 3:7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

The lectionary continues today with chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians as Paul continues his theme of spiritual maturity and repeats his refrain that we are of Christ, not Paul or Apollos.¹⁰ This section opens with a strong rebuke from Paul, challenging the church of God that is in Corinth by saying that they have not grown since he first declared the Gospel to them.

1 Cor. 3:1 I could not speak to you [then] as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. **2** I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, **3** for you are still of the flesh. *For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh*, and behaving according to human inclinations?

Paul came with simple, clear words about nothing other than Christ and him crucified because they were spiritual infants, but now when they need to go deeper into more challenging

¹⁰ As an aside, I was asked this week why I say “One Corinthians.” I had forgotten that then-candidate Donald Trump was mocked when he did the same at Liberty University. My use of “One Corinthians” or “One Chronicles” is not an allusion to that moment or any other, it is simply how the many, mostly the English, refer to the texts and I suppose my time in Oxford left this as one indelible imprint.

matters he finds they are still arguing about petty things. But when do we *not* behave according to human inclinations? It seems again that Paul is asking too much, that we should have *no quarreling*, no divisions, but complete unity in the mind of Christ. Has there ever been any community that has ever been so unified? When is there not some jealousy, some quarreling? Don't we always prefer some leaders over others, we like to be with these people more than those other folks, and of course *this* church is more right than that one so we must oppose them. When has the church, any community, ever *not* been in conflict? Even the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, were miraculously brought up out of the Land of Egypt and practically their first act is to rebel against Moses and God.

It seems ridiculous that Paul should bother insisting that we be something that we cannot be. But this isn't just Paul. In our reading from Deuteronomy God is calling Israel to follow not just the Ten Commandments, but *all* the "commandments, decrees, and ordinances." Jesus takes it even further, telling us that even the slightest inclination towards sin must be removed from our lives. "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away!"

What is our response to these extreme demands from God? Historically we have found all sorts of ways to reduce the impact of such statements, "What Jesus says is so outlandish, it is clearly hyperbole." Yes, but does that make it any less true? God doesn't want us to mutilate ourselves, but does that mean it is all right for us to have a bit of lust now and then?

God declares that our goal must be to live out our lives in accordance with his Will and Law, even as he knows that we cannot fulfill it completely. That is why he also provided sacrifices for repentance and ultimately the sacrifice of his Son. Jesus and Paul call us to live holy lives, spiritually set apart from the normal nature of this world, even as we live in a world that will continue to claw and pull at us.

This is what it means to move beyond mere milk and on to the meat of the Christian diet. It means moving beyond petty bickering and jealous fights and instead letting go of whatever “rights” you feel you may have to hold on to that grudge and be reconciled to your brother and sister.

So what is Jesus telling us when he says,

5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 5:22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.”

Or again,

5:27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’
5:28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

What Jesus seems to be doing is what the Rabbis call “building a fence around the Law.” Consider a different example from the Garden of Eden. You will recall that God told Adam, before Eve was on the scene, “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen. 2:17). Yet when the serpent comes to tease Eve she tells him that “God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die’” (Gen. 3:3). But God did not say they shouldn’t touch it, just that they should not eat it. It seems that Adam, in an effort to *make sure that Eve didn’t eat the fruit*, told her to not even touch it. It would be impossible to eat it if you don’t touch it so it seems a sound tactic. So it is that in orthodox Jewish contexts (and in some Christian traditions) women are required wear wigs or head coverings and simple, loose clothing as a deterrent to lascivious thoughts.

This seems to be in line with Jesus' teaching, yet he is, in fact, taking it much further than offering an added defense against breaking the Law. Jesus is not simply say "don't look, don't touch" he is saying, "don't even think about it!" If we can look at one another with true love, as God does, rather than with desire (whether that is sexual desire, the desire to control or manipulate), then we will not sin, in our hearts or our bodies.

The Law is a guide, given by God to direct us towards right behavior and allow us to show our obedience to God. As Paul says in Romans (7:7, 12) "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin ... [and] ...the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good." Of course this section of Romans chapter 7 shows Paul, the same apostle who is calling us to be without divisions, jealousy, or quarrels, wrestling with the fundamental challenge of being human. As he says, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Jesus knows that if we were to follow his commands literally we would all be nothing but a torso and not even that! (Like the Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.) Go back to the Garden, there was only *one negative command* and humanity could not even resist that. So if God knows that even at our most devout we "do not do the good" we want to do, how are we ever supposed to live up to these extreme injunctions? Should we just throw our hands in the air ("like we just don't care")? Should we just give up and say, "we will never achieve it, so why bother trying?" Of course not!

This is the journey of faith that we are called to walk, even as we pass through the darkest valley that is this human condition, fraught with our own frailty. It is a journey that begins at the cross and continues with our sanctification by God in Jesus and it ends only our complete transformation ("glorification") as we are raised in our true, spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44).

Consider Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery in John 8. He challenged those who had brought her forward for judgment, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And when they all left he not only said "I do not condemn you" but he also said, "Now go *and sin no more*." Jesus did not justify the woman's prior lifestyle, he acknowledged it for the sin it was, and while pardoning her from the consequences of that sin he commands her "go and sin no more." We are forgiven of our sins and yet our journey must continue; we must go *and sin no more*.

Remember, Paul opens his letter to the Corinthians describing them as "the church of God in Corinth, those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus." So this same community that Paul is saying is not mature enough for "spiritual meat" (even though he will later give them some pretty heavy teachings) is nonetheless sanctified and called to be saints. We, the church of God on Belmont Park Terrace in Nashville Tennessee, are sanctified in Christ Jesus.

That means that we have been *and are continually* being made holy in Christ. That means that our sins have been forgiven through the blood of Jesus' sacrifice! And yet we still call others "fool." That means that at times we are able to wrestle with the meaning of atonement and glimpse the eternal perspective of God, while at others we need to be reminded to stop arguing with each other. The redeemed life we live in Christ is an ongoing process as the Holy Spirit is at work transforming our lives. That is the growth that God gives to us all.

There is a Paul who planted the seeds of faith in your life and there are many Apollos who water that seed. That care and tending leads us to the baptismal font and the declaration of our faith, to the altar rail to receive the nourishment of his body and blood, to confirmation and the mature affirmation that same faith, and it sends us out into the world to declare that faith to a hurting people. But moving through it all, guiding, strengthening, and sanctifying is God who gives the growth.

Amen. ✠

Lent Essay 2017

Growing up in an evangelical Presbyterian church I had never understood Lent until I was in college. I do not mean to suggest that my parents or the pastors did not know about Lent, but it was not something observed in our church and is largely ignored in Presbyterian communities. As I studied church history I began to get some sense of the season and its traditional disciplines, but then we moved to New Orleans, home of Mardi Gras. Wow.

In case you weren't aware (I was not) Mardi Gras, "Fat Tuesday," is the day before Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. To say that it is a big party is to lack an appreciation for adjectives. Massive, grotesque, gargantuan, hedonistic, Caligula-esque. Any of those might come close. Might. Bacchanalian is probably the most accurate. What began in medieval days as a tradition of eating all the sweet and luxurious foods in the house to prepare for the austerity of Lent has devolved into a festival of indulgence of all excesses imaginable. Most who partake have no conception that Mardi Gras is a part of the Christian season of Lent. In fact, most are not even conscious for Ash Wednesday, let alone aware of its existence.

Far from being an excuse to live to excess, Lent can be a remarkable time for healing and growth. Lent is the church season from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, forty days not counting the Sundays which are considered feast days, and commemorates Jesus's time in the wilderness when he fasted and was tempted by the devil (Matt. 3:16-4:2).

Matt. 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." **4:1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

God declares his love for his Son and then immediately sends him out “into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Thanks Dad. While we are not Jesus and are not perfect as he was, his experience should encourage to faithfulness us as we journey through our own wasteland. Time and again the devil tempted him with everything from the tastiest morsels to fabulous power. Each time Jesus countered Satan with Scripture.

For millennia, Christians have followed the example of our Savior and set aside this period as a time of reflection and devotion, to develop the strength to resist any temptation. Thus many converts to Christianity set aside Lent as the time to prepare themselves for baptism, spending their time praying and studying Scripture before they are baptized at the Easter Vigil.

Lent should be a time of reflection, repentance, and restoration. We should not shun the wasteland experience, but neither should we enter into it lightly. Be encouraged doubt leads to faith and temptation to discipline.

Matt. 4:10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

XVI. Holy Perfect

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (February 19, 2017)

- First reading
 - Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
- Psalm
 - Psalm 119:33-40
- Second reading
 - 1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23
- Gospel
 - Matthew 5:38-48

Lev. 19:2 “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Matt. 5:48 “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Our readings last week included Paul urging us on towards maturity, to get at the meat of the faith, and Jesus setting the standard far beyond that of the Law. Not only should we not murder someone, we should not even think negatively about them! So I preached about the way in which Jesus and Paul call us to live to impossibly high standards; that we should not be discouraged, but instead trust and accept the work of the Spirit in making us holy. Today our Gospel reading ends with Jesus commanding us, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Great...how am I supposed to live up to that?!

Before I try and address Jesus’ words and our Old Testament reading from Leviticus, let’s consider Paul’s message to the Corinthians. He addressing, as we know, the conflict resulting from members of the church following after different leaders and he uses the analogy of both the church and ourselves as being houses, the Temple of God constructed upon the foundation of Jesus Christ.

You may not have noticed but our reading from 1 Corinthians skipped a few verses. Verses 12-13 are worth reading in their context after verse 11.

3:11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— 13 the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

Paul will go on to remind us that the structure being built is not just the church, but ourselves.

3:16 Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

As it says elsewhere, we are a new creation in Christ. Jesus is the foundation of God's temple that is our lives. So, what are we building upon that foundation? How are we living our lives, what are we doing with the time and talent we have been given? You are saved, praise God! But what will you do with your life now?

I am afraid I just can't read these passages and not think about politics and politicians. Some of you may remember that during the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski scandal there were some pundits who were blaming Clinton's Baptist faith for his (apparently) serial fidelity issues. They argued that the theology that said "once saved, always saved" gave people the license to go out and continue sinning because they have been assured that no matter what they had done or will do they have been saved and will enter into heaven. They might have a point.

Do not mistake me! Christ has died for the sin of the world: yours and mine, past, present, and future. But he did not die for our sins just so that we could get a heavenly “RapidPass.” He died so that we might be made whole and in accepting his sacrifice for us, we receive the Holy Spirit who wants to transform our lives.

Now I suppose that some do take this gift to mean that they can now do anything and they will be forgiven. If so, they might reason, why change? God will continue to forgive me. But James encourages us to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22) and reminds us that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). I will question no one’s faith, but what works of the Holy Spirit, what evidence of that faith is in your life? Are you building upon that strong foundation of Christ and him crucified with the straw and sticks of smiles and platitudes? Or is your life built of the stone and mortar, the gold and silver of the work of the Lord?

The Lord told Moses to declare to all Israel that “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” We are holy. We have been and are being sanctified by Christ, just as Israel was called by God through Abraham, to be his holy nation, a royal priesthood. And that holiness means...not taking everything in the harvest nor stripping the vineyard bare. What?!

We are called to be holy, to be perfect as God is perfect, and yet we are told that this means agricultural law? That we shall not steal or deal falsely with one another? Or perhaps my favorite from today’s reading, “You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind.” God knew our human nature and realized he had to tell us not to talk badly about someone who is deaf who cannot hear us or trip a blind person!

This doesn't seem terribly "holy" to us does it? We tend think of holiness as Mother Teresa who gave up everything to feed and care for the poor of Calcutta. Holiness is the person who spends all their time in study of the Bible and prayer. Or all those who, even to this day, give up their very lives rather than recant their belief in Christ. That is holiness.

That is holiness. But so is every element of our lives. This section of Leviticus covers all sorts of nitty-gritty details about life yet we don't call it "rules for living" or "secular laws." We call it the "Holiness Code" because the justification of every rule and guideline presented, whether it deals with what kind of seed you can plant, how you treat the immigrant in your community, or how you manage your business dealings, they are all to be followed because we are a holy people.

In other words, holiness is not something special or distinct from the rest of our daily life. It is our daily life. Every bit of it. The biblical worldview, which is to say, our worldview has no distinction between the secular and the sacred.

We talk so much in our country about the separation of church and state and I agree: the state should not set up a church or religion. BUT we have allowed that to seep into our consciousness in such a way that we believe that we can separate our lives between the church and the state, between Sunday and the rest of the week, between the office and home, the field or ball court and the classroom. But you are one, whole person. We are to be the same no matter where we are, not matter who we are dealing with, we are to be Christians, God's people called to be holy and perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

So again I say, do not be discouraged! God knows it is hard to love our enemy! But just because it is hard, does not relieve us of our duty. We must continually seek to be holy

and perfect in every aspect of every moment of our day. We are not yet perfect or holy, but we are justified, saved through faith in Christ, so even when we miss the mark we remain forgiven. As James said, “those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing” (James 1:25).

Amen. ✠

XVII. The High Places

[Transfiguration Sunday/Last Sunday before Lent \(February 26, 2017\)](#)

First reading

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm

Psalm 2

Second reading

2 Peter 1:16-21

Gospel

Matthew 17:1-9

A lot happens on mountain tops in the Bible. We read time and again of figures who go, or often are sent, “up a high mountain.” It is on a mountain that Abraham was to sacrifice his son Isaac. Taking nothing with him on the last leg of the journey but the boy with wood for the sacrifice on his back, Abraham told his servants, “the boy and I will go over there; **we will worship**, and then we will come back to you.” It was on Horeb, “the mountain of God,” that Moses beheld the bush that burned but was not consumed as God declared that he would use Moses to lead his people out of Egypt.

Ex. 3:9 “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. **10** So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” **11** But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” **12** He said, “I will be with you; and *this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God **on this mountain.***”

Notice that the sign God will give that something *will* happen is that *after it has happened* they will worship God on this very same mountain. That is faith! But I don’t know about you, I usually look for signs to come *before* the thing I am supposed to undertake; “what is the sign that I *should* do this” is the usually question not, “what is the sign that *I did this.*”

Moses did request other signs and God gave them to him, including revealing that his name was the verb of existence, saying, “I AM who I AM.” And so God confounded pharaoh and all his army and Israel made it through the wilderness back to the mountain of God. **Ex. 24:12** “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.’”

So Moses went up the mountain to meet with God. But did you notice that once he got there he had to wait a week before God called to him? Then, after he met God in the cloud on the heights of the mountain, Moses was there for forty days and forty nights. Consider *that* when we discuss our own efforts to set aside time to pray and meet with God. Do we have patience to wait even thirty minutes let alone 6 days? (I rarely do.) And when God begins to speak to us and work in our lives it takes time...a lot of time.

It is worth remembering as well what happened while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the Law from God, that Law which calls us to be a holy people. The rest of the people were just sitting around waiting...waiting. As the old folk saying goes, “idle hands make the Devil’s work” and those idle hands made an idol of a golden calf. Even when we are not on the mountain top we need to keep our focus on God because we are a people easily distracted by shiny things.

So it is in the high places, on the mountain tops, that Israel also sinned against God, committing idolatry, worshiping gods other than the LORD. After they settled in the Land of Canaan, many simply took over the Canaanite places of worship on the hilltops and began offering their own sacrifices to the local deities. God sent the prophet Elijah to fight against this idolatry, to confront King Ahab and Queen Jezebel with their blasphemy, and to destroy the 450 prophets of Baal. As he fled for his life, Elijah was so weary he simply prayed that God would

take his life (1 Kings 19:4). But God sent him on a journey of “forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”

Where centuries before Moses had stood and received the Law from the Lord, God told Elijah to “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by” (1 Kings 19:11). Perhaps you recall the story. Elijah stands there, waiting for God and a mighty wind blows, strong enough to break the mountain. But “the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; **12** and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” God was in the silence. When the Lord spoke to Elijah, he sent him back to the world that wanted to destroy him so that he could continue his ministry. Meeting God will change your life.

And it is while Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights that the Tempter took him to “a very high mountain” (Matt. 4:8). He “showed [Jesus] all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; **9** and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” **10** Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”¹¹

On the high places we can meet God or be tempted with the allusion that *we* are gods.

When I was a graduate student at Wheaton College I had a little job transcribing the handwritten manuscript of a New Testament professor into the computer. (In WordPerfect, as I recall.) He was calling it “On the Mountain Top” and it was reflections of various times in his life when he had gone away to a literal high place to reflect and meet with God. I have to say, while this person was an excellent scholar, this work was not much more than a travelogue, but it was in that project that I first learned of Tennessee’s own Holy Mountain, Sewanee. My wife, our

¹¹ Compare that with today’s Psalm. 2:7 “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you. 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’”

daughter, and I spent a beautiful summer there 17 years ago as I finished the final edits of my doctoral manuscript and I have been back many times. It is a wonderful and, for many people, sacred place.¹²

Mountains are remote, often beautiful and dangerous; that is certainly one reason why so many people feel closer to God in such places. The edifices of humanity fall away, we are exposed and vulnerable, distractions are removed and we are left alone with God. Jesus practiced this often, going aside from the crowds even and especially in the busiest times of his ministry, to pray alone or with just a few of his friends. It is an example we should follow as well, even if we cannot physically get up a mountain, Sewanee or otherwise.

Whether we journey to literal or metaphorical high places, when we set our heart to the task of turning aside from this world, even if only for a time, to be with God it will be scary, frightening, and life-changing. Abraham took Isaac up to the Holy Place to offer him as a sacrifice to God, trusting, as he told his son, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.” From the cloud on Mount Sinai, God met Moses and gave us his Law, instructions for how we are to live holy lives. As we saw last week: we are to be holy for the LORD our God is holy. That is no easy task.

When we are willing to submit ourselves fully to God and follow his commands, we will almost always be uncomfortable and will certainly be challenged to change our lives in fundamental ways.

We may well find temptation on the mountain as well, as did those Israelites who went to the high places to worship Asherah and Baal. We may find that the highest places we ascend are not literal, but metaphorical, perhaps in our careers. Standing on the top of our industry and

¹² Many people have indeed met God there and I know of at least one person who was conceived there out of wedlock. A holy act regardless of legal status.

looking out, proud of all we have accomplished, temptation is strong. Remember, it was in just such a situation that Jesus turned to Scripture and said, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’” (Matt. 4:10).

Here, towards the end of Jesus’ ministry he ascends the mountain again. He goes to pray and meet with God. Peter, James, and John are there to see the Law and the Prophets fulfilled in the Messiah as Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. Peter, as is his wont, is quick to speak rather than listen, but the voice of God cuts him off, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

We are entering in to Lent, a time that echoes Jesus’ own experience in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. In that time he was tempted and struggled, he fasted and prayed. As I wrote in the Branch (copies are available in the Narthex today), “Lent should be a time of reflection, repentance, and restoration. We should not shun the wasteland experience, but neither should we enter into it lightly. Be encouraged: doubt leads to faith, temptation to discipline.”

This Lent ascend the mountain, go into the desert, and set aside time and space to listen to God. He will meet you there.

Amen. ✠

XVII. Do not give up, take up!

[Ash Wednesday \(March 1, 2017\)](#)

First reading

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm

Psalm 51:1-17

Second reading

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Gospel

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ps. 51:15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. Amen.

Today is Ash Wednesday, marked literally and figuratively by the ashes that will be placed upon our foreheads as a sign and reminder of our mortality. It is the beginning of Lent, which is the season of forty days and forty nights between now and Easter (not including Sundays). This period of time echoes and reminds us of Jesus' own time in the wilderness when, immediately after his baptism he was sent by the Spirit of God into the wasteland where "He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished" (Matt. 4:2). Then he was tempted, yet Jesus did not succumb to the clever words and delicious offerings of Satan.

Matt. 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

So after saying "this is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" God the Father sends him out into the wilderness to be tempted! What did you do after the baptism of your child? It is there, far from humanity that Jesus suffered the most human of temptations. We remember and emulate his example as we stand firm against the pressures of this world.

So it is that Lent is considered a time of deprivation and denial. But this is too simplistic a view of the season. In a few moments, you will be invited, in the words of the Book of Common Prayer, “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

What does this mean to observe a holy Lent? Most of us think immediately of fasting and self-denial. The stereotypes are that we “give up” something for Lent. It used to be meat or wine, chocolate or sex. This week I saw many declaring that they would be giving up Facebook and social media. Others are giving up sugars or carbohydrates, moving beyond the more traditional “no desert Lent.” The general idea is that you should set aside, you should fast from, something that you enjoy to remind yourself of your mortality and bring our focus back to God. This approach is not inherently bad, after all, Jesus fasted while in the wilderness and the Bible and our Book of Common Prayer instruct us to fast at certain times. But it removes fasting and self-denial from prayer and most of us, in practice, struggle to keep that our focus upon God and instead mark our progress towards (or failure to meet) that external goal. We often end up spending Lent discussing how hard it is to do without desert, for example, rather than delving into a study of how to pray and foster the spiritual disciplines.

Consider again the invitation and notice that “fasting and self denial” are only two elements of the seven we are called upon to observe. We are invited “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” First and foremost we are to enter into a time of self-examination and repentance.

It is not a coincidence that these two tasks are listed first because our journey to spiritual health begins with a careful taking stock of our lives. Self-reflection is necessary so that we can fully appreciate both our need and the extent of the grace that God offers in forgiveness. The Litany of Penitence that we will recite together offers a beginning of that inventory. As we pray

this litany we each need to reflect upon what specific barriers exist within that keep God from entering into our lives, consider where our priorities are not God's, and how our particular, selfish appetites harm others and keep us from loving our neighbor as ourselves.

This self-examination leads to repentance which in turn will lead us to move further into our relationship with God through “prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” We must begin with the internal for as the prophet Joel says,

Joel 2:12 Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me **with all your heart**, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 **rend your hearts and not your clothing**. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

Recognition of our sins *should* grieve us and lead us to fast, weep, and mourn, but those outwards symbols of mourning which in antiquity were the ripping of clothing and the putting on of ash, are meaningless unless this indicate the rending of our hearts.

As we enter into Lent it is good and appropriate for us to engage in “fasting and self-denial,” but we must remember that what God asks is that these external signs be the merest tip of evidence of the internal transformation that comes from our **true repentance**. As Jesus reminds us, no one but God should know about your prayer and your fasting.

6:16 “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

So don't send out that Tweet declaring your abstinence from cupcakes or your respite from making fun of politicians. And as you leave today consider using the tissue to remove the ash from your forehead. *God knows* that you are here, that you have humbled yourself before him and that you have asked with sincerity, Lord, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps. 51:2). This is a matter between you and God, no one else need nor should they know.

This is where Lent *begins* on Ash Wednesday with self-examination and repentance. Then as we move forward on this spiritual journey rather than giving up something, you are to *take up* the discipline of prayer and fasting, of reading and meditating on God's word.

Remember, fasting is a function of prayer. There is a reason why our liturgy says it is "by prayer, fasting, and self-denial." Fasting and self-denial are servants of prayer. They should only be for a time, such as forty days, or even only a day, but they are to focus our prayers, hearts, and minds upon God, his word, and his will for us. They are never goal or objectives on their own.

So as we leave here with cleansed hearts and brows, setting aside the weight of sin, let us take up the Cross of Christ, offering to God "a broken and contrite heart," strengthened and renewed in the knowledge that God does not despise such a sacrifice.

Return to the LORD, [our] God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, [he] relents from punishing (Joel 2:13).

Amen. ☩

XVIII. A Healthy View of Sin

[First Sunday in Lent \(March 5, 2017\)](#)

First reading

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm

Psalm 32

Second reading

Romans 5:12-19

Gospel

Matthew 4:1-11

Ps. 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and did not conceal my guilt.
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord."
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.

This past week we were vividly reminded through the imputing of ashes that “we are from dust and to dust we shall return.” Our reading from Genesis today takes us back to that original moment, that moment of God fashioning us by his hands out of the dust of the earth, and the origins of our mortality as we disobeyed God and sought to be like him.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he describes how it is that this first transgression, this initial sin brought death to all humanity. But as certain as that fact is, says Paul, how “much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many” (Rom. 5:15). So sin and death entered the world through Adam, but salvation and everlasting life came through Jesus Christ.

And in the Gospel today we read of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, sent there by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan. This is the model of our own Lenten observance that we have just begun, but where Jesus is confronted with temptation he resists with faith in God.

So it is that our entire lectionary today is focused upon one theme of two truths inextricably interlinked: Sin and Grace. We rightly hear in our churches about the grace of God that is extended to all the world through the sacrifice of Jesus. It is the center of our worship within the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

But what of sin? It makes us uncomfortable. For some it seems an old fashioned and offensive word. If we talk about sin then we feel we are judging others and, after all, who is without sin? None but Jesus. So let's just not talk about sin, let's focus upon grace, healing, and love. We live in a non-confrontational culture of "I'm OK, You're OK."

Of course others have been in churches where sin was talked about entirely *too* much. They have been made to feel that they are useless pieces of garbage so full of sin that they are worth less than worm. And while preachers may feel that piling up the sin and wickedness makes the grace of God seem that much greater, the focus upon personal shortcomings and failings serves only demoralize and dehumanize, ultimately making many feel that there is no way that God's grace could be big enough to overcome the sin in their lives.

Yet Jesus died for the sin of the whole world. He can handle yours and mine.

So what is sin and most importantly what is a *healthy view of sin*? This is not an academic exercise. We must know and understand the nature of sin if we are to fully experience grace. After all, how can we know what healing we need if we do not identify the illness in our lives? We don't do that by ignoring our sin. We don't love others by ignoring the sin in their lives either.

It is important that we start at the beginning, to remind ourselves that this is not the way God wants the world to be and how we got here.

We are, first and foremost, created “in the image of God” and possess his spirit. You may recall, that in Gen. 1 humanity, male and female were created on Day 6, the last of all creation; all things were made for us and we are the pinnacle of creation. Gen. 2 tells the same story in a slightly different way.

Gen. 2:7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

The earth and the Garden were made and then man was placed within it. We, created in the image of God and possessing of his spirit, are to be like him in that all of this creation has been given over to us, by God, for us to rule. And we are to emulate God’s rule: to love and care and protect what we have been given (just as he loves, cares, and protects us). It is was not just good, it was “very good.”

This is how it was *supposed* to be, living in love, harmony, and relationship not only with one another, but with God and all creation. But love only exists when it is freely given and so God also created us, as creatures in his image, with free will. We had the freedom to choose whether we would love and obey.

This leads to one of the most fundamental and challenging questions of the Bible: if God is good and God created all things, how could he have created evil?

It is important that it be clearly stated that God did not create evil, but he did create the *potential* for evil. The fact that God made us in his image means that God also gave us the freedom to obey or not; to love or hate; to seek his will or our own. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was not just a test, it was an opportunity to demonstrate our love.

There is so much that I could be said about just these few verses in Genesis. (I once taught a whole semester course on just Genesis chapters 1-3 and barely managed to fit it in 16 weeks.) When the serpent tempts the woman notice how she is drawn in. She is told that by eating the fruit she will be “like God.”

Gen. 3:4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Throughout history the serpent is referred to as “the great deceiver” and he certainly was “the most shrewd of all beasts of the field that the LORD God created,” but in this instance he was not lying. Their eyes were opened and they knew good and evil because in that moment of disobedience *evil was created and entered into this world*. Suffering, hardship, and death are present because of human will, not divine intent.

It is important to note that *both* Adam and Eve decided that they wanted to be like God. When the woman had tasted of the fruit “she also gave some to her husband, *who was with her*, and he ate.” While it is the woman that the serpent speaks to directly, it is clear that Adam was right with her as she ate and did nothing to stop her before eating of it himself. Both are equally culpable.

This is sin: doing counter to God’s will for us and his creation. God told the man and the woman to be fruitful and multiply, to have dominion over the earth and its creatures, to “till and keep” the Garden, and not to eat of the fruit of that one tree. Had they failed in the positive commands, the “does,” it would also be a sin, but they wanted to be like God. They were no longer content to be who and what they were created to be but sought to elevate themselves, by their own power, to god-like status.

We do this every day. We think that we, with all our modern knowledge and power, know better than the Bible or our elders or other cultures what is right and wrong. We believe that we know what is best for ourselves and usually it involves pleasing *only* ourselves, at the expense of others.

Yet this is exactly the opposite of who and what we were created to be. And like Eve and Adam, when we reach out to set ourselves up as God, to be his equal to reach up to heaven, we fall and bring about the opposite of all our desires. We become estranged from God, distanced. We now realize that “we are naked,” we see our base desires and discover that by placing ourselves and our hungers before obedience to God we have brought starvation and exile upon ourselves. The relationship with God is broken.

A healthy view of sin then is one that recognizes that we were created to be in love and harmony with God, that his will for us is to live *healthy and holy lives*, but that when we push against that will, that plan and design for us, we will experience suffering and hardship. Today’s readings remind us that even when we are committed to following Christ, there will be anguish because we live in a broken world, a world in which evil and death have entered.

A healthy view of sin does not end with that recognition, but acknowledges that with sin came the grace of God. When God sought out Adam and Eve in the Garden and confronted them with their disobedience and declared the punishment his very next act was one of care, comfort, and love. They had realized they were naked and they were ashamed.

Gen. 3:21 And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and he clothed them.

It is vital for our lives, both temporal and eternal, that we recognize that we are sinners, that we acknowledge the sin that is in our lives, *and* that God is ready and present to comfort us and clothe us with his redeeming love.

That is the definition of grace: the gift freely given by God through his son Jesus Christ.

5:16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification.

Paul's words might seem convoluted (and certainly would be worth another sermon), but what he means is this: the one sin of the Garden brought death, yet even after countless sins in the world by all humanity, the one gift of the Cross brings eternal life.

This is Lent, the time when we reflect on our mortality, our sinfulness, and our broken relationships. A time when we acknowledge and confess the sin in our lives. But Lent is also about recognizing the forgiveness, the grace that has been given in and through Christ. In Lent we should also rejoice in the freedom from the weight of sin being lifted from our souls.

Hear again the words of Paul declaring the message of Lent:

Rom. 5:18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.
19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Let us pray,

“Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself, and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.”¹³ Thank you.

Amen. ✠

¹³BCP, p. 362. We are using Rite I for Lent, this is from Rite II.

XIX. We have lost our faith.

[Second Sunday in Lent \(March 12, 2017\)](#)

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

This morning's readings all center upon faith, what it means *to believe and trust* in something that God has *revealed* to us. We do not know it by any empirical metric or prior experience, it cannot be externally proved, and requires action on our part. Such examples are found throughout the Bible; a few weeks ago I mentioned God telling Moses that the sign that he, The LORD, had sent him to free the Israelites from Egypt would be that they would worship him on this very mountain, *after* they left Egypt. The evidence of God's presence would be confirmed *after* Moses had done as God commanded. Faith required action. The classic example is, of course, Abraham, as both Paul and the author of Hebrews note. The story of Abraham begins in Genesis chapter 12.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go" ... "So Abram *went*, as the LORD had told him." (Gen. 12:1, 4)
"Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Gen. 15:6, "Look towards heaven and count the stars....")

This is faith: the belief in God's promises moving us to act. Sadly, over the last 30 years I have come to the conviction that most American Christians have lost their faith. This is as true of fundamentalists and Evangelicals as it is of liberals and progressives. Either we no longer believe in the divine revelation of God's Word to his people or we refuse to acknowledge that this faith requires our action.

Some of you may recall a very popular Christian apologist from the 1980s named Josh McDowell. He had a book, that became a series, called *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.

(Wikipedia tells me he has authored or co-authored 115 books!) I am sure that some of you know of him and his work, but it represents the strain of Evangelicalism that I was raised in and that is still quite prominent, in which it is common to seek to prove the Christian faith. McDowell's story goes that while in community college he wrote a paper examining the historical evidence of Christianity with the intent to disprove it but, in the end, was so convinced that he converted. This form of apologetics has a long and strong history and has much to commend it, but it has also been the downfall of many faithful Christians.

It is ironic, in many ways, that while modern American Evangelical Christians are charged with anti-intellectualism it is precisely because so often they are trying to employ the post-Enlightenment intellectual tools of discovery to our faith. For example, the efforts to align contemporary scientific discoveries with a literalistic reading of Genesis 1-3 is not inherently anti-intellectual, rather it is applying the wrong intellectual tools to the text. And this can have devastating effects for many.

One of my good friends in college was also going to be a physician, a "real doctor." We came from very similar backgrounds and churches. He studied biology and, specifically, evolutionary biology. When he went home at Thanksgiving our first year, the members of his church told him there was no way that he could believe evolution to be true and remain a Christian. So he left the church.

This is the problem with insisting on evidence, evidence that we can survey, gather, collect, and assess in the manner of scientists and historians; it is limited. It is limited first and last by the fact that it can only take into account this world, this physical domain of touch and feel. As technology has gotten more and more sophisticated we have been able to touch and feel ever smaller and more ephemeral phenomena, but it is this corporeality that such methods measure. The Bible and Christianity, however, testify that this physical world is not all that exists.

Heb. 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

This passage goes on to list the so-called “hall of faith,” as the author of Hebrews identifies great heroes of the Bible and detailing that they are considered such because they *acted* upon God’s promises of future blessing, and “by faith our ancestors received approval.” Some saw the result in their own lives, while others, such as the Patriarchs, never would see them come to fruition and yet they acted “being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom. 4:21).

Heb. 11:13 All of these died *in faith* without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.

All of these died without ever seeing the *evidence* of God’s promises, nevertheless they believed God’s promises and that faith shaped their lives.

I think the problem with the Josh McDowell, or the more contemporary Ravi Zacharias, approach is that we have tried so hard to engage with this world on its own terms that we have, in many significant ways, lost our faith. Or, we have at least lost the truth that at the center of our faith, that is the religion that we confess, is faith, the conviction of things not seen.

Please don’t get me wrong, I am not saying that Jesus did not heal the leper or resuscitate the widow’s son; I am not saying that Jesus did not rise from the dead (for if he did not, we above all people are most to be pitied!). What I am saying is that these things are miracles. By their very definition they are an occurrence which is contrary to the natural order that God himself created. As such, miracles by definition are not provable in any scientific sense. Proof, evidence of that sort, is not what brings salvation. As Paul says in today’s reading from Romans,

4:16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.

Reason can only take us so far. To illustrate the limits of reason and to show the point at which faith takes over, consider the identity of Jesus.

For years I have studied what scholars refer to as “the historical Jesus” and I have taught a course by the same name several times. For personal and professional reasons, I have examined the textual and historical evidence, I have considered the likelihood and probability of who Jesus was, who he said he was, and what happened to him. My professional conclusions as a literary historian of early Judaism and Christianity is this:

There was a guy named Joshua, Jesus in Greek, who lived and taught as a prophet the fulfillment of the Law given to Israel by God. It is likely that he also considered himself the messiah, the one anointed by God to bring about the new age for God’s people. He caused great consternation for the Jewish leadership and was executed by the Romans. Many, many people believed that he then rose from the dead.

That is what the scholar, Dr. Christian M. M. Brady can defend, prove, and otherwise verify, at least as far as anything from ancient history can be verified.

But I also believe that Jesus is the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried. I believe that he rose again on the third day according to Scriptures and ascended into heaven. I believe that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, and I believe in the resurrection of the dead.

Why do I believe these things? By and because of grace through faith. Yes, the testimony of the Gospels, the testimony of the people who were with Jesus who heard him speak, who walked with him, ate with him, and were healed by him, their testimony is a vital component of my faith. So too is the testimony of my wife, of her experiences with the spirit of God in her own life. The way Elizabeth and I met, how we were brought together, our children, the shape of our careers, and the grace found even when our son, Izzy's brother, Mack died, all tells me that God is present and active in our lives.

But remember, many of those who were there with Jesus, who saw him act and heard him speak, they did not believe what they saw and experienced. Today psychologists might reduce these "experiences" to *apophenia*, the tendency of humans to see patterns and meaning in what are "really" random events. But both are limited in their vision, they operate under the assumption that this world, our brains, our physical framework is all that there is. How I met Elizabeth, our lives, children, and what I have termed "grace" can all be explained away as simply *apophenia*. It is not the hand of God, it is the amazing organ of my brain seeking to organize the randomness of this world so to reduce anxiety and enable me to survive. That is what the modern scientific assessment of the evidence would say.

But I am convinced through faith that this is not all that there is. I cannot defend it in a scientific debate or prove it in a courtroom. Because if we could, it would no longer be faith.

After this morning some may charge me with anti-intellectualism and I will accept that charge with a caveat. I will accept it not because I am rejecting the use of our intellect, nor because I have used the tools of critical thinking, reason, and logic inappropriately. Quite the contrary, I have brought all of that to bear in the examination of my faith and in the writing of this sermon. But I will accept the charge only because I recognize that our intellect has its limits. So perhaps it would be better to say that I am a "*limited* intellectualist."

I have been successful as a scholar and an academic administrator precisely because I think critically and scientifically. But I am someone who accepts a larger data set. Science and faith are not in conflict. They are, as the atheist and biologist Stephen Jay Gould famously put it, “non-overlapping *magisteria*.” Two separate and distinct domains that ought to respect and value one another, but ultimately they operate in two different realms, the one the natural world, the other the “equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings, and values.” But be aware, not all are as generous as Gould. The Oxford biologist and evangelistic atheist Richard Dawkins has vilified the late Gould for this capitulation and regarding faith he is hardly more reserved. “I will respect your views,” Dawkins said, “if you can justify them. But if you justify your views only by saying you have faith in them, I shall not respect them.” [From the Independent and a speech given at the Edinburgh International Science Festival, 15 April 1992]

My response is, “OK.” What Dawkins is attempting to do is to draw us into his domain without his having to acknowledge that there is any other. Where we have lost our faith is by giving in to the terms of those who would have us defend faith with science. Remember, as Paul said, “we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the world” (1 Cor. 1:23). The conception that the public execution of this one man Jesus could in any way offer salvation to the world is simply ridiculous ... without faith.

I know that in our congregation there are many scientists, nurses, physicians, and engineers. Science and the endeavor of all these various fields of research are wonderful amazing things. This work can teach us so much about ourselves and our world, it can bring healing and comfort to millions. But science can only take us to HERE. Faith takes us beyond the HERE.

That is why Genesis 1, as orderly and almost “scientific” as it seems, is not about the world (knock on podium) but rather it is about the one who is not of this world, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17, see Hebrews 11:3).

“How” is not the point, “Who” is the point. Genesis 1-3 is the foundation not for the scientific understanding of the cosmos, rather it is the theological framing of all reality, informing us by revelation of what we can only know from God.

That revelation, that promise of future things rooted in the historic events of the crucifixion and the resurrection, should then call us to action. What was the evidence of Abraham’s faith? That when God said “get up and go” he got up and went! It is not simply a matter of intellectual ascent, saying “I believe.” It is that belief moving us to act, to love the LORD our God *and* to love our neighbors as ourselves. These cannot be passive statements. Faith in the resurrected Lord means nothing less than being born again.

Do your colleagues and friends know that you are a Christian? I don’t mean, do they know that you attend church and study the Bible. I mean, do they see in your life, the life and love of Jesus for the whole world? Being born from above, being born of the spirit means that we are children of God and our priorities and actions must be those of God. The God who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes* in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It is not an easy love; it is a sacrificial love, a love that does not shrink from confronting sin and wickedness, and transforms this world. Fundamentally, it is a love that emanates from our faith in Jesus, the Son of Man and the sacrifice for the sin of the world.

Amen. ☩

XX. Who is blind?

Or “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.”

[Fourth Sunday in Lent \(March 26, 2017\)](#)

- 1 Samuel 16:1-13
- Psalm 23
- Ephesians 5:8-14
- John 9:1-41

“Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Eph. 5:14) *In the name...✠*

Today’s Gospel reading from John is a beautifully crafted reflection on sin and blindness through the example of the experience of the Man Born Blind. The passage opens with the disciples questioning Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” While it might seem odd to us today, it is a reasonable question and reflected a theology that many continue to hold today. Many Christians, just as with the Pharisees and the disciples, take the view that suffering and hardship comes either from sin (God is punishing you) or from a lack of faith (if only you would believe, God would heal you). This is far too simplistic a view of life, as Jesus makes clear, but the questions come out of a basic need that we all have. In our Wednesday night class on “Suffering and Grace” we have discussed often that when we are suffering some hardship, loss, or affliction what we most want to know is “why.”

In this case, Jesus says that the man’s blindness did not come from sin, but it is true that all too often children *are* born with illness as the result of sin. Thousands of children were born in the 50s and 60s with physical deformities because their mothers had taken a medication that had not been properly tested. Others are born with cancer due to companies dumping toxic waste, or with birth defects due to a mother’s addiction, and millions experience malnutrition due to simply being born into poverty as a result of society’s greed and indifference. The

consequences of sin are real and evident in this world. But such was not the case with this man; he was born blind “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

Most of the time in our lives we do not have the benefit of such a clear explanation of our hardship. Consider Job, the book of Job opens with the prologue explaining why it was that Satan was allowed to bring so much pain and hurt onto Job. As readers, *we* know what is going on, but Job himself has no idea why he and his family are suffering. Most of the time in life we are Job, living in the midst of hardship without the benefit of any explanation, without knowing why. In the Gospel, it is not clear whether or not the Man Born Blind is privy to this exchange between Jesus and the disciples; he may well have not heard and had no idea that his lack of sight was so that all might see the power of God in his life. All we do know is that Jesus goes over to him, “spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, [said] to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.’” And the Man “went and washed and came back able to see.”

Throughout this narrative the themes of sin and blindness weave together, back and forth. The story begins with the Blind Man receiving sight and ends with the Pharisees being told that they had lost theirs. As the narrative unfolds and the Pharisees question whether or not this was truly a miracle, asking if the man really had been blind, and then questioning if Jesus could indeed be from God since he performed this work on the Sabbath, and all the while the Man slowly “sees” Jesus as the Son of Man. It is interesting that this clarity comes to the Man even as the Pharisees are challenging the identity and work of Jesus. As this happens, the Man’s “vision” of Jesus gradually comes into focus: first he tells the Pharisees that it was “the man named Jesus” who healed him, then upon further questioning he asserts that “he is a prophet,” and finally when Jesus tells him that he is “the Son of Man” the Man Who Was Blind responds, “I believe.”

The Pharisees, on the other hand, refused to see what was right in front of them, they didn’t believe their own eyes or the testimony of the one who was healed. The passage is

remarkable for the extended back and forth questioning of the Man and even his parents to determine first if he really was born blind (“I am he!”), then how it was he was healed, and by whom. In spite of all the evidence brought forth that Jesus had indeed healed him and that such power came from God, they insist that, “as for this man [Jesus], we do not know where he comes from.”

Where the narrative began with this Man who had been born blind, it ends with Jesus declaring that the Pharisees are the ones truly blind. “If you were [physically] blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (John 9:41). What *they* saw was not a miraculous healing by the Son of Man, evidence of God’s power at work in the world, but in all their wisdom and knowledge they could only see a con and a charlatan. Whereas no one’s sin caused the Man to be born blind, the sin of hubris and arrogance made the Pharisees blind.

What then, do we take from this passage?

First, illness is not necessarily a sign of God’s disfavor or of sin. In the case of the Man, his physical blindness is not *evidence* of sin, but an opportunity for God to be at work in the Man’s life and for him, in turn, to declare the power of Jesus. The sin of the Pharisees, on the other hand, brings about their spiritual blindness to the true identity of Jesus. This is an ailment far more tragic than any physical impairment.

Second, we learn that the light of God can shine into even the darkest parts of this world, even into our illnesses, griefs, hardships, and struggles. This Man was reduced to begging for the basic needs in life and it was no doubt a hard life. And yet when Jesus said, “go and wash,” he went. Notice that his faith, *his act of obedience*, came before he ever said, “I believe.” The Man was ready to respond, to act in faith when grace was presented before him.

Are we ready and willing to see the light of God penetrating through our blindness? And are we ready to act when we are told, “go”? Or, do we come up with all sorts of other explanations, as the Pharisees did, unwilling to acknowledge the power of God to act not just in this world, but in our *own lives*.

It is an easy trap to fall into, the blindness that comes from sure sight. We are so much more advanced today, we have 20/20 vision compared to the men who wrote the Bible. The world has changed so much and we recognize that it is far larger than they could ever imagine in antiquity, with countless cultures, religions, and communities. It is arrogant, we say in our enlightened state, to suggest that Christianity possesses “Truth.” Yet Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus is the light of *all the world* and that light can penetrate the deepest darkness of your life or mine. It is bright enough to illuminate not only the whole world, but all of history from Creation to the New Jerusalem.

Finally, we also learn that it is OK if we do not see the full vision all at once. At first the Man simply knew he needed to be made whole and accepted the direction that Jesus gave. It was only gradually, as the Pharisees grilled him and sought to disprove that Jesus was special or from God, that the Man began to see clearly that Jesus was indeed from God. And when Jesus said, “I am the Son of Man” he responded simply with “Lord, I believe.”

Accept the healing touch of God, no matter where you are on the journey, accept that he is present with you, and when you step out in faith you will begin to see more clearly the work of God in your life.

Amen. ✠

XXI. Light and Life to all the World

Fifth Sunday in Lent (April 2, 2017)

- [Ezekiel 37:1-14 not read]
- Psalm 130
- Romans 8:6-11
- John 11:1-45

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. —Romans 8:11

[Needs both to be tightened and expanded.] This morning's Gospel recounts the famous episode of Jesus calling Lazarus forth from the tomb. He had been dead for four days (and surely stank!), yet Jesus commanded "Lazarus, come out!" and he came out. Contemporary culture requires that this sermon should contain some reference or allusion to the "Walking Dead" and zombies. Now I have met that obligation. But what John presents to us here is not a critique of capitalism (the shambling masses in poverty who cannot "live" yet do not die) nor is it a metaphor for spiritual death and rebirth. It is the consummation of Jesus's ministry. As the scholar Raymond Brown has noted, the raising of Lazarus is the culmination of "Jesus' ministry of signs and inaugurate[s] the ministry of glory."¹⁴

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus had taught of the coming Kingdom of Heaven, he had fed thousands, healed many, but now he had conquered all sickness, all hunger, even death itself. This was entirely too much for some. As we saw in John chapter nine last week when Jesus healed the man born blind, the reality of God's work in this world led many, like Martha, to acknowledge and believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Yet others refused to believe, they were willfully blind to the Light of God that had come into the world. Here, with the raising of Lazarus, Jesus is affirmed as the Life of the world. More believe and more reject him.

¹⁴Brown, *AB*, p. 429.

From this point onwards in the Gospel of John the political machinations begin that would lead to Jesus' execution by the Roman authority. Immediately following the passage read today we are told that while many believed,

John 11: 47 ... the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs.
48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

The empty tomb of Lazarus led directly to Jesus' crucifixion. But whereas Lazarus would eventually return to *his* tomb, when Jesus rose from the dead he returned not back to the earth, but to heaven, to sit at the right hand of God his Father.

In John's Gospel, this story is the pivot upon which Jesus' time on earth moved from miracles and signs to his glorification and exultation.

Like his previous work of giving sight to the Man Born Blind, the raising of Lazarus from the dead was "for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." This resurrection of Lazarus foreshadowed the complete resurrection of Jesus and hints at our own resurrection. Although Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he eventually died again. This is the fate of all of us in *this* world, but so too will we all be fully resurrected as this world comes to an end and the new heaven and new earth will be established.

The feeding of the four and five thousand, the healing of the woman who touched hem of Jesus' garment, the bringing back from death the son of the widow and Lazarus, these were all signs of the Glory of God, evidence to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah come into *this world*. As I suggested a few weeks ago, these signs are not the sort of evidence that a modern scientist or court would find persuasive because these acts of God are by their very nature miracles; they run counter to the natural order. It is the mystery of our faith.

Today God is still at work and so some may come back from a time in that liminal space between life and death and many are healed in Jesus' name. But even in Jesus' own day, there were many who were not raised from the dead, untold numbers of sick and hungry were not healed and fed. The question is not "why did a miracle *not* occur," (although it is a reasonable question, to be sure) rather when miracles *do* occur we should ask why *this time*? And the answer is always, at least in part, so that God may be glorified.

When Lazarus rose from the dead, no doubt one of the first things he did was to sit down and eat with his sisters and Jesus. Those who had been there to mourn would now feast in rejoicing over his rebirth. Then I am sure he slept, then he awoke and ate again, worked, slept, and eventually became old, ill, and died.

This world remains with all of its sickness, hunger, and death. Jesus never promised us that following him would remove hardship and struggle. Quite the opposite! We must each take up our own cross, yet he did promise that the burden would be light, if not easy.

But while the world may remain, nothing is the same now that the Messiah has entered into it! The Light and Life of God has been revealed to all humanity! Now we *know* that this world is not the end. He *is* the resurrection and the life. Death is no longer the victor, nor is injustice, rather we shall *all* be raised to eternal life and Jesus *will* judge all humanity. Or, to put it another way, *everything that is wrong with this world*, shall be made right.

11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Amen. ☩

XXII. Palm Sunday – “Save Us Son of David!”

[Liturgy of the Palms \(April 9, 2017\)](#)

- Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29
- Matthew 21:1-11

[Liturgy of the Passion \(April 9, 2017\)](#)

- Isaiah 50:4-9a
- Psalm 31:9-16
- Philippians 2:5-11
- Matthew 27:11-54

This morning marks the beginning of Holy Week, the last Days of Lent, and our continued journey to the hill on which Jesus was crucified. We have two liturgies this morning, the Liturgy of the Palms and the Liturgy of the Passion. The latter has as its central element our collective recitation of the Passion narrative that we just finished. We divided parts and roles so that we might each find ourselves in the narrative. I encourage you to continue to “Live the Story” by walking and worshipping with us throughout this Holy Week. You will find the services listed inside the back cover of your bulletin and of special note is the Easter Vigil. This takes place on Saturday night, but our liturgical days begin at nightfall so this is the first service of Easter and will be celebrated with a baptism, Eucharist, and the shouting of “Alleluia! Christ is risen!”

But first, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds gathered around him and shouted “Hosanna to the Son of David!” Although we have just read the Passion narrative, cast your minds back to our first Gospel reading of the morning, six chapters earlier in Matthew. Jesus and the disciples go up to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the commemoration of God bringing Israel out of Egypt and slavery.

Passover was one of three times a year when Jews were to go up to Jerusalem and the Temple (the other two being Shavuot and Sukkoth). The already crowded city would be

overflowing with Jewish pilgrims and in amongst the devout would be the rebellious, the rabble rousers, and revolutionaries. The authorities were petrified that the presence of Jesus would galvanize these people into action, whether Jesus meant to or not. It did not matter that he was also the Son of God preaching a spiritual revolution, the crowds would latch on to one element of truth, he was the Son of David, and they would create the revolution *they* wanted.

Jesus could have chosen to go up to Jerusalem at any time, any of the pilgrimage festivals or even on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. After all, Jesus is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Whenever Jesus went up to Jerusalem, the effect would have been the same, the crowds were ready for the revolution to begin, but Jesus had a different objective. So why Passover? Because this festival is unlike any other in the Law. Whereas all the others [with the exception of Purim, which is outside of the Law] are sacrifices which must be made each and every year by the priests in the Temple. Passover, in contrast, commemorates the historical event of the Exodus, God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and out of their slavery. The sacrificial meal that is the signature event of the festival is offered in the home by the family. No priest is needed and all partake of eating the lamb that is offered.

Jesus Christ is our Passover lamb and the Eucharist is our Passover meal. In it we remember the historical event of the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, once and for all, to lead us out of the slavery of sin.

This is why Jesus went up to Jerusalem at the Feast of the Passover, the path strewn with cloaks and palms with people praising God and hailing him as “the Son of David.” Who did they believe they were seeing? What were they expecting of him? And what do we expect of Jesus now?

The crowd declared that Jesus is the Son of David and he arrived riding on a donkey, not, as some have suggested, as a sign of lowly stature, but rather a symbol that he is the *true* king of Israel. The allusion is to Zechariah 9:9.

Zech. 9.9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The prophet Zechariah was preaching during the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile (c. 520-18 BCE). It was a time of uncertainty and potential war, yet the Word of God through the prophet encouraged them. He reminded the people that a Son of David, one anointed by God, would come again to deliver his people, returning to her humble, yet victorious, riding on a donkey.

In Jesus' day Jerusalem was again occupied by foreign rulers. Turning to Scripture many remembered the prophets and heard Zechariah in a new way. Now, perhaps now is the time! And indeed it was, it was the time of the arrival of the Messiah, the Son of David, and he entered on a donkey (and a foal, just for good measure). They declared "Hosanna to the Son of David!" They saw him as the Davidic Messiah and others declared that he was a prophet. And they were right, but their image and understanding of the Messiah and Jesus was incomplete.

In the days that passed between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the crucifixion he became violent, driving out the moneychangers in the Temple courtyard. He was gentle and healed those who were blind and lame. He grew weary and tired, afraid and despondent. *This* did not fit the image of a triumphant king! The Romans had not been run out of the city and now the Jewish

leaders worried, not without good reason, that all Jesus' presence would do is stir up passions and lead to the Romans violently putting down a fomenting rebellion.

The truth is not even the disciples knew what to expect from Jesus. He had told them that he would be betrayed and would be killed, but they were, as Matthew tells us "greatly distressed" (Matt. 17:22-24). This wasn't the way it was supposed to be! The Messiah-King was to ride in victorious, overthrowing empires and self-righteous religious leaders alike. The revolution had begun! Perhaps on this day that we now called Palm Sunday they might have thought that this talk was behind them, that *now* it was really going to happen! Jesus was living out the prophecy of Zechariah and the people understood!

But they only understood a portion of who Jesus was and what it was that the Messiah had to do. The rest of the passage in Zechariah could have given them a hint,

Zech. 9.11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

The blood of God's covenant would no longer be that of the animal sacrifices, but rather it would be his own. God had become flesh in order to offer up himself as a sacrifice to set us free from the prison of sin. The true enemy of Israel and all humanity never was the nations or the powers that surround and conquer us. Our true enemy is the sin, the impulse within us to push God away and to go our own way. The Great Tragedy did not begin with a battle, but with a simple act of disobedience and arrogance in the eating of the fruit. Cain's sin came first as he gave in to jealousy. We are trapped within our own desires and from these all other hardships descend and from this the Son of David came to deliver us.

We enter into Jerusalem with Jesus and into the beginning of Holy Week. Unlike the disciples, we know what will come on Good Friday *and* Easter Morning. But are we in any better position than his disciples were on that first Palm Sunday?

This week, join Jesus and walk with him this Holy Week and find yourself in the story. Reflect, pray, and ask what are *your* expectations of the Messiah. Do we expect him to win elections and wars for us, to provide us with a spouse and or ideal job, and then become dejected and reject him when it doesn't work out in the way we thought it should? Or are we accepting of his sacrifice for us, his offer to deliver us from that waterless pit of our own sin and self-centeredness? Jesus did not fight against the external powers and authorities. He cleanses us of our sins. He transforms hearts and purifies souls. It begins within and *then* moves without.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Amen. ☩

XXII. Maundy Thursday

- [Exodus 12:1-4, \(5-10\), 11-14](#)
- [Psalms 116:1-2, 12-19](#)
- [1 Corinthians 11:23-26](#)
- [John 13:1-17, 31b-35](#)

Exod. 12:11 This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the LORD.

Tonight we read the account of the first Passover with directions on how the ancient Israelites were to commemorate it throughout their generations, as a “perpetual ordinance.” This was the final plague that God was sending upon Egypt to force Pharaoh to release the Israelites from their slavery. There had been plagues of the Nile river being turned to blood, swarms of frogs, lice, flies, disease upon their livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness for three days. Each of these were demonstrations of the power of the LORD God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These were demonstrations that the LORD was the God of all creation and had dominion even over the Egyptian deities, “beating them on their own turf,” as it were. The final plague was the death of the first born.

While in all the prior plagues God proactively protected the Israelites. A sign of God’s power and that Israel were his special people was that these catastrophes did not affect Israel or their animals. This time it was different. This time the children of Israel would have to act in order for the plague to “pass over” their home. They had to show their faith in the LORD through the action of obeying his commands to make this sacrificial meal and paint their doorposts with the blood of the slain lamb.

Exod. 12:13 The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Unlike the other plagues Israelites could and were harmed *if they did not obey God's directions*. Israel and Egypt had all seen the mighty power of God in the prior nine plagues and now God brought the Israelites into partnership, asking them to provide evidence of their faith in the LORD. So it was they gathered as families, slaughtered the lamb, spread its blood around the door frame, and ate that final meal in Egypt.

And they ate it in haste, loins girded, sandals on their feet, and staff in their hand. When that final plague struck, they had to be ready to move and quickly. Once God's judgment had descended upon Egypt, Pharaoh would act quickly to be rid of them and their God.

Ex. 12:31 Then [Pharaoh] summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD, as you said. 32 Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!"

So it was that the Israelites packed up, accepted the "parting gifts" from the Egyptians intended to make them leave even faster, and headed out of the Land of Goshen to the land that God had promised their father Abraham. It would be a dangerous and long journey, but God was with them by day and by night.

It was to be as God had told Moses when he appeared to him at the burning bush and announced that he would lead his people out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt. When Moses had asked for a sign, God declared, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on *this* mountain" (Ex. 3:12).

On *that* mountain God presented Moses with the Law and the Commandments, the guide to holy living for Israel, simply for their lives in the wilderness, but as they moved throughout this world. The Law was God's love letter to Israel. Jews would later refer to it, all 613 positive

commandments, things that one is supposed to do in obedience to God, as “the blessed burden of Torah.” It was not easy, but it is joyous because it is done in response to God’s love and deliverance of Israel. Jesus says the same thing when he says,

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:29-30)

On Palm Sunday I spoke of the uniqueness of Passover. That unlike all other sacrifices commanded in the Law, Passover commemorates an historical event, something that actually happened in history and is to be remembered and celebrated and observed in perpetuity. God had spared his people death and delivered them from slavery; this was to be remembered forever. Furthermore, the sacrificial meal that is the signature event of the festival of Passover is offered in the home by the family. No priest is needed and all partake of eating the lamb that is offered. So it was that Jesus chose Passover as the festival at which he would go up to Jerusalem to lay down *his* life to deliver us from the slavery of sin and death. His blood was spread on the cross, even as the lamb’s was over the doorpost, so that the Angel of Death will pass over us. *He* is our Paschal Lamb.

On this night we remember the last meal that Jesus ate with his disciples, when he prepared them for the wilderness, the time we spend in this world as we await his coming again in glory. On that night Jesus blessed the bread and the wine, declared that it was his body and blood and then *whenever* we ate and drank of these basic substances, we should do so in remembrance of his sacrifice for us. It is the Passover for the whole world and we are to continue it “throughout [our] generations; we are to observe it as a perpetual ordinance.”

On that same night, Jesus also girded his loins as the Israelites did all these centuries before. Jesus did not do it because he would need to rush out after the meal, but in order to

become a servant to the disciples. With that towel wrapped round his waist he washed and dried his disciples feet, as the servant of the house would do. Jesus took those feet, which would have been coated with all sorts of dust and dung from the streets, he took them into his hands and cleaned them to demonstrate the way in which we are to be subservient to one another. We are to submit and care for one another, even with the most menial and filthy of tasks because this is what our savior did for us.

It was on Mt. Sinai that God provided Israel with the Law and the Commandments which would enable them to demonstrate their love for God and one another. It was in the upper room that Jesus gave us this “new commandment,” *mandatum novum*, that was also foundational to the prior Law, that we love one another.

John 13:34 “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Just as he loved us, so we must love one another. God so loved his people Israel that he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. So too he loved the entire world that he gave his only Son Jesus to die for the sins of the world. That is how he loved us. We cannot die for the sins of the world, but we do not have to because Jesus has done that for us, he has saved us from death. If we accept him as our Savior then we will follow his example, loving one another as he loved us, making ourselves servants to one another, not just on this night but always.

Amen. ☩

Let us now follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ and minister to one another, remembering that this is but a symbol of the love that we are to take embody in this world in the name of Christ.

XXIII. Easter Vigil

The Writing of History

- Exodus 14:10-15:1
- Isaiah 55:1-11
- Psalm 42
- Zephaniah 3:12-20
- Psalm 126
- Ezekiel 37:1-14
- Romans 6:3-11
- Matthew 28:1-10

When I was in college, just beginning earnestly my biblical studies, I began to question and worry about history and God's role in it. I knew my Bible fairly well so I knew all about God's call to Abraham, leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, his promises of return and redemption we have read in the prophets this evening, and God entering into history himself as Jesus, God made flesh, sent to teach us, guide us, and ultimately offer himself up as a sacrifice. This is what scholars call a *Heilsgeschichte*, the "Holy History" of God's work of salvation in the world. But I started to think about the long span of history, the nearly two millennia it would have been from Abraham's time to Jesus' and the nearly two millennia from Jesus' day down to our own and all the time in between.

Our readings tonight take us through a narrow path within Scripture, mere allusions to the predominate theme of God's grace and love for us, his people. We can be forgiven for getting the impression that God is a divine puppet master, pulling the strings constantly to determine every last detail in life. And that can be discouraging, can't it? Because if we view God as managing and determining every last detail of history, then when things are going so wrong in our lives we have to ask why God is bringing all this on our heads.

Consider now all the passages we didn't read, the reasons why Isaiah and Zephaniah and Ezekiel were sent these words from God to Israel. These are messages of encouragement and hope to people who were living in hard times. Times like our own. They felt that God was not listening to them, that God was not present. God did hear their prayers and so he sent encouragement and words of hope.

An imperfect analogy is perhaps to consider that God is the author of all history, written and unwritten. He has created the universe, framed the story and determined the narrative and.... Well, here is where the analogy breaks down because God has invited us to *participate* in writing our history. History is "crowdsourced," if you will. God allows us to write the chapters and verses within the full narrative that he has already determined. At times he is the editor, stepping in now and again to provide a key element that ensures the culmination and fulfillment of our story. God remains sovereign, he remains in control of history, yet he allows and invites us as co-authors.

This follows from the fact that we are created in the image of God. Since God is the Creator of all, the author of all history, then we, being made in his image, also have this creative and authorial ability. As it says in our Catechism, being created in the image of God means, "we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God" (BCP, p. 845).

So we are full participants in our history, writing day by day new lines of dialogue and character development, shaping the environment and setting of the story. The Kinard family have added beautiful little Jones into our story and tonight he will be baptized, opening yet another chapter, another narrative. Yet, time and again we, we Israel, we the church, have also written long winding narratives in which we become our own heroes only to find that we are often the villains. Time and again God reenters the story, with the editor's deft touch to redirect, to bring us back to the primary themes of *his* story. Because our story is his story.

This is what our readings tonight, this Holy History tell us: The God has not forgotten his people and that he remains attentive and the author of the story. When the narrative had developed fully enough, when humanity was ready, he entered into the story himself and revealed in broad, sweeping, and beautiful imagery the conclusion of the story.

Yesterday Father Travis described the crucifixion and the resurrection as the hinge of history, because upon these historic and historical events everything changed. We remain a vital and critical part of the narrative, *you* are a central character to God's unfolding story. You and I are also co-authors. Jesus, the Savior of the world, has invited us to help shape the history of the world. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has revealed to us not only the triumphant conclusion (Spoiler Alert!: We too shall be raised from the dead and live eternally with him and the saints!), but he has also liberated us to write the most beautiful story.

6 We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For whoever has died is freed from sin. 8 But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (Rom. 6)

God is Sovereign, the Great Creator, the Redeemer of the World, and the Author of Life. He invites you to write your portion of the narrative, freed from sin and guided by the Holy Spirit, confident in the knowledge and truth that Jesus has written and completed that final chapter, lifting us up out of death and into eternal life.

Amen. ☩

XXIV. Easter Sunday

- Jeremiah 31:1-6
- Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
- Colossians 3:1-4
- John 20:1-18

1 Cor. 15:3 For I shared with you the most important truth that I had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

Over the last twenty years I have attended a *lot* of matriculation and graduation ceremonies. In fact, in my ten years as a dean I personally gave more than 30 commencement addresses, listened to more than twice that number, and shook thousands of hands. Like a church service, the ceremony is scripted and even as the years pass certain things remain constant: some students will wear flip flops while some women will wear ridiculously high heels (I have had to catch more than one woman tripping down the stairs), others begin their celebrations well in advance of the event (and likely remember little of it), the creativity on the tops of their mortar boards is ever increasing, and the speeches are rarely noteworthy, not even mine. Like Christmas and Easter, the reason for the gathering is the same as it has been for centuries, the script is little changed, and yet it is always *the first time for someone*.

This morning we read John's account of that very first Easter morning. As I have prayed in preparation for this sermon I wondered what I could say that had not been said before, what new message God might have for us this Easter. There is no *new* message. The truth has not changed: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again! Yet because the truth and the message remains the same it is vital that we consider it again because this day, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, everything *else* changed.

The Gospel of John provides us with some interesting details that might also help us to understand the Easter story anew and perhaps even see ourselves within it. John tells us that Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at the tomb, before sunrise, and discovers that the stone had been removed from the tomb. She does not look into the tomb, but instead runs to tell “Simon Peter and the other disciple” (presumably John). They then dash off to see for themselves. The Beloved Disciple arrives first, but like Mary, he does not enter, he simply bends down, looks in and sees the linens that had wrapped the body of Jesus. Then Peter arrives and rushes directly into the tomb, seeing not just the linens, but rolled up neatly by itself, the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head. At this point the other disciple entered and, John tells us, “he saw and believed.” Then John provides us with perhaps the most curious of details, “Then the disciples returned to their homes.”

Mary remains at the tomb. Then, as she weeps, she bends over and sees the two angels who ask her why she is weeping. Finally, Jesus himself appears to her. She does not recognize him at first, but when he simply speaks her name, “Mary.” She let’s out a cry of joy and relief. Then at Jesus’ command she goes and tells all the disciples that she seen the Lord.

So let us consider the actions and reactions of these three followers of Jesus. Starting with the smaller parts, as it were, of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Peter shows typical Petrine impetuous behavior even if he is older and less fit that the other disciple. Once at the tomb he runs directly in to see what it will reveal. John tells us that “he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.” But that is all we are told. We do not know what Peter was thinking or what conclusions he had arrived at based upon his observations. He says nothing. Peter does not stay long.

The Beloved Disciple arrives at the tomb first, but does not enter. From the entrance all he can see is some linen. After Peter looked into the tomb, the other disciple enters as well. Some

scholars suggest that this disciple is in fact John, the author of the Gospel. If so it would explain how it is that John is able to tell us that upon seeing the grave clothes this disciple “believed.” Then he too does not stay long since we are told, “Then the disciples returned to their homes.”

Here we have these two men who were very close to Jesus during his life and remained close to him even unto his death. What do we make of their actions? They were eager to see for themselves what had happened to Jesus’ body, to confirm what Mary had said, that it was no longer there. But what did Peter think when he saw that empty tomb? Perhaps, like Mary, he assumed that his body had been taken. After all, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that this was the rumor started to suppress the news of the resurrection.

The Beloved Disciple “believed,” but the Gospel is a bit ambiguous as to *what* he believed in that moment since it says, “he saw and believed; for *as yet they did not understand the scripture*, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead.” The grave clothes are surely the key. If Jesus’ body was stolen they would have left him wrapped and anointed. The Beloved Disciple believed...that *something* miraculous had happened.

And yet they left. Had they remained what would they have seen? How much more deeply and clearly would they have believed?

Mary is devoted to Jesus. She comes early in the morning, before the sun has risen, to be near her Lord even in his death. When she sees the tomb opened she fears the worst and brings the disciples. But after they have come and gone, she remains. She continues to be at the tomb weeping and waiting. Her patience and devotion is rewarded.

The angels did not appear to the others, they waited until Mary was alone and then they ask, “Why are you weeping?” She weeps because the world took her master from her. The

authorities had conspired to kill her dear friend. She cries in anguish because now she fears they have desecrated his body as well. She simply wants to know where he is so she can continue to love him and care for him, even in his death. She is devout, loyal, and loving. The angels offer her no answer.

Then Jesus appears to Mary and Mary alone and asks her again, “Why are you weeping?” Jesus then adds the pointed question, “Whom are you looking for?” He does not ask “what” because he knows that she is seeking a person, not a corpse or a thing. “Whom are you looking for?” When he speaks her name, Mary recognizes her Master.

While we are told simply that the disciples went home, when Mary Magdalene leaves the tomb she goes with a mission from Jesus, to go to his followers and tell them that she has seen Jesus and he has said, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

So where do you find yourself in this story? I see some of myself at different times in my life with each follower of Jesus. There are times when I am so eager I grab at the most immediate answer, barely stopping to pray or weep. I get in and I get out. This doesn’t mean that we aren’t committed to Jesus, but rather that we aren’t always willing to take the time to reflect and consider what we have just seen and experienced.

For example, the disciples did not understand the scripture concerning Jesus’ resurrection because they had yet taken the time to study and reflect on all that all that Jesus had taught them. This is surely excusable since they were still grieving the loss of their Master. But how often do we dip into the story of Jesus simply now and again, see a bit that excites us, leads us to believe a bit, but then leave again before Jesus is fully revealed in our lives? Are we constantly in a rush to find an answer to the questions we have in mind and miss the answers that Jesus has to offer?

Then there are other times I weep. I weep and often I am not even weeping about the right things. Mary Magdalene is crying bitterly because she believes that Jesus' body has been taken, when in fact he has risen and is standing right beside her.

But Mary is faithful and patient. She remains and investigates, seeks to find out what has truly happened to her Master so that she might serve him even after he is gone. This is a model that I aspire to and often do not achieve. Mary is passionate enough to weep and yet determined enough to be ready to carry Jesus' body away herself to ensure he is treated with respect. This is the devotion our Lord deserves.

Mary Magdalene teaches me this morning the importance of devotion and patience, even while weeping. Our faith grows deeper the more we are committed and engaged to seeking out Jesus.

3:1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. (Col. 3:1-2)

Amen. ☩

XXV. Walking in Mourning

- Third Sunday of Easter (April 30, 2017)
 - Acts 2:14a, 36-41
 - Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
 - 1 Peter 1:17-23
 - Luke 24:13-35

Luke 24:21a “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

Acts 2:37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

Our Gospel reading for today reminds me of another story, no doubt apocryphal, that Elizabeth and I heard about an older priest of a little country parish in England. It seems someone new had moved into the parish and the priest, being old school in that way, went round on his bike to see the newcomer. (Think Father Brown on his old postman’s bike.) The priest knocked on the door and the gentleman answered and was very friendly. They chatted for awhile and the priest enquired after the man’s line of work. He said he was a musician and the priest said, “Wonderful! It would be a blessing for us if you would join us one Sunday to offer your gifts in worship.” The man agreed and so the next Sunday, after pronouncing the Peace, the little priest welcomed the newcomer to the front of the church. He announced, “I am also very pleased to say that we have a new member of our parish and he is a musician. He is offering us his gifts to God this morning. So as we prepare for Eucharist we welcome also Mr. Eric Clapton who will play our offertory.” The priest, as we were told, had no idea who Mr. Clapton was. I suspect, however, that when he began to play his guitar even the priest knew that this was someone uniquely gifted and talented.

This last chapter of Luke begins with the *absence* of Jesus. For three years or so these people had followed Jesus, listened to him teach, watched him heal and feed thousands, and

now...now he was gone, killed in the most violent of ways. Now his followers are grieving and mourning the death of their teacher, their master, their friend. He is no longer with them. So this last chapter of Luke's Gospel opens with the women seeking to anoint and care for his body, even in death. Then there is Cleopas and his friend, walking despondently in early evening, trying to understand what had just happened and what it meant.

The narrative quickly moves us from this moment of grief with the angels stepping in to announce that Jesus has risen and to remind the women that this was all part of God's plan. But I think it is important that we remain for a moment on the way, walking with the women to the tomb, walking with Cleopas to Emmaus, walking in mourning.

The theologian Shelly Rambo comments on the fact in Christianity we often compound the pain of trauma and suffering when we retell the story of our redemption, the story of the passion and resurrection. We often move so quickly from the crucifixion to the resurrection that our "theology is complicit in covering over suffering, in offering a redemptive gloss over its deep wound."¹⁵ Christians sometimes try to encourage one another after a death by saying, "Don't grieve! They are with the Lord and we will see them soon!" This is a great truth and can be a great comfort, but if we move too quickly, we devalue suffering, we can make it seem as if all grief, trauma, and conflict must be set aside in light of the empty tomb. Rather than acknowledging that the Cross, the suffering of Jesus, is at the center of our faith. After all, Jesus asked Cleopas, "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things?"

Who here has not suffered, mourned, and grieved? Who has not been depressed, sad, or lonely? Many of us have loved ones who have died and while we celebrate and are thankful for the time we had with them here on Earth, we miss them deeply and yearn for the time we are reunited. Two weeks after Mack died I offered a very poor analogy for this experience. It is a bit like being forced to wear a pair of painful, ill-fitting shoes. They may look beautiful, but they

¹⁵Excerpt From: Rambo, Shelly. "Spirit and Trauma." Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. iBooks.

hurt badly and make you limp, wince, and cry, but you can't take them off. The only way to ease the pain is *to start walking*, to break them in. Blisters form, then calluses, and the limp begins to settle in. After a while, months or years, I still don't know when, I imagine that you begin to think less and less about what shoes you are wearing and most people won't notice the limp and the occasional wince. In the meantime, we live with the pain and we walk. We cannot, we should not, hasten the time we have here, even if it means we must continue to walk this path with the limp of sadness.

For a year now the St. B's community has lived with some uncertainty, anxiety, and even anger. Father Jerry was with you as your servant-leader for a long time and now...well, we continue to pray and wait to see whom God will call to serve this community for the coming years. But in between many grieve. They miss Jerry. They are uncomfortable and nervous about what changes a new priest will bring. Others are ready for change and, perhaps with some anxiety, are eager to see whom God has called. {They miss Jerry, they are uncomfortable with this interim priest changing things up in worship and just being... "not Jerry."} Others are ready for change and, perhaps with some anxiety, are eager to see whom God has called. I would suspect most feel some of both, a sadness of what has passed and an eagerness for the future. This is a path that we walk together, as a community in tension and in transition, moving from one place to another.

Some of us bear our own, very personal scars, the wounds from emotional, physical, and spiritual violence. Rambo defines "trauma" as "what does not go away."¹⁶ But she also reminds us that while trauma, these wounds that seem never to heal, can challenge our theology it can also be key to our understanding of healing and redemption. We are lying to the world if we say that becoming a Christian means the end to struggles and strife. Death, in this way, is always a part of life and that remains even after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. *This* is "why it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things." God *himself* now bears

¹⁶Rambo, Introduction.

witness to our experience and he walks with us, we are joined with him in suffering just as we will join him in his resurrection.

“Jesus *himself* came near and went with them.”

Cleopas and his friend had set out from Jerusalem to Emmaus having heard the account from Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women (Luke 24:10) that Jesus had risen from the dead. They could not figure out what to make of the last three days. They were in shock, grieving, and bewildered. They had believed that he was “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” and *they hoped* “that he was the one to redeem Israel.” But now all their hopes were gone. Sure, the women had told them what the angels had said, but none of them believed the women. So they trudged along, shuffling their feet, asking each other “How could this happen?” “We had such hopes and dreams!”

“Jesus *himself* came near and went with them.”

Jesus met them on their journey. He listened to their fears and their mourning. Their anger and frustration. But he did not let them stay in that state. He challenged them, meeting them where *their* needs were. They needed to see how it was that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets, how the Messiah was indeed to suffer and die before he was raised from the dead. This stirred their hearts and made them glad of his company and loathe to see him go on. But it was in the simple act of the blessing and the breaking of the bread that they recognized Jesus.

Remember, these two were not with Jesus at the last supper. This was not a reenactment of that meal nor an institution of our Eucharist. Rather it reminded them of the feeding of the five thousand, the gracious provision of God for his people. They recognized Jesus in the blessing and giving of sustenance and support. He had provided them with what they needed on their journey.

He met them and walked with them in their pain and grief, even as their world was being transformed.

So we are walking, we are *not to stand still, sit, or wallow in our grief*. Yet neither do we fully leave it behind. This is our human condition, to live with our trauma, our wounds and hurts. But our *redemption* is that the Messiah suffers with us and for us so that we may be comforted, strengthened, and healed. This is why it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things *before* he entered into his glory.

Heb. 4:14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

We must continue to walk even as we mourn, moving forward on the road knowing that Jesus walks with us, sharing the burdens of our journey, even as he opens up the words of Scripture and the words of our life so that we can see the work/plan of God.

Will you recognize him as your companion on this journey? Will you open up your heart to hear his words of comfort and receive them? Will you allow him to suffer with you? Will you accept the grace that he freely offers you?

Amen. ☩

Suffering for the Faith (or not)

We are in Year A of the lectionary and coming up on the Third Sunday of Easter. The epistle for this season is 1 Peter and I sat down to read it through. Many of you have likely read it or at least have seen verses picked here and there from the letter, it is very quotable. One of Peter's themes is perseverance through suffering and so we often find that 1 Peter is cited as evidence that "Suffering is God's plan for us."

1 Peter 1:6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Rejoice when you suffer! That is the lesson we find here, because if you are suffering it is God's to test and refine our faith! And, having come through such suffering we will offer "praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" in our lives. Except when that is not the reason for our suffering....

What is missing from the use of such verses is context. Peter is encouraging a community that is suffering for their faith. In fact, he is very pointed about suffering as, well, punishment for doing wrong.

1Pet. 2 19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.

This is a more nuanced view of suffering than I often come across in Christian admonitions. Far too often I have read and heard Christians and their pastors encourage one another by saying that "we suffer for Christ" and "if you are enduring hardship, you must be

doing something right because Satan is working so hard against you!” Yes, perhaps, or maybe you are simply doing something wrong. That option needs to be considered as well. For example, it is not really suffering for your faith if you are an obnoxious jerk in your office, who also happens to be a Christian, and your colleagues complain to the boss that you are creating a difficult place in which to work. That is not suffering for your faith, that is not persecution, that is you doing wrong and being a jerk. As Peter says,

1Pet. 4 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed,
because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. 15
But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a
mischief maker.

If I were providing a new English paraphrase, I might render the last phrase as “or even as a social media troll.” But you get the point. Peter is clear. We may and many do suffer “in the name of Christ” and if that is the source of your suffering be encouraged. Know that you are, in some small way (1 Peter 4:13), sharing Christ’s suffering. But we are called to live holy lives and suffering can and does come about when we are simply being wrong headed, sinful, and a cad. Instead, Peter says you should

1Pet. 3:16 Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned,
those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

XXVI. The Voice of the Shepherd

Fourth Sunday of Easter (May 7, 2017)

- [Acts 2:42-47](#)
- [1 Peter 2:19-25](#)
- [John 10:1-10](#)
- [Psalm 23](#)

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ...The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Two weeks ago Merriam-Webster announced via Twitter that “sheeple” had been added to their dictionary.¹⁷ The term “sheeple” is, of course, a portmanteaux of the words “sheep” and “people.” They defined the term as:

Definition of sheeple

informal

: people who are docile, compliant, or easily influenced : people likened to sheep

As an example they list, “Apple’s debuted a battery case for the juice-sucking iPhone—an ungainly lumpy case the *sheeple* will happily shell out \$99 for. — Doug Criss.” Some have taken offense at such comparisons. Others see it as fitting. I noted this week that Merriam-Webster has since removed that particular example from their website.

Preachers often say that the reason the Bible compares God’s people to sheep is that we tend to be dumb or “wooly headed” (sheep are not), defenseless (don’t mess with a ram), and prone to straying (or as sheep calling “grazing”). Some of those comparisons *may* be apt, but as I

¹⁷<https://twitter.com/MerriamWebster/status/857619516620189701>

mentioned in a sermon back in January, sheep, and their close kin the goat, were some of the most valuable property that a family, especially a nomadic clan, could own. Like bread and wine, sheep and goats were staples of life in the ancient Mediterranean. A sheep can produce wool for soft clothing, leather for shoes, armor, and parchment for writing, milk for drinking and making cheeses, and meat for eating. They were one of the most valuable possessions a person could have. *That* is why we are so often compared with sheep.

Psa. 100:3 Know that the LORD is God.
 It is he that made us, and we are his;
 we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Our readings today offer a number of pastoral images, but it is our Gospel that is most fully flocked with references to sheep and shepherd. In these few verses in John chapter 10 we have a combination of parable and allegory, with Jesus being alternately the shepherd, whom both the sheep and the gatekeeper recognize, and the gate itself. On the other hand, the sheep are equated clearly and consistently with us, the people who *will be led*, by the shepherd or by the thief or by our own folly. And then there are the thieves, they are consistent in their presence as well.

Some of you may recall that I mentioned my brother and I raising lambs for 4-H to show and sell at the county fair. We would buy them in the spring, care for them over the summer, halter train them to be able to take them around the ring, and then auction them off at the end of the fair (for meat). We only did it for a few years, but we learned a lot about responsibility, the animals, and ourselves. We never had them long enough that they would simply respond to our voice, but they knew where their food came from, and would come to us when it was feeding time. On farms where the shepherd is out with the sheep all the time, talking and singing to them, the shepherd becomes one of the flock. She is accepted and followed wherever she leads. This trait is a key element to one facet of Jesus' parable.

...the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him *because they know his voice.*

“Because they know his voice.” We are his people, the sheep of his pasture, and if we are to follow Jesus, our shepherd, then we need to know his voice. That means that we need to be familiar with it, we need to hear Jesus on a daily basis, multiple times a day in fact. This may sound simple, trite, or just really old-fashioned, but it is the truth: We know the Master’s voice through the reading of Scripture and prayer. There is no short-cut, there is no self-discovery (that takes you to self, not savior), and there is no other authority.

God has created this entire world and set it all in motion and so it is true that all creation declares the glory of God. We can learn much about our creator through the creation. But God has given his specific revelation through his Son Jesus and the Bible. It is only by reading, studying, and knowing the Bible that we can place what history, culture, and nature is telling us in its proper context.

A follower of Christ should be fully aware and part of this world where God has placed us, knowing the needs and priorities of our community, country, culture, and world. We also need to perceive the world through the lens of Scripture, the voice of God. In this way we can discern when and where it is that *God* is calling as opposed to our own desires.

It is the voice of God that leads us out into world and brings us back into his fold safely. It is the Shepherd who knows where the greenest pasture and the sweetest water is to satisfy and satiate us. So it is *his* voice that we must follow. But Jesus also warns us about the thief.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ...They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of

strangers. ...The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The sheep are able to know that the stranger is not their Master because they know the Shepherd’s voice so well. In keeping with the terminology of Jesus’ parable, the thief is the one who seeks to steal or lead the sheep away from the security and safety of their Shepherd. There were various people who had claimed to be the Messiah, but Jesus says, “All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.” Today we continue to be plagued by thieves and bandits, those who want us to follow them instead of Jesus. The difficulty is that today they tend to use the gate.

The Smart Thief *will* enter by the gate. They will use words, language, and a voice that is so similar and familiar that it is difficult to tell the Christ from the antichrist. It is important to remember, for example, that while popular culture tells us that the “Antichrist” is some super enemy that will rise in the end times, the Bible itself makes it clear that there are plenty of “antichrists” and they often come from within our communities and go out into the world to lead others astray. In John’s first letter he encourages and warns the church:

1John 2:18 Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, *so now many antichrists have come*. From this we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

I don’t say this to get all apocalyptic on you or to try and create a McCarthy-like “red scare” where we are looking for antichrists under every cassock and alb. Nor am I trying to call us into some hermetically sealed cloister, safe from the outside world and all corrupting influences. Not at all! We are called to be in this world, acting on behalf of Christ to proclaim the Gospel and bring healing and comfort, but we are not to be *of this world* (1 Cor. 5:10; John 17:16).

What we need to hear today is Jesus and John's warning that thieves still abound. There are many who will try and lure and lead us out of the security of the God's fold. The real threat is not so much the lure of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll," although those vices are as alluring as ever. No, the real threat comes from within, from those who sound so very much like the Shepherd. They will say things that are partially true, yet partial truths are lies. Their ability to mimic his word and voice that if we are unprepared we might mistake their teaching for the Gospel.

That is why we must never cease from meeting together, studying the Bible, praying, and seeking God's wisdom. This is why, like the earliest followers described in Acts, we must "devote [ourselves] to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." From our children's ministry to our youth programs, from our Sunday morning services to adult Sunday School, from Wednesday night programs to daily prayer, it is vital to the spiritual health of each one of us and therefore the entire body that we continue to not simply hear the Word, but understand it as well. *This* is how we will know the Shepherd's voice as he leads us through the valley of the shadow of death into the broad green pastures of his endless love.

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen. ☩

XXVII. "This is why he ascended"

Ascension Day 2017, Year A, RCL (moved to Sunday, May 28)

- Acts 1:1-11
- Ephesians 1:15-23
- Luke 24:44-53
- Psalm 47

"Mercifully give us faith to perceive that, according to his promise, he abides with his Church on earth, even to the end of the ages."

This morning we are observing Ascension Day. Occurring this past Thursday, the 40th day after Easter, it commemorates an event as important to our faith as the crucifixion and the resurrection: the ascension of Jesus to heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

Children: I am so glad that the children are with us in the service for the summer! You have your own bulletins (that go with the readings for Easter 7) for you to color and draw. On the blank page it asks you to draw something that you want Jesus to pray for *you*. In the sermon, you will hear me talk about how Jesus is with God the Father, doing that: telling God what our prayers and needs are. Listen for that in the sermon and maybe draw a picture of what *you* think it might look like as Jesus and God are hanging out together in Heaven.

So today we observe the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Sadly, most American Christians, especially Protestants, are barely aware of Jesus' Ascension and those in Europe are only slightly more aware because it is a bank holiday. It is, however, as central to the Christian faith as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter.

Our reading from Acts provides the fullest account. In the forty days that followed his resurrection Jesus continued to appear to the disciples and to teach them. It is a sad lesson to all of us, that even after having seen Jesus heal, feed, and heard him teach, after witnessing his death

and his resurrection, the disciples still didn't understand the mission of the Messiah. They ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" They are still thinking in earthly human terms. They are focused upon their immediate hurts and needs, which are great, to be sure, but they had yet to elevate their vision to heaven, to see from God's perspective. Jesus replied to them,

"It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

The first and most important point to understand is, as Claude Pressnell wrote so clearly and well in this week's Dailies,

The ascension was not a mystic event; it was a physical reality. Christ, in the fullness of the resurrected body, ascended into heaven. Heaven is not a storybook fantasy; it is a place. True, it remains a *mystery of faith* until we are called to experience it, but the ascension bolsters our faith in Jesus' trustworthy statement that He is going to prepare a place for us.

We speak often of the "bodily resurrection," both Jesus and ours, but Claude is right to focus our attention on the bodily ascension of Jesus and the reality of heaven, the domain of God. "In the fullness of the resurrected body" Jesus took his place with God, ruling with him over *all* creation and history. This is one of the three main reasons or purposes of Jesus' ascension: (1) he now rules with the father and intercedes on our behalf; (2) the Holy Spirit would then be sent upon all Christians, and (3) the Gospel would be declared to "*the ends of the earth.*"

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning we heard it read that "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:20) In so doing the prophecy of Daniel was also fulfilled.

Dan. 7:9 As I watched,
 thrones were set in place,
 and an Ancient One took his throne,
13 [and] I saw one like a son of man (כְּבֶרֶךְ אֱנוֹשׁ)
 coming with the clouds of heaven.
 And he came to the Ancient One
 and was presented before him.
14 To him was given dominion
 and glory and kingship,
 that all peoples, nations, and languages
 should serve him.
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion
 that shall not pass away,
 and his kingship is one
 that shall never be destroyed.

The Son of Man has taken his place as the Son of God, seated at the right hand of God, the Ancient of Days, to judge all the world. While here on earth we do not yet see justice done fully, the ascension affirms that the judge has entered his court and will come again to bring justice and peace. This is why he ascended.

While with the Father, Jesus also prepares a place for us. John 14 was always one of my Uncle Freddie's favorite passages. "John 14:2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" This is the New International Version and I remember vividly when it came out because Uncle Freddie was adamant about sticking with the King James Version: "My Father's house has many mansions." He said, "I don't like it! Jesus promised me a mansion not a room!" There is *now* a place for us also in Heaven.

While seated at the right hand of God the Father, Jesus also intercedes for us. Hebrews 4 is perhaps, for me, one of the most encouraging passages in all of Scripture.

Heb. 4:14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus ascended and “passed through the heavens” so that we may now enter directly into that throne room and come before the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man and boldly make known our sins, hurts, and our needs. Jesus, the great high priest, intercedes for us and we will receive “mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” This is also why he ascended.

While Jesus has ascended he is not absent from this world. He ascended and the Holy Spirit *descended* upon his followers. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The Holy Spirit has always been present, at creation “the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.” The Spirit spoke through the prophets and the psalmists, *but now* God is sending his Spirit upon *all* his people and he does so with specific purpose: So that we will be “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Notice that progression. The disciples were to start right where they were, but they were not to stay there, they were to move out, into the world.

One commentator (Samuel Son) has said that the Ascension “took away the temptation of the first disciples to claim a central location and language.”¹⁸ Where ancient religions had primarily been regional and inextricably connected with the land and country of its adherents, the Holy Spirit was sending the disciples out to proclaim the salvation of *all the world* through Jesus Christ.

Next Sunday we will celebrate Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended like “divided tongues, as of fire,” came and rested upon the disciples, and they began to speak in the languages of all nations. They had gathered together in one place, yet Spirit drove them out of their cloistered rooms, into the streets to proclaim the Gospel Message. Were Jesus to remain here on Earth, the church would be located around him geographically rather than spiritually. Instead, the Spirit sends us out into all the world.

The Messiah has ascended into heaven, but he is not absent. He remains King and High Priest, but now, by the Holy Spirit, we are all called and empowered to be his prophetic voice declaring the salvation of the world, calling for justice and mercy, and fulfilling his command that we love one another.

He ascended and we have work to do.

Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so we may also in heart and mind there ascend, and while here on Earth may continue the works and teaching that he began. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, who lives and reigns with you, one God for ever and ever.

Amen. ☩

¹⁸<https://sojo.net/articles/ascension-day-antidote-american-christian-exceptionalism>

Weekly Devotional – May 29 - June 3, 2017

St. B's Dailies

Dates: May 29 – June 3, 2017

First Name: Christian

Email: cbrady@stbs.net

Monday, {May 29}

[Psalm 89:1-18](#); [Ezek. 4:1-17](#); [Heb. 6:1-12](#); [Luke 9:51-62](#)

Reading

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' ⁵⁹To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' ⁶¹Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' ⁶²Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

Reflection

Our Gospel readings are from Luke chapters 9 and 10 and focus upon what it means to be a follower of Jesus. In this first section, Jesus is rejected by the Samaritans of this village, “because his face was set towards Jerusalem.” The Samaritans believed that the *true* holy place to worship God was Mount Gerizim, not Mount Zion (Jerusalem). If they had hopes for Jesus as *their* Messiah, they evaporated when they realized he was going to Jerusalem and so he was not welcome in their town.

The James and John were humiliated and indignant. They were heady with the power Jesus had given them (Luke 9:1) and wanted to rain destruction down upon them. We are not told Jesus' words of rebuke, but his response to those who rejected him was to move on. Their judgment comes from God. When he sent his disciples out he told them, "Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them" (Luke 9:5). Walk away. And leave your pride behind you.

The rest of this passage offers a similar message, we must be willing to let go of the comforts and connections of this world if we are follow Jesus. But for many of us, myself included, leaving my pride behind is perhaps the hardest. It is one thing when we choose to set aside something of we value, it is another to be unwelcomed, scorned, and rejected. Our only choice then ought to be to turn, walk away, and leave our pride behind as we follow Jesus.

Collect for the Day

If you'd like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

TUESDAY, {May 30}

Insert the list of daily office readings here.

Reading

¹ After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!"

...¹⁷ *The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'*

Reflection

Chapter ten of Luke begins much the same as chapter 9, with the sending out of disciples, but this time it is a far larger number, as the followers of Christ increase in number. Their job was reap the harvest, that is to bring people into the Kingdom of Heaven: “⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’” They are to be wary, like sheep among wolves, yet they are to be vulnerable, taking nothing with them, but rather trusting in the charity of those who will take them in.

Later in his passage Jesus warns of God’s judgment that will come upon those who do not welcome this message, but their first response upon entering any home is always to be “Peace to this house.” The judgment is for God, but our part is to bring the Good News of the healing and risen Christ, to declare “peace.” And when we come and go in peace, God will not only provide for his servants, he will conquer all the forces of this world as he brings about his Kingdom.

Collect for the Day

If you’d like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B’s in Transition

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WEDNESDAY, {May 31}

[*Psalms 101, 109:1-4\(5-19\)20-30; Ezek. 11:14-25; Heb. 7:1-17; Luke 10:17-24*](#)

Reading

17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!’¹⁸ He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹See, I have

given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

21 At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²²All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'

23 Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! ²⁴For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

Reflection

"Rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

"Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!"

Jesus gave his disciples great authority and power, yet this is *not* what is most important. No matter how great we become, what position or authority we achieve, nothing is more important than the knowledge of the one who is the Son. "No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." This intimate knowledge, in turn, leads to our names being "written in heaven."

This knowledge is not always easily seen and grasped. The disciples often did not fully understand what he said and did not fully comprehend who he was until after the resurrection and his appearance. When we are children our knowledge and conviction of who Jesus is my be strong and unassailable, but as we grow the world begins to look more complex and are certainty may waiver. But he remains the same and can stand the scrutiny. His commitment to us remains the same as well.

Lord Jesus, enable us to see and hear you at every stage in our life and growth and confirm in our hearts the certainty of our salvation. Amen.

Collect for the Day

If you'd like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

THURSDAY, {June 1}

[*Psalm 105:1-22*](#); [*Ezek. 18:1-4,19-32*](#); [*Heb. 7:18-28*](#); [*Luke 10:25-37*](#)

Reading

Luke 10:25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’²⁶He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’²⁷He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’²⁸And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’

Reflection

It is in our nature to want to both simplify and make things more complex. The lawyer wanted a simple, straightforward, easy to follow answer to the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life.” Jesus in return asked him what God’s Law says. The man, remember a lawyer, which in this case means he knew the Law of God, provided the summary of the Law that we recite at the beginning of the Rite One service (BCP, 319; “Penitential Order”). To simplify yet again: Love God with all your being and love your neighbor too.

Then we seek to complicate it, “who is my neighbor?” The question was asked not so that he could better serve his neighbor, but to know who he did *not* need to love. Jesus’s answer, the parable of the Samaritan, is well-known and illustrates the fact that everyone who is in need is our neighbor. We become *their* neighbor when we show them the love and compassion that they need, regardless of our desires, prejudices, or prior commitments.

³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Collect for the Day

If you’d like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

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FRIDAY, {June 2}

[Psalm 102](#); [Ezek. 34:17-31](#); [Heb. 8:1-13](#); [Luke 10:38-42](#)

Reading

Luke 10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.'

Reflection

This short episode has shaped many a sermon. "Who are you, Mary or Martha?" The lesson is obvious enough: the world has much to distract and occupy ourselves with, but we must focus upon Jesus, whose love will last forever.

It is a simple lesson and yet devilishly difficult to implement. Every day we have to get up and get ready for school or work. We have relationships that require attention and time. I like to think that if Jesus showed up in the flesh to my house, I would indeed sit at his feet and listen raptly. What I need to realize is that *he is with me* every moment of every day. True, we have the matters of this world that require our attention, but Jesus is present and is always ready to speak into our lives. Our task is to prioritize, to first stop and listen to what Jesus has to say to us. Other matters not only can wait, but we will be better equipped when they are in their proper place.

Collect for the Day

If you'd like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

SATURDAY, {June 3}

[Psalm 107:33-43, 108:1-6\(7-13\) Ezek. 43:1-12; Heb. 9:1-14; Luke 11:14-23](#)

Reading

Luke 11:14 Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. ¹⁵But some of them said, 'He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.' ¹⁶Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven. ¹⁷But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, 'Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. ¹⁸If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? —for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. ²⁰But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you. ²¹When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. ²²But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his plunder. ²³Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Reflection

“Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house.” Jesus uses this expression to point out that if he were indeed casting our demons on the authority of Satan, then Satan’s kingdom is coming to an end. But, in fact, it is “by the finger of God!” Not only is Satan’s kingdom coming to an end, the Kingdom of God has come near.

Jesus applies the same house-divide principle to God’s kingdom as well. “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” Notice the passive nature of those who are “against” Jesus. They are not working *against* Jesus, they are simply not with him.

The fact that they are not gathering means that they are effectively scattering. There is no passive position when it comes to the Kingdom of God.

Collect for the Day

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

XXVIII. Fire and Spirit

Whitsunday – Pentecost

Year A

RCL

- Acts 2:1-21
- 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13
- John 7:37-39
- Psalm 104:25-35, 37

O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

This morning we have heard our readings in the several languages of our congregation, Spanish, Ukrainian, Dinka, and of the Bible as Adrea read our Psalm in Hebrew and the Gospel in Aramaic. Father Dave and I just read the Gospel in a manner similar to the way in which the Torah, the Law, would have been read in the synagogue when Jesus worshipped. One verse would be read in the original language, Hebrew, and then a translator, *meturgeman*, would render it in the common language of the community, either Aramaic or Greek. In our case, rather than read the Gospel in Greek, the language in which it was written, I read it in Syriac, an Aramaic dialect similar to that which Jesus would have spoken. Father Dave then read in English, so that all might understand the Gospel. Our readings remind us not simply of the great power of the Holy Spirit or of the diversity of our community, but also of the ancient roots of our worship as the people of God.

“Pentecost,” the Greek word means “50th” and refers to the Jewish festival of Weeks, in Hebrew *Shavuot*, which was 7 weeks (7x7) after the offering of the first-fruits at the time of Passover (Lev. 23:9-14). Jewish tradition also holds that it was the day on which God gave Israel

the Law on Mount Sinai. Shavuot or Pentecost was one of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the Three Pilgrimage Festivals. So on this day Jerusalem was crowded with Jews from every nation on earth, from every region, as they celebrated God's great gift of the Law.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem and offered up his life fifty days earlier, at Passover. Since that "beautiful scandalous night" he died and rose again and appeared to the disciples. Then, after ascending to heaven, on the Feast of Shavuot, the anniversary of the giving of the "Blessed Burden of the Law," God's spirit descended upon the disciples.

Acts 2:3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

This is the anointing of God's people, the fulfillment of the Law *and* the prophets. Jesus' earthly ministry had ended and now God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has empowered us so that *our* earthly ministry might begin.

The tongues of flame came upon the disciples that day and gave them the tongues of humanity so that they were able to speak in the languages of all those present in Jerusalem. Was it a sign of the Holy Spirit's anointing? Yes, but *more importantly*, it was so that the Gospel would be proclaimed to *the ends of the earth* (see Ascension Gospel, Luke 24:44-53). Each person in Jerusalem, from all those various countries of the world, "heard them speaking in the native language of each."

The image is of tongues of fire appearing above their heads. Our stained glass windows depict this with great beauty, even our bulletins depict the image. When God first revealed himself to Moses it was in the fire of the bush that burned bright and yet was not consumed. When God led Israel out from Egypt, it was by a pillar of fire in the night and a pillar of cloud in

the day. I saw something just like this one evening. I was driving home from Tulane University across the Ponchartrain Causeway, the longest overwater bridge in the world, and because of the lake and summer evening storms, I saw a thunderhead of clouds rolling towards the bridge from the west. Descending down from its belly was a long column of cloud and within it lightening flashed. Ezekiel saw the throne of God in the midst of the storm.

Ezek. 1:4 As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber.

Although I have only recently come to read his writings, one of my favorite authors is Frederick Buechner. In his collection of ABCs *Beyond Words*, he makes this observation about “fire.”

Fire has no shape or substance. You can’t taste it or smell it or hear it. You can’t touch it except at great risk. You can’t weigh it or measure it or examine it with instruments. You can never grasp it in its fullness because it never stands still. Yet there is no mistaking its extraordinary power.¹⁹

Is it any wonder that this is the image that we have again and again for the God who is both transcendent and immanent; our God who is both the divine creator, uncontainable by this cosmos, and yet willing to come and live as one of us in his Son, Jesus Christ? God the Spirit is the fire that dances within us and consumes us and cannot be contained. It is fire that purifies, refines, and sanctifies.

On the other hand, in that same book under “S,” Buechner notes that the word “Spirit” has become vacuous.

¹⁹Excerpt From: Frederick Buechner. “Beyond Words.” iBooks. <https://itun.es/us/3BNFv.1>

The word *Spirit* has come to mean something pale and shapeless, like an unmade bed. School spirit, the American spirit, the Christmas spirit, the spirit of '76, the Holy Spirit—each of these points to something that you know is supposed to get you to your feet cheering, but that you somehow can't rise to. The adjective *spiritual* has become downright offensive. If somebody recommends a person as spiritual you tend to avoid that person, and usually with good reason. *Inspiring* is even worse. *Inspirational* is worse still. Inspirational books are almost invariably for the birds.

(It should perhaps be remembered that this snippet is found in an “inspirational” book.)
He is right again, of course. What does “spirit” mean to us today? It conjures up images of *Ghost Hunters* on cable TV or the crowd-led fever of “team spirit” (I am rooting for the Preds!).

In Hebrew, Greek, and Latin the word “spirit” comes from the same root as “breath.” It is, in other words, the very substance of our lives. Without breath, we have no life. In the beginning the *Spirit, the Breath, of God* hovered over the face of the deep and God “breathed into human nostrils the breath of life; and humanity became a living being.”

So it is that throughout the Old Testament that God appeared to his people in fire and his Spirit inspired the prophets. But now, from that first Pentecost after the Ascension of Jesus to today, God is sending his spirit upon *all* his people, not just a select few, but *all Christians* are to be inspired, Spirit-filled. As Peter quoted the prophet Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon *all flesh*,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

Then *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

This is the birth of the Church, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the congregation of God's people, those who worship and declare Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One through whom God has redeemed all the world. "Then *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In my brief time with you at St. B's I have learned about the history of the Holy Spirit's work among you. Some will think I am speaking of those days, decades ago now, when people spoke in tongues, shared prophecies, and were slain in the spirit here in these aisles. It is certain that God was at work in St. B's then as well. But I am thinking also of the days when revivals were held in this sanctuary. I am thinking of those days priests and parishioners alike have gone into hospitals and homes to bring prayer, comfort, the Eucharist, and healing. I am thinking of how the Spirit has been at work in the educational programs of St. B's. I am thinking also about those times of creation, expansion, division, and transition. I am thinking about the past, the present, and the future.

The Spirit is *always* at work.

The fire of the Holy Spirit came to rest as tongues of flame "on each one of them." The Spirit of God rests *now* upon *us*. Upon each and every one of us. Giving each of us, according to our gifts and abilities, the power to do God's will and ministry in this world.

The fire of the Holy Spirit rests upon each one of us today so that we too can continue that ministry begun by Jesus himself. Paul, writing to a church as complex and diverse as our own, encouraged them all to recognize the gifts that God had given.

To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit? Do you believe that Jesus died, rose on the third day, and ascended into heaven? Do you believe that he sent his Spirit to comfort, heal, inspire, and move us? Because God believes in *you* and God is at work in your life. Allow the Holy Spirit into your life, allow his healing and renewal to grow within you, and from you will flow the deeds of God. Are you thirsty? Then drink deeply.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Amen. ☩

XXIV. Trinity Sunday – “It’s Just a Mystery”

First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday, Year A, RCL

- Genesis 1:1-2:4a
- 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
- Matthew 28:16-20
- Psalm 8

Check audio of second service.

When I consider of the nature and character of God I naturally think of George Carlin. For those unfamiliar with this comic genius, George Carlin was at his height during the 70s and his character the “Hippy Dippy Weather Man” (“with your hippy dippy weather, man”) best exemplified his style at the time. He died in 2008 and was one of the greatest comedians of all time. As a fan of stand-up, I enjoyed his routines immensely; he matched his irreverence with a particularly keen wit and mind. But as he aged, his condescension towards anything or anyone who disagreed with him grew and this was particularly true of his routine on “Why God Does Not Exist.”

Fortunately for us, someone has posted the content of this routine (© 1999) on the web so I can share with you the most salient points with appropriately adapted language.

But I want you to know something, this is sincere, I want you to know, when it comes to believing in God, I really tried. I really, really tried. I tried to believe that there is a God, who created each of us in His own image and likeness, loves us very much, and keeps a close eye on things. I really tried to believe that, but I gotta tell you, the longer you live, the more you look around, the more you realize, something is ***** up.

Something is wrong here. War, disease, death, destruction, hunger, filth, poverty, torture, crime, corruption, and the Ice Capades. Something is definitely wrong. This is not good work. If this is the best God can do, I am

not impressed. Results like these do not belong on the résumé of a Supreme Being. This is the kind of {stuff} you'd expect from an office temp with a bad attitude. And just between you and me, in any decently-run universe, this guy would've been out on his all-powerful {rear} a long time ago. And by the way, I say "this guy", because I firmly believe, looking at these results, that if there is a God, it has to be a man.

Carlin insists that God must not exist because of all the bad things in the world. He is right, of course, that this world *is* full of the most awful kinds of suffering imaginable. What is even worse is that the most terrible examples of suffering are inflicted upon humans by *other humans*.

This is the fundamental error in Carlin's comments and criticism of God. Carlin fails to understand, that the evil/suffering/sorrow in this world is not a reflection of God and his character, rather it is the result of human will. Carlin's position is the ultimate in hubris as he blames God... well, to be more accurate, he believes he has disproved the existence of God, because of what we as humans have done to ourselves and others. His solution, by the way, is to worship the sun because it "treats me fine" and he prays to Joe Pesci because "he looks like a guy who can get things done." I think he was kidding about this last bit.

The fact is that, and what makes Carlin's routine so poignant and powerful, it *is* hard to reconcile the world of pain and sorrow and suffering that we experience with the concept of a God who loves us and cares about what happens to us. If he cares so much, then why hasn't God done something about it? Of course God did, but let's start with the account of Creation found in Genesis 1 and see what it tells us about God.

The first and most fundamental truth asserted by the Bible is that God exists and that he created everything. The Bible opens, "In the beginning, God created..." God is the subject of the first verb and everything described in this chapter comes from God. That is, the waters separate,

because God commanded it, the birds multiply because God told them to. One of the main functions of Gen. 1 is to tell us some important details about God:

1. God exists. Period. Full stop. There is no further explanation or elaboration here or elsewhere in the Bible about the origins of God. As with his name Yahweh, He is.”
2. All things come from God. From this formless void God created everything. This is a truth regardless of how one wants to read the passage and understand evolution. The mechanisms are not provided, rather simply the truth that God is the origin of it all.
3. The Spirit of God also exists and moves.

The Hebrew term for “spirit,” as we discussed last week at Pentecost, also means breath or wind, but there is no doubt that the term here means the same thing as what we would describe as “spirit” so this English term and concept is fine. *With one exception.* Our spirit resides within us so long as we are in this world. God, of course, does not reside in this world (at least not as we do) and so the Spirit of God can and does act in this world, working with God in creation, inspiring prophets (that is where the word “inspire” comes from, after all), and now, after Pentecost, moving and comforting the Church.

So Genesis recounts that God created this world *for us* and that we were created in His image and “it was very good.” *This* is how the world was supposed to be. Of course part of being made in God’s image, as our Catechism (BCP, p. 845) reminds us, “means that we are free to *make choices*: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.” The choices we have made as humans, even with best intentions, often lead to hurt, injury, and

pain. This is the world that we live in. But contrary to George Carlin's assessment, God *does* care about us that is why God is not just Creator and Spirit, but Son as well.

In our Eucharistic prayer Father Travis will say,

... when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

This is the care and love God expressed in and through the Divinity. First he creates us in his image, with will and choice, then when we had fallen into sin and death, he sent his Son.

John's Gospel begins by making it clear that Jesus, the Son, was present also at Creation. The Gospel begins with that incredibly poetic and powerful statement that parallels our reading from Genesis.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

How did God create all things? Through simple declaration, through his Word, "Let there be light! And there was light." Jesus was literally the Word, the utterance, by which God created and that Word was uttered through the Spirit.

Here we find one of the most direct and powerful statements about the Trinity within the Gospels. You notice that the word "Trinity" is not used since John is not trying to explain *how* Jesus was with God "in the beginning," just as Genesis 1 is not a guide on "How to Create Your Own Cosmos." Instead both Genesis 1 and John 1 are simply telling us that it is so. It is a

mystery, a truth revealed. God created this cosmos and all that inhabit it, the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep, and all things came into being through the Word, the Son. God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

But I acknowledge that I have dodged the hard question. How is this possible, how does the Trinity *work*? I will tell you honestly, I don't know. I will not pretend to explain to you the inner workings of the divine relationship, how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit coexist, are *homoousious*, of one substance, and how they each have their distinct roles and personalities. There are various analogies, but everyone comes with its own difficulties and heresies. (See the Lutheran video of "[St. Patrick's Bad Analogies](#).")

The kinds of analogies that work best for me are the pie and water images. You don't know the cherry-pie-as-Trinity model? It is simple. Consider a nice runny cherry pie, with a big poofy crust on top, with three slices made. From above you see three distinct slices, but under the crust, they are "of the same substance." In this case sticky, sweet, and yummy!

The water analogy has a little more substance to it. Just as H₂O has three states, liquid, gas, and solid, each with its own specific qualities and peculiarities, and each able to exist at the same time, while having the same molecular structure, so it is with the God head, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Of course if taken too far, this analogy would lead to a heresy called modalism. Which is an excellent reminder that analogies are just that, a comparison of two things that may be similar, but are not identical. Analogies may be helpful, but they will always be imperfect.

So to try and analyze the inner workings of the Trinity is fruitless and would be a mistake. Such knowledge has not been given to us. We know of God through what he has revealed to us; it has not revealed precisely *how* the Three-in-One divide up their divine chores. This is, in the proper sense of the word, a *mystery*. As today's collect says, God has

... given to us [his] servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity.

We don't have to understand it to know that it is true.

It is not unknowable. It is just a mystery. *Amen.* ✠

XXV. "Everyone will laugh *with* me."

Promise, Patience, Perseverance, and Peace

- Proper 6 (11) (June 18, 2017)
 - First reading and Psalm
 - Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)
 - Psalm 100
 - Second reading
 - Romans 5:1-8
 - Gospel
 - Matthew 9:35-10:8

"... because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us: we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." Rom. 5:5, 3-4

God made a lot of promises to Abraham. The story of Abraham begins in chapter 12 of Genesis when he is still called "Abram" and begins with God's promise:

Gen. 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God promises Abraham that he would take him to a new land and that from him would come "a great nation." Abraham got up and left his hometown of Ur of the Chaldeans, took his household and started walking. He started the trek of thousands of miles to a place he did not know, because God had made him a promise. Oh, and Sarah, his wife, was barren; she could not have any children.

This is the tension that runs through what we call the “Abraham cycle;” God has promised Abraham that he would become a great nation and yet he has no children of his own and his wife is barren. It is a theme that returns several times, but it is finally resolved here in chapters 18 and 21. When reading, it can all seem to happen so fast, after all it is only a few short chapters, each only a page or two in the Bible, and then they have their son Isaac. All is well and just as God promised! But if we read a little closer we realize that the promise also came with a need for patience.

The Bible tells us that Abraham was 75 when he went out from Ur (Gen. 12:4) and he was 100 when his son was born (Gen. 21:5). You may take those ages as literally or figuratively as you like, the point is that many, many years passed from the time God promised Abraham that he would lead him to a new land and make his descendants a nation down to the day his son was born. We tend to think that God was always hanging out and chatting with Abraham, popping in for a little veal, curds, and biscuits. But in fact there are years that pass without any apparent interaction. He and his family and retainers walked more than a thousand miles and lived through a famine before the Bible tells us of God’s next word of encouragement to Abraham! He has a son, Ishmael, by Sarah’s servant Hagar in an effort to bring about the promise of descendants. He and his men fight a war and rescue his nephew Lot, who later will leave his uncle to settle in the city. All this and far more real life happened before Isaac was born.

We also must remember that Abraham and Sarah never saw in their own life the fulfillment of many of God’s promises to them. The promise of a land, a country where their family would settle, the growth of their people from one son to a nation named after their grandson, all came after they had died. Still, when God told them to “get up and go to the land that I will show you,” Abraham and Sarah got up and went.

God’s promise requires perseverance on our part.

When Sarah heard the messengers from God declare that she, in her old age, would give birth to a child she laughed. Not with joy, but with mocking sarcasm.

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

Can you hear the sarcasm? “Shall I have *pleasure*?” Pleasure?! Childbirth is hard and painful even for the healthiest of young women. It was commonplace for women in antiquity, as in many places today without modern medicine, for women to die giving birth. In fact, while the prophets regularly describe the coming day of God’s judgment by saying “all creation will groan as a woman in childbirth,” in the two times (Rachel and Phinehas’ wife) in the Bible where that phrase is used for actual women, they died giving birth to their children! “Shall I have pleasure,” indeed! But nothing is too hard for the LORD.

Sarah’s laughter turned into laughter, from bitter sarcasm to tears of joy. When Isaac was born, “Sarah said, ‘God has brought laughter for me; *everyone who hears will laugh with me.*’” I am sure that it was not an easy pregnancy or birth. The pain and hardship that she undoubtedly endured during that natal year likely made the decades of nomadic life seem luxurious. Yet she persevered, God’s promises were fulfilled, and her joy was made complete.

I do not know the specific promises that God has for you. I do not even know if you know them. That is a matter for *you* to seek out by praying and listening to God’s voice and remembering that God speaks through those around us and through the events of our lives. The personal promises that God has for you are for you to discern. Just as St. B’s must continue to discern God’s call for us as a parish. But we all share in the one promise that Paul describes this morning in these words: “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is the promise of Good Friday and Easter Sunday: that we have been reconciled with God and may now be at peace with him. It is a promise to *all* humanity. Like Abraham and Sarah, we will not experience the fullness, the completeness of that promise in this life. After all, that is the meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom*; we translate it as “peace,” but it means “to be complete, fulfilled.” The ultimate completion and fulfillment of God’s promises, the fullness of his *peace*, lies before us and **in him, our joy will be complete.**

Yet still we must persevere, to continue to trek through this life fulfilling our commitments to God and to one another in this time that we have here. For “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” **We must persevere.** When Christians talk of perseverance we often turn to this passage in Romans that we read this morning. And we often misunderstand it. We read Paul saying, “we also boast in our *sufferings*, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” So it is that too often we teach that we are *called to suffer* because of these benefits, that through suffering we learn to endure, building character and hope. But we have the sentence (and it is a long one) backwards. It is not *suffering* that is the key to our hope, rather it is God’s love and the Holy Spirit.

“... because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us: we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” Rom. 5:5, 3-4

We may boast in our sufferings *because* God’s love and the Holy Spirit allow it to be transformed into endurance, character, and hope. Sarah’s bitter laughter became true joy because God was at work in her life. Hold firm to the promises of God, accept the love and work of the Holy Spirit in your life, and you will have peace, your joy will be complete.

Amen. ✠

XXVI. Where are you going from here?

- Proper 7, Year A, RCL, Track 1
 - Genesis 21:8-21
 - Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
 - Romans 6:1b-11
 - Matthew 10:24-39

We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. *Amen.*

In two months it will be thirty years ago that my parents handed me a letter from Cornell University. I had finished my freshman year at the school and I had *not* done well academically, I knew that. My summer was now winding down. As I had for the last three summers, I was working as a lifeguard and coach and swimming in the local summer league. That was my sport, swimming, and I had been good enough to receive several full scholarships, none of which I took so that I could go to Cornell. The letter, which I dearly wish I still possessed, said something to the effect of “after your academic performance of this year we think you ought to reconsider whether higher education is for you; we recommend you take a year off and think about it.” My parents had held on to the letter for a couple of months so as not to ruin my last summer swimming with my local team.

I had dreamed for years that I would be a research medical doctor. I had even done internships in the National Institutes of Health as a high school student. Science, medicine, and technology all fascinated me, they still do, but when I got to school I found that I simply was not committed to it, not in the way that was required to succeed. That and I never was able to pass Calculus 2. Certain detailed concepts were just beyond my grasp. They still are. So it was that a combination of my own lack of attending classes and aptitude in key, required areas led to a

significant personal crisis. I would not be going back to college with my friends and I would not be fulfilling my dream of becoming a “real doctor.”

My parents were very supportive, but sometimes you need an outside perspective. I drove to the house of a mentor and friend. He was a psychiatrist, had gone to Cornell, and was much of the reason why I had fallen in love with the place. There were no cell phones in those days, so he didn't know I was coming, I just showed up on his doorstep. That evening he provided me with perhaps the most important template of my life. While we discussed and assessed for a bit how I had come to this point, he said, in effect, **“Here is where you are. So, where are you going from here?”**

He helped me to think through and plan how to move forward from that moment, building upon the past, even grieving the lost vision of my future, but he did not allow me to wallow in regret or kick against the goad. Instead we considered what I could do with this year I now had at my disposal, how to get the most out of it to grow and learn more about who I was and what God might be calling me to become. It was one of the most difficult and important years of my life.

Our reading from Genesis this morning finds Hagar in a place she never asked to be. Cast out from her home of nearly twenty years, discarded by her mistress and master, wandering in the wilderness with her boy Ishmael. With nothing more than “bread and a skin of water” she was sent away and when those meager rations were gone, she put her boy down in the shade and sat, waiting to die. She never asked to be sold into slavery. She never asked to be given to her mistress' husband to produce a child for them. She never wanted anything but blessing for her little boy.

You may remember that last week we considered the story of Isaac's birth, the unlikely and untimely provision by God that fulfilled the promises he had made decades earlier to Abraham and the barren Sarah. This morning's reading from Genesis tells the story of Abraham's *other* son Ishmael. Ishmael's birth is recounted in Gen. 16. Sarah was so frustrated that she was unable to have children of her own that she suggested she should give her Egyptian slave Hagar to Abraham.

Gen. 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2 and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her."

It seems that the idea was that the child born to Hagar would effectively be adopted by Sarah, making it her own child. Hagar was made an unwilling surrogate and, as you might expect, emotions and jealousies arose.

3 Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram *as a wife*. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, *she looked with contempt on her mistress*. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" 6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

The pregnant Hagar ran away, no doubt expecting to lose herself and perhaps her life in the wilderness, but an angel of the LORD found her by a well. He comforted her and said, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction." The name "Ishmael" means "God heard." Hagar returned to her mistress, as the angel had instructed her, and gave birth to Ismael. He was fourteen years old when his half-brother Isaac was born. The boys laughed and played together, as we find in

today's reading, but Sarah's jealousy is too much, she cannot allow a rival to exist, so once again Hagar goes out into the wilderness. And once again God meets her there.

Each one of us finds ourselves at times in the wilderness, feeling separated and alone, cast off and anxious that we have no future, or, at least, that the future we had envisioned for ourselves is no longer possible. We may feel that we are suffering through no fault of our own, yet there is always some role that we play in our journey. Thirty years ago I was the victim of my inability to understand Calculus...and my refusal to attend my 9 am German section and my Chemistry class and lab. I *earned* those failing grades. But my dreams were dashed. I deserved my fate far more than Hagar deserved hers. Hagar did not ask to be a slave and a surrogate mother. Yet once she was a mother, she lorded it over her mistress and fanned the flames of jealousy.

Regardless of how we made our way into the wilderness, **“Here is where we are. So, where are we going from here?”**

First we must make clear our grief and concerns, offer up to God our prayer for deliverance. It is important that we lament and express our sorrow at our situation. But then we must listen for God. Remember Ishmael: God hears. God *does* hear the prayers of his people and he will respond. Of course we would all love for it to be as clear as an angel arriving by our side and speaking directly to us. Most often, however, God speaks to us through those immediately around us. Sometimes it is through our parents or spouse (although familiarity often seems to make us deaf to those we love), but it may be just as likely through... well, *anyone*. We have to be listening in order to hear.

It may also be through circumstances. Some of us (he says, pointing at himself) have a hard time hearing the “still small voice” and so God may work through the *events* in our lives,

the day-to-day happenings, to speak to us. As I entered into this year of leave from my academic obligations, I was praying for God's guidance in this time. I had thought that would come as inspiration in my reflection and writing. Instead it came in a phone call from Canon Pamela Snare asking if I would be interested in spending time in Nashville for the year. I accepted the call and it has been one of the most challenging—and blessed—years of my life.

Cry out, then listen. Tell God your fears, hurts, and pain, but never forget to then be silent, listening for his reply.

And never forget that God's promises remain. They did for Ishmael and they do for us. God promised Hagar that her son would be a great nation. "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water." Our children are unlikely to become a great nation, but we have a greater promise. Paul assures us that no matter what our crisis, no matter how much we suffer and die day-by-day, "we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, [so] we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ... The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

So, here you are. Where are you going? We all, at one time or another, find our selves in the wilderness, broken and ready to give up. The sin of this world and in our lives overwhelming us and making it feel as if there is no hope. Yet, Ishmael, God hears our cry. God remains present and working with us, in us, and through us. When we cry out, God is listening and will hear us and he will open our eyes and show us the well of living water. We must be willing to hear and see. So prick your ears and lift up your eyes and drink of the healing waters from God.

Amen. ✠

Weekly Devotional – June 26- July 1

St. B's Dailies

Dates: June 26, — July 1, 2017

First Name: Fr. Christian

Email: cbrady@targuman.org

Monday, {June 26}

[*Psalm 89:1-18*](#); [*1 Samuel 5:1-12*](#); [*Acts 5:12-26*](#); [*Luke 21:29-36*](#)

Reading

1 Samuel 5:1 When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod; 2then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and placed it beside Dagon. 3When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. 4But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ...10So they sent the ark of the God of Israel to Ekron. But when the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "Why have they brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people?" 11They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people."

Reflection

This week our Old Testament readings will take us through a significant portion of the prophet Samuel's life. As with many other figures in the Bible, Samuel's mother was barren and only gave birth after praying for God to provide her with a child. She dedicated him to the Lord and so rather than live with her, he served God with the high priest Eli at Shiloh. God had sent word to Samuel, "I am about to punish [Eli's] house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them." Samuel told Eli the prophecy.

The Israelites went out to battle against the Philistines and when the battle began to go against them they elders decided, "Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh,

so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies” (1 Sam. 4:3). So Eli’s sons took the ark into battle, it was captured, his son’s killed, and, upon news of the ark, old, fat Eli fell of his chair and broke his neck.

The ark of the covenant of the LORD is not a talisman, the cross around your neck will not protect you from muggers or vampires. The Philistines defeated Israel that day not because their gods had defeated the God of Israel, but because the people of Israel were not truly worshiping and following the LORD according to the covenant that they had agreed upon. The covenant that the ark held and represented. They simply looked to him to help them get out of a mess, rather than prayerfully considered whether they should have entered into it in the first place. True repentance is rewarded by God. Superstition is not.

Yet God still valued the covenant and its symbols, even if Israel did not and so the gods of the Philistines all fell before the sign of the LORD’s covenant. The ark of the covenant did what thousands of Israelite warriors failed to do: defeated the Philistines and put fear in their hearts.

Let us set aside our superstitions and talismans and live in true faith and obedience to the LORD our God. Trust that God will bring about his might work in your life and declare

Your love, O LORD, for ever will I sing;
from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness. (Ps. 89:1)

Collect for the Day

If you’d like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B’s in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

TUESDAY, {June 27}

[Psalm 97, 99, \[100\]; 1 Samuel 6:1-16; Acts 5:27-42; Luke 21:37-22:13](#)

Reading

1 Samuel 6:1 The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. 2 Then the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us what we should send with it to its place." 3 They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed and will be ransomed; will not his hand then turn from you?" 4 And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five gold tumors and five gold mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines; for the same plague was upon all of you and upon your lords. 5 So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps he will lighten his hand on you and your gods and your land. 6 Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had made fools of them, did they not let the people go, and they departed?"

Reflection

The Old Testament for most Christians is a (literal and metaphorical) closed book. We rarely read it and when we do we often struggle to see its application to our lives. This morning's reading from Samuel about the Philistines making an offering to send the ark of the covenant back to the Israelites simply seems too...well, too "Old Testamentish" to be relevant to us today!

Yet has God changed? Has human nature really changed all that much? Still we tend to go our own selfish ways and offend one another. How do we go about rectifying that in a relationship? If I have hurt my wife's feelings, I will apologize to her and perhaps offer her some sign and symbol of my true contrition. Of course the lasting gift is to not hurt or offend again, but rather to offer a true transformation in my behavior and even deeper love for her.

In this passage from Samuel we find it is the *Philistine* priests, in stark contrast with the deceased Eli and his sons, who understand that they must offer up guilt offerings to seek the forgiveness and healing, and "give glory to the God of Israel." We should not be above making vows and offerings to the LORD our God.

We too need to be healed and ransomed, so let us confess our sins, acknowledge and accept our forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord, and "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and make good your vows to the Most High" (Ps. 50:14).

Collect for the Day

If you'd like to choose a collect or prayer for the day that goes with the office, insert it here. If not, please leave it blank.

Collect for the Week

We use the collect from the proper on the Sunday (the day before) your dailies begin.

Collect for St. B's in Transition

During this season of transition, we have a list of collects that we rotate through to help us pray for our church family as we seek our next rector.

WEDNESDAY, {June 28}

[Psalm 101, 109:1-4\(5-19\)20-30; 1 Samuel 7:2-17; Acts 6:1-15; Luke 22:14-23](#)

Reading

1 Samuel 7:2 From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD.

3 Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the LORD, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

... 10 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the LORD thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. 11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car. 12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."

Reflection

"If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then..." For years, we are told, the ark was at Kiriath-jearim and only after twenty years did they finally call on the LORD for deliverance. Then Samuel offers them the challenge, "If you are really serious, then you will change your lives." They have to set aside their other gods, the ones that they would offer sacrifices to in order to hedge their bets for a good crop or the healing of a sick child, they would destroy them and serve *only* the LORD.

It is easy enough for us modern folk to assume this is not relevant to us, after all who among us recently offered raisin cakes to Asherah? Yet we all hold on to certain worldly things rather than releasing them to God. Perhaps we look at it as only "practical" or "prudent" to do business in a certain way. Whatever it is that competes with God in our hearts, we need to put them away and serve him only. When we do, he will deliver us from our oppression and fears.

Collect for the Day

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Collect for the Week

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Collect for St. B's in Transition

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THURSDAY, {June 29}

[Psalm 105:1-22](#); [1 Samuel 8:1-22](#); [Acts 6:15-7:16](#); [Luke 22:24-30](#)

Reading

1Sam. 8:1 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ² The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. ³ Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵ and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." ⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the LORD, ⁷ and the LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸ Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹ Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

Reflection

Samuel was, by all accounts in the Bible, a godly man who sought to be honest and just in his dealings. Yet his sons "took bribes and perverted justice." They did not follow after the example of their father. There is no discussion or critique of child-rearing methods here, but simply the statement that they were wicked and the people were not going to have them as their leaders. They wanted a king, just like all the other nations!

When Israel settled in the land they were not to be like the nations (Deut. 18:9), even to the extent that they were not to have a king. Rather, they were all to follow God's Law and, when needed, God would raise up a prophet like Moses to lead them. These were the Judges of the books of Judges and 1 Samuel. But those judges were inconsistent, scattered around the region, and the Israelites now wanted to be like the other nations. Samuel's job was to remind them of the challenges of having a king (the rest of the passage not quoted above, which parallels Deut. 17:14-20).

The Israelites were quite right in that Samuel's sons, like Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas, were wicked and would not have led the people well. Furthermore, under David and Solomon Israel would grow to be a mighty and strong nation.

But where is our faith? It is in human leaders or the LORD? As God tells Samuel, "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." Do we allow the LORD to be our king, what would it look like in our lives if God were in control?

Collect for the Day

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Collect for the Week

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FRIDAY, {June 30}

[Psalm 102](#); [1 Samuel 9:1-14](#); [Acts 7:17-29](#); [Luke 22:31-38](#)

Reading

1 Samuel 9:1 There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. 2He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else. 3 Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, had strayed. So Kish said to his son Saul, "Take one of the boys with you; go and look for the donkeys." ... they did not find [the donkeys]. 5When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to the boy who was with him, "Let us turn back, or my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and worry about us." 6But he said to him, "There is a man of God in this town; he is a

man held in honor. Whatever he says always comes true. Let us go there now; perhaps he will tell us about the journey on which we have set out."

Reflection

Saul was just the king Israel was looking for, he was the most handsome man in Israel, tall and strong, and he came from a wealthy family. As we will read and discuss tomorrow, this was the man whom God would send Samuel to anoint as the first king of Israel. Saul's journey towards the throne began with a search for lost donkeys. Valuable property, Saul and a servant were sent out to find them and search as they might, they could not find the donkeys. Saul is ready to head back when the boy offers the wise advice, "There is a man of God in this town; he is a man held in honor. Whatever he says always comes true. Let us go there now; perhaps he will tell us about the journey on which we have set out."

This boy was the guiding voice of God; Saul did not know that and he had no idea of the journey on which he was about to embark and yet he listened to the wise advice of the boy. We often talk about trying to "hear God's voice" and seeking to follow the path that he has set for us. In my experience, God most often speaks through others. I have to be willing to hear his wisdom and council in the voice of another and accept that the journey I *thought* I was setting out on had, in fact, a completely different destination.

Collect for the Day

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Collect for the Week

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Collect for St. B's in Transition

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SATURDAY, {July 1}

[Psalms 107:33-43, 108:1-6\(7-13\); 1 Samuel 9:15-10:1; Acts 7:30-43; Luke 22:39-51](#)

Reading

1 Samuel 9:15 Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed to Samuel: 16 "Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be ruler over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me." 17 When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD told him, "Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall rule over my people."

10:1 Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, "The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around."

Reflection

The people of Israel had been tired of the cycle of poor leadership leading to the Philistines attacking and overrunning their communities followed by a brief time of stability after they called to God and he raised up a judge who would provide them with military strength and civil leadership. They wanted a king like the other nations because they believed that this would bring constancy and peace. They were, in fact, rejecting God's direct authority over them. Yet God heard their cry and, after Samuel had warned them of the dangers of having a king, he anointed Saul as the first king of Israel.

God did indeed use Saul to deliver them from the Philistines and the other Canaanite tribes around them. There was political stability, secure borders, and it seems economic prosperity as a result. Yet Saul's reign, as with his personality, was not completely stable. He enjoyed the presence of the LORD in battle and the guidance of Samuel until he decided that he did not need either and attempted to "go it on his own." God had raised him up to defeat their enemies and used his weaknesses and shortcomings to illustrate the failings of a monarchy or any leadership.

It would be David, "one after my own heart," said the LORD, who would follow Saul. He was of more even temper, sounder strategy, and no less an ego. The difference between the two kings was that when confronted with their errors David repented, Saul did not.

God wants to use each one of us; we are each anointed by the Holy Spirit to be God's leaders in our community. We have to be confident in God to accept his anointing and the mantle he has bestowed upon us, yet humble enough to acknowledge that it is by his grace that we succeed and contrite in acknowledging when we have gone astray. When we do so, God is quick to forgive and remains present with us even in the midst of the consequences.

Collect for the Day

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Collect for the Week

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Collect for St. B's in Transition

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