

**Trinity Lutheran Church, Terre Haute, Indiana**  
**Sermons of Pastor Karen Husby – Year 2022**

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***Silence and Darkness. A Word and a Light.***

There are two kinds of silence: the *holy silence* that accompanies a deep sense of peace, the “*Silent Night with candles*” kind of silence. Silence can be golden, when it helps us to fully take in what surrounds us, undeterred by loud one-sided smart-phone conversations in a restaurant or annoyingly cheesy Christmas muzak in the grocery store. We need a holy silence to hear the tiny cries of a newborn baby. We need the holy silence in order to hear the whispered guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But there is another kind of silence, a silence that burns an aching *hole in the heart*. The silence of a parent unable or unwilling to respond to encourage an anxious child. The silence when the phone *doesn't* ring, and another Christmas goes by--with no word from a wandering loved one. The unspeakable silence that follows when the phone *does* ring with news no one ever wants to hear. The silence of grief, that strains to hear the remembered voice that has been stilled forever. Such silence sets us on the *edge of anxiety*, or perhaps it just *terrifies* us as, unbidden, our imagination fills up with scenarios of being left alone and lost.

So also, there are two kinds of darkness: the blessings of a night that restores our sleeping selves and lets the sun shine for a while somewhere else. The darkness of night that gives good hunting to the owl and the bat. The darkness that tells the plants when to rest and when to send out their new shoots.

But there is *another kind of darkness*: the fearful darkness deeply rooted in the human experience. Many cultures mark the winter solstice and celebrate, with a deep cosmic sigh of relief, the *beginning of the light returning*. I don't like trying to find my way in the dark in an unfamiliar place--I grope for the light switch, first thing, to spare myself a shin bruise, all black and blue. And in the dark, I try to remember what I have seen in the light, with mixed results. I don't like the dark--it feels unwelcoming, even dangerous.

Growing up in northwestern Minnesota, I used to dislike December and January mornings, because the school bus came *before light*, and brought us home again *after dark*. And it was *cold* in that darkness, especially when the wind was blowing, as it had been around here for the past few days! Not that the sunshine warmed it up all the much. Often, the brighter the day, the colder the temperature. Yet, when it was dark, the cold always *felt* so much colder. And lonely. And achingly sad.

And though we try to bless the darkness and embrace the silence, we cannot really make it holy *on our own*, if it is not been *made* holy for us. We can load up our electronic gadgets with self-help videos, or seek out therapists to teach us to *think differently* about darkness and silence. Or we can simply pretend that there is no darkness and no silence, holy or unholy, and set about at a frantic pace to *fill up the void*. Yet, we catch ourselves still looking for the comforting nightlight out there in the dangerous darkness; we are wearied by the *noise*, and scared to death of the *silence*.

Have you ever visited a cave? I once took a tour of the Meramec Caverns in Missouri. It was silent and it was dark. We were so grateful for the guide with a flashlight. At one point in the tour, the guide *switched off* the light. Everyone was silent in that absolute darkness. I could feel

my anxiety level begin to rise, even though I knew better. The darkness can be terrifying, like the shadows of trees blown by the wind that played across the curtains at my Grandparent's house--visions of frightful unknown creatures lurking in the dark. The silence and the darkness--how painful they can be to us. How painful and yet how very familiar, haunting our human struggles.

But now, into our unholy, lonely Silence comes a Word; into the unholy, fear-filled Darkness shines a Light. This is the Christmas news. This is God, finally *face-to-face*.

God has spoken to us, human face to human face, and that message to us from God is Jesus Christ. We can see God eye-to-eye because that Word of God became flesh, and *dwelt among us*. This is the miracle of Christmas.

The book of Hebrews tells us: *In these last days God has spoken to us by a son*. Jesus is now *what God wants to say to us*. We wrestle with the silence of God; or perhaps we hear God's voice, but only in judgment. But God speaks to us through the "Word made flesh" Jesus. God created the world, and as the crowning evidence of that creative love, *Jesus Christ became part of this creation*. Into the silence breaks a hopeful Word; into the darkness shines the welcoming light of Christ.

*"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* How is God dwelling with us now? In the created world, sometimes we *do* see quite clearly a reflection of the creator. For these moments, we can give thanks as we remember our calling as caretakers of that creation. But we hear the Word that breaks the soul's silence most clearly when we hear it *in and through each other*. God is *still among us*; we see God as we serve the people God sends to us, as we hear the Word preached and join the angel songs of praise. We speak the Word of Christ when we build each other up for our various callings as *God's hands in the world*.

We who have received the Christ Child--the one who lived among us, who loved us all the way to the cross, the one now alive with Easter promise-- we who have trusted in that name above all names, we have been *"given the power to become the children of God."* And in the children, we can see the face of the parent. In the preached Word, we can hear the voice of God's message here and now. When we share a meal together at our Lord's Table, we are a family of God gathered, festive like the Christmas dinners you may be sharing today.

On this Christmas Day, the unholy Silence is transformed and filled with the holiness of the promised *Word* sent from God. And even the Darkness is not dark for God, for Christ has become the true Light of the World. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."* Let us together live out our thanks and praise to God, now and always.

Again, we hear the wonderful, wonder-filled story. The angels singing, the shepherds joining the animals at the manger with Mary and Joseph to praise God for the long-awaited birth of a savior. We hear the story, we sing the familiar carols, we light our candles. It is what brings us here on this cold night. But after the angel's song drifts away, we will find ourselves in the very *ordinary* silence where we live out our days. And yet, even there we can ponder our moments of wonder, and then maybe, *just maybe*, we *too* can hear the angels' song again.

Our moments. . . when you caught just a *tiny fleeting* echo of something *wondrous*. And you know *you could almost believe* . . . Maybe it was the first birdsong at sunrise after the struggle of a long feverish night. Maybe it was the gentle breathing of your own newborn child, or the voice of a faithful friend when you feared you were all alone. Maybe it was even *Silent Night* sung in a darkened church, with candlelight flickering and eyes glistening. Wonder-filled moments.

The shepherds spread the new-born wonder they encountered standing with the animals at the manger. Will we wonder at God's marvelous gift, tonight amid the beautiful candlelight and festive Christmas decorations? Will we, like Mary, keep these things in our hearts, and take them with us --even after the tree is dragged out to the curb? Will we dare to remember that *this* baby will know in person all the pain we could ever face? Will we hang on for dear life to the Good Promise speaking to our fearful silence, filling us with gentle, holy, hopeful LIFE?

We long for the peace and joy of the Christmas carols --hoping against hope, if only for a day or one dark, candlelit evening, that the story IS true, that all those wild promises are truly good news FOR US, NOW, *no matter what*. Good news in our joy and peace – and also in our fears and disappointments, our loneliness, our grieving, even perhaps our quietly hidden despair. Good news even when this world's madness and sadness threatens to silence the Promise and simply break our hearts.

We are as vulnerable to the emptiness of this ailing earth as that newborn in the hay, surrounded by humble animals. Down payments of death steal pieces of life away every day. Christmas reminds us that God knows our pain in person. In the fragile weakness of a trusting infant, we can *begin* to know God's surprising strength.

The gift of the Christ Child speaks to our deepest pain. God has created a space where we can just be, where we can finally shake off the *fear and anxiety* that can seep into our days and sour them, shrinking our thoughts toward individual survival; pain that pulls our dreams so thin that we deplete our joy in living, lose our hope for a whole future, and pare a life-giving faith down to the grim business of "*survival as usual*."

Back in the seventies, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel recorded a remarkable piece: the

evening news broadcast, with *Silent Night* playing faintly in the background. Wars and rumors of wars, terror and threats of terrors, chaos, calamities, cruelties: every blessed night at 6 and 11, maybe every hour on the hour, or just *endlessly* invading the airways and social media. Slowly, however, *Silent Night* becomes louder and louder, until it can be heard plainly *above* the sad sounds of the news. It's a parable of Christmas hope.

Hear the noise of the news today: The never-ending, heart-breaking, escalating cycles of violence, the boasting of the warlords, the bickering of the power brokers, the "*incidents and accidents*" that litter our lives. The lonely lost ones, overwhelmed by the confusion and chaos of their lives, who can *barely* imagine what living in a safe and warm place might be like, with enough food and a steady job that pays the bills, and nobody shooting at them or blowing up their cities. The anxious lost ones who, Scrooge-like, have found no compassion in their hearts, and no true connection with others in their lives, who shut out the wondrous gift of hope and forgiveness. The grieving ones, who face another holiday meal with an empty chair at the table, and a wretched hole in their hearts.

Listen to the carol of the angels breaking through the blare of that pain. Listen to the sounds of the Good News of this holy night overcoming the bad news of brokenness in our lives and in our world. Take in the innocent adoration of the animals, hear the echo of the angels.

The real wonders of this life are fragile gifts. You have to quiet your self to take in the cry of this newborn--you can so easily miss it. So, I invite you to stop and listen to the joyful voices of the angels. Wonder in the Holy Gift of the Christ Child, and then go out and live it, letting God transform your wonder into faith, and your faith into joy and service honoring God's presence among us. Let the wild promises of God take root and grow within you. Join with all who share the angel-song of praise and hope, welcoming the Christ Child into their hearts and into their lives.

What do King Ahaz, Joseph, and *all of us* have in common? [Pause] The answer, simply put, is: King Ahaz DIDN'T... Joseph DID... and we SHOULD... trust Emmanuel, "God with us."

In our first reading from Isaiah, Ahaz, king of Judah, has his battle plans all lined up; he wanted to wheel and deal with the powers-that-be to work his way out of the jam he finds himself in. King Ahaz did not *want* to trust God's direction, and so he refused to accept the offer of a sign in support of it.

In our *Gospel* reading, Joseph had not *asked for* a sign. He was not *seeking* the angel's voice, but still he listened to his heavenly dream and acted according to what he had heard, following God's direction even when faced with a wife-to-be who is "*with child*" that he knows is not his. The signs from Isaiah and from the angel now proclaim to all who will hear that "*God is with us.*" In the person of Jesus, a *loving* God is among us and here *for* us.

We sing "*Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel,*" and we pray to see the coming of the one who is "God with Us." The creator of the universe slips quietly into the creation. Source and author of *all that is*, God grows, cell by humble human cell, in the womb of a peasant girl from the sticks, who said "yes" to *her* angel. Joseph the carpenter says "yes" to God, and God uses him to help make a way for the promised saving activity of God.

It was not an easy thing for Joseph to follow God's message about what to do about Mary. Mary was already pregnant and Joseph knew full well that the baby wasn't his. The dream from God helped him give up his right to be "righteous." We hear sometimes about the so-called "honor killings" within traditional tribal societies such as in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Legally, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death for the dishonor she had brought upon him and his family.

Or, he could have *publicly* divorced her, reclaiming his righteousness in the eyes of his neighbors, and then the best she could have done would be to live as a servant with some relative who would *agree to take* her and the baby. Even if he listened to the angel and married her, the whole village would know, and he would have to live with the shame of it --it's not hard for his neighbors to count to nine. You know, like "*Mary's baby and Joseph's, maybe?*" But Joseph trusted the sign he had received. He bet his future on the hope that God would indeed be with them and for them; he held onto the promise of Emmanuel, "God with us," waiting expectantly.

Amazing, that the God who is the supreme source of all that is, this God came to be with us here, a human being *like you and me*. This fully human Jesus shows us that God knows our weakness, and is acquainted with our pain. God knows the limits of human existence, and chooses to work *within* those limits. God *relied on* Joseph's obedience, just as God had relied on Mary's "yes."

God loves us, and so we can dare to ask God to be "Emmanuel" with us in our pain—not somehow, shamefully in spite of it, but precisely *within* it, transforming it. In weakness we discover God's strength. It is so easy to forget that, to allow ourselves to hold onto the image of a God who makes the universe tick like a divine clockmaker, winding up the universe and sitting back to observe, with careful detachment, its every tick. Christmas blows our tidy images of a

God in a distant heaven, with the cosmic register of our good deeds and bad, the uncaring scales of judgment balanced in his hands. Christmas gives us, not an *idea* or a *doctrine*, but a Baby in a manger.

We have all seen the anticipation and excitement that comes from expecting a new baby. When I was working as a hospital chaplain, dealing with the sudden tragedies in the ER, the anxieties of folks facing surgery, or the losses of those who struggled with illnesses that threatened their lives, sometimes I would take a break and pay a visit to the maternity ward nursery, just to see the joy in the faces of the families as they imagined a whole new world of possibilities in the vulnerable face of each new infant.

When the time came, Joseph and Mary welcomed their baby. Joseph did what the angel had told him to do, took Mary as his wife, and, by naming the newborn, adopts him as his own. Name him *Jesus*, the angel had said. The name “Jesus” means “God saves.” God is with us to save, and we do not have to hide anything. We can face our reality, no matter how daunting it is. We can offer our deepest pain; we can acknowledge the wreckage in our lives and the anxiety that so often *seeps* into our days and *sours* them--anxiety about an *unknown and frightening* future, a chaotic sense of powerlessness in our everyday lives. Anxiety that lingers, when our thoughts get mired in our own individual survival, and we struggle to hear any of the voices of *our* dreams. God can help us when our hopes are thin and pale and no longer sustain us. *God has a sign* that can speak to our human fears and anxieties, when we have lost our joy in living and lost our hope for a whole future, and reduced faith to protecting “the way we always taught it.” The sign is Jesus, *God with Us*.

We now have a place where we can *take that pain* and turn it over to God, where we can dare to be weak and vulnerable. A place where we can safely surrender our worries and know that whatever God has placed in our lives, God will be with us to work it through. God can do it. We see the sign of this at *Easter’s empty tomb*. As difficult as it may be to really trust this, God loves us--fanatically, zealously. God wants more for us than our own ideas and efforts can come up with. The baby in the manger is God’s wild attempt to woo us, people of God’s own creative hand.

In order to hear the cry of this child, amid all the *hustle and bustle* of the season, we must quiet ourselves and suspend our busyness; we must watch and wait for *God’s own time*, and open ourselves for God’s surprises. We follow a God who chooses to come to us *utterly vulnerable*, a God who cares about the *poor* and calls the *powerful* to task. We follow a God who *teaches and heals*. We follow a God who *acts on our behalf* by submitting to power-possessed human plans for *violence and control*, strung up on a deadly cross. This is the love that God calls on us to *trust above all else*, and to let *God’s way of love* shape and empower our lives.

We can’t control how this happens; we can’t make it happen by *trying harder*. That’s like trying hard to go to sleep. You ever do that? The harder you *try*, of course, the less likely you are to nod off. The real wonders of this life are fragile moments, *beyond our control*. Like the fleeting beauty of a sunrise, like the rainbow in the late afternoon sky as the sun comes out, or the first breath of a new baby.

*Listening and waiting* means spending time with God in prayer and worship, studying the Scripture to learn about how God has worked in the past, sharing the meal of Holy Communion, the simple stuff of creation filled with the presence of Jesus. You can't make it happen, but these practices will help us to be receptive to God's timetable, and God's plans. Mary said *yes* to God, and waited while God grew within her. She risked losing everything--her reputation, her future with her fiancé Joseph, even her life if she were accused of adultery. Joseph obeyed God's instructions to go ahead and have the wedding. He set his own concerns aside and allowed God to *lead* in his life, and God used him in a very wonderful plan.

So we pray, *Come Lord Jesus*. Come to us "*Emmanuel*." Be our God, teach us and heal us. Give us *patience, wisdom and courage*, ears to hear and hands to help. Give us the faith of Joseph and Mary, that we may follow you forever.



In last week's lesson, John was in the wilderness, preaching up a storm, baptizing the crowds in the Jordan River, urgent with his message: "*get ready! God's chosen one is about to appear.*" This week, the picture is quite different, and so are John's words. "*So this Jesus: could he really be the One?*" Now John had come to be in a different kind of wilderness. Locked up, in King Herod's prison. Done preaching, done baptizing. *Done for.* There in his cold, dark cell, even John the "*fiery forerunner*" is wrestling with his doubts. "I told people you were the *One* to deliver us from all our enemies. I told them you're the Messiah; but Jesus— just what kind of Messiah are you? Are you *really* the One we've been waiting for?" And that heart-wrenching *underlying* question: "And if you ARE the one, then *what am I doing here in prison?* I built my life on your cause; now will that make *any* difference?"

You'll notice that Jesus doesn't give a simple "yes" or "no" answer. "Am I the Messiah? *Watch* what I am doing, listen to I am saying. *That* will tell you what kind of Messiah I am." Check it out! "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Go and tell John that the hopeful vision spoken by the prophet Isaiah is coming to life."

The prophet Isaiah, in the midst of his nation's bleakest, most broken time, exiled from their land, spoke of a day when God's people are filled with joy and gladness. Rejoice now, even in the wilderness; look for it now with *hopeful eyes* and an *opened heart*. God is at work transforming the wilderness. Listen for the rumble of the divine road-graters preparing a way *home*.

I appreciate Advent— its focus on the hope that *if God could come to be among us* as a vulnerable little baby, then perhaps God's promise of "*waters in the wilderness*" offers hope in *our* wilderness too. Jesus *is* the One and *God* builds the road and waters the wilderness, so together we can walk along a road paved with goodness, grace and healing, God's promised new thing blossoming.

Jesus acknowledges that many will not follow this road. I wonder if John the Baptist and his followers were *offended* that Jesus didn't seem to be acting like a *proper Messiah*. After all, *John was stuck in prison*. Not a *great* way to see your ministry working out. Certainly, many who met Jesus were turned off by *his kind of* Messiah. Some complained that he hung out with the wrong crowd, "slackers and losers." Jesus warned that just "*keeping up appearances, following the letter of the law*" wasn't going to cut it. Others stumbled at the foolishness of relying on God's grace, instead of mobilizing the armies. Many shared John's doubts-- John, about to be *silenced forever*, beheaded by King Herod's blade. What kind of God is *this* that we're supposed to trust and follow? Isaiah, crooning to the captives in faraway Babylon about the *joy of going home again--* with *hundreds of miles* of brutal wilderness and the cruel armies of their captors between them and Home. Telling them to *wait for God* and *hold onto the promise* of healing and wholeness and home. Telling *us* to be patient while we wait for God and to rejoice, even in our wilderness times. *What kind of Savior is this?*

Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for his efforts to bring about justice and peace in South Africa. Do you suppose that, as his 27 years of hard labor stretched on and on, he might have wondered what kind of a God he was trusting, like John the Baptist wondered? Could Mandela rejoice there in prison on *Robyn Island*?

Can we ask folks who are *suffering* to rejoice while it is still cold, dark winter, calling them to celebrate the warmth of spring? The winter solstice is coming soon. The *shortest* day, the *longest* night, the beginning of winter, yet nature gives us a sign of hope. The days begin to get longer; we know that winter will give way to spring. In our *darkest and starkest* days, the promise of renewal grows. But we must *wait, patiently*. We must remember and trust the God we meet in Jesus, trust his willingness to suffer and even die *as one of us*; trust his resurrection, the down payment of God's promised home-going. Jesus is our "*highway to wholeness*." He paves the way for us.

Highways, especially highways through the desert, were dangerous places, especially for the *poor, the old, the foolish and the vulnerable*. Isaiah gives us a vision of a *watered desert*, and a *watched-over highway*, transformed to pave a way toward joy and justice, toward home. Here, the vision of the watered oasis will not be a cruel *desert mirage*; here, the bright hopes for the future won't simply wither into the depressing *same old, same old, or worse*. Here, *wonder of wonders*, the waters will actually quench thirsty spirits, giving a taste of life to bodies worn out with wandering, giving voice to long-silenced cries and hope in quiet desperation.

This highway through the wilderness differs from the "*yellow brick road*" in the movie "The Wizard of Oz," leading to the glorious Emerald City. Traveling that road, the cowardly lion wanted *courage*, the scarecrow wanted a *brain*, the tin man wanted a *heart*, and Dorothy just wanted to get *home*. This yellow highway held the *promise* of getting one's heart's desire. Yet, Dorothy and her friends discover that the wizard isn't "the One" who can save them. He's a razzler-dazzler *hiding* behind a curtain, trying to maintain the fiction of his ultimate power. Turns out, he's just trying to get home, too.

On our road to the promised New Jerusalem, we *cannot* earn our way through our bravery, our diligence or cleverness, nor even by hearing "*don't be afraid*" because *see--* you are brave already-- that may get you part of the way, but it won't really get you home. The Wizard's power isn't the answer in the *Emerald City*. And our own efforts won't get us to our *New Jerusalem*, either.

God comes among us do that which we cannot do. In 1943, after being arrested by Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in prison during a cold, dark, lonely Advent. In a letter to a friend, Bonhoeffer compared his situation in prison to *our situation in Advent*: "One waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other - things that are really of no consequence - *the door is shut*, and can be opened only from the outside." Like Brittany Griner's prison door could only be opened due to outside efforts.

The God that Isaiah proclaims comes to *open the locked prison doors* behind which we languish, hoping for a better day, believing there ought to be a better world, waiting, longing for a God who will come to *save* us.

The Bible says, “*Fear not, because your God will come.*” Do not be afraid, because our God is here. The water in our wilderness depends on that God, not on some kind of wizard behind a curtain, not on the “powers that be,” and not on one’s self alone either. Our God comes through those who are faithful and loving, those who are God’s hands and feet and voice even when they *can’t see* how God is ever going to restore the brokenness. Trusting Jesus can give us *courage to act when we can* and the *patience to wait when we must*. It can call out of us more than we could *imagine* giving on our own. For 27 years in his prison, Nelson Mandela was being shaped for a leadership that helped to heal a nation and promoted peace through the power of *forgiveness*. We can celebrate our Hope in the Promise that God uses even our frail *humanity*, a *stable* and a *cross*, our *weariness*, our *wilderness*. God isn’t done yet.

As we hear and dare to trust the promise of God’s grace and forgiveness, we can rejoice in the gift of hope. Prompted by the Promise, we can find the patience we need to wait and watch, and the courage to seek out and join in God’s work of healing and forgiving, and sharing the amazingly good news of God’s love.

Our God prepares a very special roadway through the wilderness, traveling toward the home our hearts long for. “*Fear not, your God will come, will come and save you . . . the ransomed of the Lord will come to Zion.*” As we make our way along that road, we strain our ears to hear faint echoes from a hillside near Bethlehem: “An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘*Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people.*’” And so we pray while we wait: *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*

Christmas is coming, and there's lots of preparing to do. Today, on this second Sunday of Advent, we talk about preparing *spiritually*. We hear John the Baptist preaching "*repent, turn around, change your ways,*" for the "*ax is laid to the root of the tree.*" Our lessons use the image of a tree, *cut down or about to be*, a stump that witnesses to the *loss of what was*, but promises *hope for what will come to be*.

When I was growing up in Northern Minnesota, there was a sledding hill just across the road from our house. At the top was a stump, handy for hooking sleds over it when you wanted to take a rest, so it was good for something. It looked pretty dead, like the hopes of God's people in Isaiah's time. The family tree of King David had produced some really bad apples, and with the people facing disaster at the hands of their enemies, it looked like only a lifeless stump from that royal tree would remain. God's promise to them now looked to be cut off like the stump. For Israel in exile far away from their homeland, the "axe had fallen." Yet, the roots are alive with the promise of new growth.

When students and professors from my seminary walked out of Concordia Seminary in 1974, facing accusations of false teaching, forced retirements and threats of firing, the banner that led their exodus from the campus bore the image of a stump, with a green shoot growing from its side, like in the reading for today. That image helped inspire the new *Seminary-in-Exile* that emerged, Seminex. No one knew what would happen, but we knew who we followed, and trusted the Gospel promise of new life in Jesus Christ.

The stump has roots that are alive, like rose bushes pruned for winter, anticipating new growth in the spring. The new life will come, says Isaiah-- the promised one, Jesus, son of David, son of God. When the situation looks quite dead and hopeless, *remember the roots*. Rooted deeply in Christ, we will bear good fruit in the world.

In our Gospel reading, John the Baptist is out there "*in the wilderness.*" And that's important for us to note, because it is in our wilderness, precisely in our lonely and unlovely wildernesses, that the Lord is preparing a way *to* us and *for* us. This wilderness is not a reality that we embrace easily. I'll bet that you have never gotten a Christmas card that said "*Merry Christmas, you brood of vipers!?*" Our getting-ready for Christmas doesn't generally focus on this rough and rude wilderness business of repenting.

What about this repentance? First, a few things that *it is not*. Repentance cannot simply be feeling sorry for what you have done or failed to do, although surely it begins there. I once saw a poster that sums up some people's attitude: it said "*if I've done anything I ought to be sorry for, I'm willing to be forgiven.*" Repentance is not just wishing you were a better person or wallowing in your faults, as if, well, God might be persuaded to skip over them if only you could somehow convince the Almighty that you are really, *really*, REALLY sorry. This repentance that John preaches is also not an intellectual exercise, in which list your good and bad points and come up with an earnest 10-point self-improvement plan. It isn't even simply *deciding* to be nicer, or more generous, or more spiritual. True repentance *may* be what happens *in spite of* what you had planned for yourself.

Some people deal with this call for repentance with complete self-righteous denial of the need. They see nothing wrong with what they are doing, so the call to repent falls on deaf ears. In *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*, the young cartoon character Calvin says to his tiger friend, Hobbes, “*I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I’m sorry I did it.*” “*Maybe you should apologize to her,*” the ever-sensible Hobbes suggests. Calvin thinks about this for a moment and replies, “*I keep hoping there’s a less obvious solution.*”

Repentance is spiritually tough work. We need to at least begin trusting the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ, before the human heart can muster enough hope to really take in John’s warning that “*the axe laid to the root of their tree.*” We turn away from what we fear will kill us – often avoiding it as long as we can. But that denial blocks healing and promotes injustice--because those who have enough power will protect themselves from the truth about themselves *at the expense* of those who are weaker and unable to build protective walls around themselves.

Folks who are full of guilt about what they have done, or shame about who they are, may be feeling only remorse. They believe the *accusations* but not the *invitation* to trust that a way through the wilderness to a new life is offered to them. This remorse is only the first step toward complete repentance. They need to take in the good news that God loves and forgives, for Jesus’ sake.

We can only *truly repent* when the Spirit of God empowers us to make the leap of faith to trust that the good news is our good news, in whatever wilderness we face; trusting--in the face of sometimes overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that God has begun the good work in us and that God will complete it. God works through repentance that owns up to the crooked paths of our lives and in our world, and, trusting God’s power to make the paths straight, then responds by following our Lord, freed, forgiven and forgiving. Only God’s Spirit can overcome our deathly fear of that leap of faith, the leap into believing that God does indeed love each one of us, for Jesus’ sake. We don’t have to worry about being *able* to do it. We can’t. It is God’s doing.

In Advent, we live with “*already*” and “*not yet.*” Whenever I hear those inspiring words from Isaiah, “*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them,*” I am also reminded of a somewhat less lofty comment from Woody Allen. “*The lion and the lamb will lie down together, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.*” An uneasy peace, at best. We hope for the vision of the realm of God which is “*not yet*” fully here. But *already* the promise of this vision sustains us as we live in our everyday wilderness.

When it comes to standing before God, we can’t rely on any identity, except the identity we have as the baptized children of God. We draw our life from *God’s roots* because we have been grafted into *God’s tree of life*. We can’t rely on any tradition, except the promise of God’s unconditional love through Jesus. We can’t rely on our history or memories, except in recalling Christ’s own life, death and resurrection for us. We can’t rest on our own laurels, for we are called and equipped to be *God’s* agents at work in this world.

We have God-given freedom to say no--this is God's great loving gamble with us humans--*no one is compelled to love or trust or obey*. But we also have God's promise to bless and work through the *daily* "yes" of repentance. God can empower that repentance to make our lives new.

God rules here--in a surprising way. God rules through love, love that shows itself in service and sacrifice. God rules by being powerful in ways as hidden to us as roots under the ground. God's life lies buried deep as a grave, and often we just can't see it at all.

Into such a world, comes the Lamb of God, Jesus. In such a world, like Woody Allen we don't really trust Lamb power. We're looking for a Lion, who will roar mightily and force our enemies into complete submission. But, *instead*, we have promise of a new world beginning to take shape *even now*, a transformation that begins with each of us doing the rough work of repentance. Confessing where we are broken, where we have turned our backs on God -- this prepares the way for God's forgiveness to take hold as a powerful force for peace, for healing and for justice. Trusting God's word of forgiveness, believing in the Spirit's promised new life, and hoping in God, we pray for strength and guidance to bear the good fruits that God calls us to share in the world. As we prepare for Christ's coming, "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may overflow with hope.*"

Today I *could* wish you all a **happy new year**. Then you might want to ask me St. Paul's question from our Romans reading: "*Do you know what time it is?*" The stores will tell you just how many *more shopping days 'til Christmas*." I'm not trying to outdo them in rushing things. The season of **Advent**, with its focus on the gift of *God with us*, marks the beginning of a new year in the church's calendar.

In Advent we ask "*How can we be prepared for God's activity, whether today or on that final day when Christ comes again?*" How do we live as faithful Christians in a world that is here to stay **indefinitely, but not forever**? How do we reflect the **radiance** of Easter morning under the **shadow of a cross**?

These weeks leading up to Christmas can be a very difficult season--people speak of **joy** and **peace** and **goodwill**, but the **glitter and glitz** of the holidays can't hide the pain entirely. I worked for a couple of years at a telephone **crisis counseling** line. The number of crisis calls would always go way up during the holiday season. **Bright expectations** can make daily life seem even **bleaker**.

Amazing **medical breakthroughs** make the headlines, yet millions of children die for lack of five dollars' worth of **food and medicine**. Hopelessly hurt and angry voices cry out for **vengeance**, so **violence** breeds yet a new generation of violence-- on and on. We can certainly feel *overwhelmed, helpless and hopeless* facing such a world.

There are seasons when life threatens to careen into uncontrollable **chaos, pain** that doesn't go away even as we pray fervently for release. A **loved one** is taken from us suddenly, or our **health** takes a sudden turn for the worse, or we get the dreaded **pink slip** and know that the bills won't stop coming just because the paycheck is gone. "*The light shines in the darkness*" but sometimes you really need eyes of faith to see it. As the **days get shorter**, sometimes the **darkness grows inside** of us, and we don't even realize it. "*Pay attention!*" we hear in our today's lessons. When God gives a wake-up call, don't hit the **spiritual snooze button**.

Consider the story of **Noah**. He **listened** to God's warning about the Flood and he acted: he built the **Ark** and was ready when the deluge came. The **neighbors** thought he was nuts, building that big foolish boat out on the *dry land*, nowhere near the water. Perhaps even when it **began to rain**, they were poking fun at silly Noah. By the time they had figured out *they* were really in trouble, it was **too late**.

Being **prepared**, we pay our **auto insurance** premiums and try to pay attention to our **retirement savings** accounts. Being **watchful**, we get **car alarms**, we **install yard lights** and **Ring doorbell cameras** and dead-bolt **locks**. It's easy to focus *on ourselves*, and *forget God*. How prepared are we for **God's transformation** in and through our lives?

God wants us to **pay attention** so we can be prepared while there is time. God wants us to wake up to the spiritual difference between being on the *Ark* and being on the *Titanic*, the crucial difference between being *saved* and being *lost*. Folks still have a fascination with the *Titanic*; I saw the sobering museum in **Halifax, Nova Scotia**, where they brought the bodies plucked from the cold ocean. The state-of-the-art ship, they boasted it was *unsinkable*: but on its very first voyage in 1912, it ripped into an **iceberg** and **sank** to the bottom of the North Atlantic like a stone.

The **partying** on the *Titanic* included the cream of society from two continents: fine **music**, all the best **food** for them. The band played on; the **dancing** continued even as the ship began to list. As in the days of Noah, *disaster was looming, and no one thought it could happen*. The **crew and first class passengers** were so sure that nothing could take them down, that they walked around on deck, **curious** about the **commotion**, but **unconcerned**. Even as the boats were lowered into the darkness, some thought it was only a **drill**. It was a terrifying, deadly **tragedy**, a tragedy that could have been avoided.

Arrogant, sure that their new ship could not sink, the builder's plans had not called for enough **lifeboats**. Some people warned the builders, so they added a *few* more, but still not enough. Throughout that fateful night, other ships sent urgent **teletypes**, warning about *"black ice" bergs in the shipping lane, nearly impossible to see at night*. **Slow down**, they warned. **Watch out**. But these urgent alarms were lost or ignored amid all the pile of messages of **congratulations**, and "ship to shore" **bragging**, dangerously **diverting attention** in the *very place where the watching was most crucial*. So, it was full steam ahead, into the **iceberg** that ripped a hole so huge that the rest is the stuff of *disaster movies*. If only they had paid the barest attention to the most basic of warnings . . . *"if only"- those are heart-breakingly terrible words*.

On the *Ark*, they were prepared; Noah and his family had listened to God and had acted accordingly. And they were *saved*. On the *Titanic*, they hit the *spiritual snooze alarm button* and they were swept away. We need to **watch** for the Holy Spirit's lead as we seek to love and serve our neighbor. We need to pay attention, for you can't tell God's time by looking at your **smart phone**, or by tuning into the fiery **TV preachers**, or checking out the **tabloid headlines** in the supermarket. After all, *Jesus* told his disciples that even **he** didn't know the final day or hour.

As we watch and wait in this Advent season, how do we remain faithful? God's *Spirit* helps us to trust our Lord who lights our way-- ***we do not ever walk alone***. Trust the promises of Jesus, the one who ***has come***, who made a way for us through dangerous darkness, and who ***will come again*** victorious over all the spiritual powers which threaten to sink us. We can face the frightful **uncertainties** of life with **confidence**, inspired by God's vision of a world of peace and justice, calling on the coming **Lord** of history for help. We can see the *Ark* pull up alongside our sinking *Titanic* lives, and a gracious **gangway** extended. So, we watch for the Christ-light to guide us through the darkness.



It is only when we acknowledge that our own **resources are woefully inadequate** that we can begin to encounter true *HOPE*. Hope is not blind denial—“*fiddling while Rome burns.*” Hope sees the *reality* of the situation, and *IN SPITE OF* the wreckage we see, **relies** on a promise, as we remember God’s love for us in Jesus. Hope is *faith*, informed by the *past*, making a way into the *future*.

When we give up grounding our hope *in our own* powers, then God can *teach us* to hope—in GOD. That’s why we get these “warnings” like today, so we will stop trying to trust the **wrong resources**, and then miss the boat. Trust *this* Good Promise: *God loves us and forgives us for Jesus’ sake, and sends the Holy Spirit who will always be with us.*

God leads us into our future, showing us **who we are** by cracking the door open to a vision of who we **are to become**. It is *dreams* that *drive* us, and *hope* that makes us *happen*. It is watching and waiting—not yet **fulfilled**, not yet **finished**—that keeps us leaning into the **future**, readied for God’s new creation. Don’t be a **spiritual sleepwalker**. *Don’t hit the snooze button when God gives a wake-up call.*

The Christ we wait for, who **comes again in glory**, can be good news for us only because of the Christ **who came**; in his teaching, in his healing, in his death and resurrection, he showed his faithful love for us, and gives us a down payment on eternal life. “Lo, I am *with* you always,” he promised. The church can live in the decisive “end time” *ahead of* time, because Jesus Christ is with us *even* now.

Christ comes to us now, as we **hear** God’s promises, as we bring our needs before God in **prayer**. Jesus Christ comes to us **now** as we **sing** our praises, as we **celebrate** our calling to be the Body of Christ, responding with holy **compassion** in a hurting world. At the **Lord’s Table**, we gather with all God’s people throughout all time and in all places, to share a **foretaste** of the glorious feast to come. We can trust that our **Ark** will carry us through every storm, and will, in God’s own good time, land us safely **on heavenly ground**. This space in which we gather for worship is called the “nave” --as in “navy” – the Ark that carries us through the storm. May God give us the **grace to stay attentive as we wait** and the **courage to** walk in the light of that promise.

***King on a Cross: Ridicule or Faith***

Grace and peace be to you from the one who is, who was, and who is to come. Today is the last Sunday of the church year, the one we call Christ the King. The Gospel lesson for today is, well, surprising at the very least—you *might* even say it *invites* ridicule. The folks who were there at the cross on that fateful Friday thought so. The one wearing the crown should be sentencing the outlaws to death on a cross; not hanging up there with the outlaws. A cross is really *not* the place for a crown.

The inscription nailed above the cross read “King.” The ones who placed this inscription meant it as ridicule, because this *so-called* King was being executed on a cross, the Roman Empire’s most cruel, horrible, shameful public punishment, with thieves hung up on either side. And his crown was not studded with jewels, but woven with piercing thorns. King? Really?? What kind of king *is* this anyway?

The inscription read “King,” but the Roman soldiers scoffed and the bystanders jeered or just shook their heads ever-so-sadly. A *naked, nailed-down* Jesus seemed to be nothing more than just another reckless fool, another rabble-rousing loser whose grand claims were being knocked to the ground by this gruesome death. In *this* world, rulers use “*shock and awe*” to conquer their enemies; they don’t ride around on donkeys. In *this* world’s usual playbook, rulers just don’t submit to being strung up after a pathetic show-trial. Not if they can *help* it— and if they *can’t* help it, well, what good are they anyway? If Jesus Christ is *King*, then surely he is some kind of *different* ruler than we’ve ever seen.

People mock Jesus on the cross, because he is *not* the kind of king that they expect or want to have. Today’s Gospel reading offers a choice of how to *respond* to this Jesus on a cross--*ridicule* or *faith*. There’s a choice. Two thieves hung there with Jesus. One scoffs at Jesus, to the very end. But then the other dying thief makes an astonishing leap of faith. He dares to speak to Jesus as someone who could make a crucial difference. This second thief receives a profound promise, like a king’s proclamation of a full pardon: “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*”

It’s so easy for us to look at a battered and bleeding Jesus, and *fail* to see God at work because we’re so turned in on our *own* concerns. Dagwood and Blondie are walking home after seeing a movie. Blondie is gushing: “*I can see why they’re calling this the best movie in years! What did you think?*” Dagwood answers, “*Not enough butter on the popcorn.*” We can miss the miracle if we just focus on our own self.

This bleeding king crowned with *thorns* is a disturbing image. Do we find *ourselves* just as *scandalized* by the claims of a “*crucified Messiah*” as the people of first-century Palestine at the foot of the cross, mocking, mourning? If we are truly honest with our human hearts, we can see that we prefer a victory that goes from *glory into worldly glory* – no losers allowed. We prefer that so we don’t have to truly engaging the grim realities

of Golgotha, the painful cries of Calvary, the curse of a cross. It's so easy for *us*, as we encounter difficulties in life, to miss seeing *God* here among us, keeping the promise to work through weakness and human limitation, bringing life from *death* itself--quite the promise. Better than enough butter on the popcorn. When we join the first thief in rejecting a king on a cross, when we insist on casting god in our own images of power and glory, we turn ourselves away from the true power of *God's transforming love*.

Like those thieves, we face our own sentence of death. Yet, *God doesn't abandon us*. Jesus is hanging in there, right beside us. God forgives, and gives hope. The second thief receives a powerful gift. Given his dire situation, saying to Jesus "*Remember Me when you come into your kingdom*" requires either a *fevered brain*, or the powerful *gift of faith*, trusting that Jesus can and will make a difference. Jesus shines through the gloom there on the cross, reigning as Lord after all, announcing the victory of life with this promise: "*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*"

Jesus became vulnerable like us, suffering for our sake and in our stead, taking on our death sentence. This king dies to conquer the lynch mobs, the cruel hopelessness of hate and abuse, the grieving of families in endless funeral processions for the *all-too-young victims of violence*. We see the kingdom of God coming wherever people need *grace and forgiveness*, and then turn to Jesus to receive it. What happens to us is no longer because of *who we are* or *what we've done*, but because of *who Christ is* and what *he has done for us*. God's realm is active, where love rules— not *force*—and where God turns the tables on the pretensions of all of our human structures and expectations of power.

In this world, calling Jesus on the cross a "*king*" is a cruel joke. But God has the last laugh--Easter. Through faith, we discover in Christ the power that is hidden to the world; self-emptying love for God and neighbor, the real power of Jesus, crowned with thorns. And only the gift of faith, trusting *this king on a cross* connects with this power.

In God's unexpected use of power, in God's surprising realm, it is precisely *in our weakness that we see God's strength in ourselves*. If we're not, you know, just paying attention to the popcorn butter. It is in the loving vulnerability of God that God's strength can truly be experienced. *Christ the King* cannot be separated from *Christ the Crucified*; the *crown* cannot be separated from the *cross*; for the crucifixion of Jesus is the puzzling and paradoxical coronation of a very different kind of King. That's why we have this strange lesson today--to help us see God at work in hidden ways, and place our trust in that God.

This thief on the cross has suddenly seen a possibility that this *is* the King of all creation hanging next to him. God had always been there; *he just hadn't seen it*. And isn't it like that with us? When we take that leap of faith to trust the *crucified Christ* as our king, a whole new world can begin to unfold.

Jesus holds the universe together, yet he dies as a criminal, sharing our condemnation. He rules from a cross, and plays the card game with Death. Death thinks this Ace of Spades is digging Jesus' grave. But Jesus holds a little two of hearts, and Death loses out to that Easter morning surprise—lives resurrected from vain self-centered striving.

We pray, "*thy kingdom come*" in the Lord's Prayer. Martin Luther says, "*God's kingdom comes without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come TO US.*" It comes to us when we hear the story of God's love in Jesus. When we realize that *we* have obeyed *other rulers*: money, success, self-preservation, comfort, control, and we then turn to Jesus and say "*have mercy and remember ME.*" It comes when we respond to God's love with lives of loving service. God's realm is happening when Jesus says, *I forgive you. You are mine and I love you. And I will always be at your side in the gift of my Holy Spirit.*

The thief is offered an improbable paradoxical promise. A *dying* Jesus offers him a promise of *life with him* forever. "*Will he believe it?*" It is the *same* question that we face where it seems that God cannot *possibly* be present and working. Is the kingdom of Christ coming in and through our fractured lives today? Well, the *cross and the crown* are forever bound together, in the mystery of God's love and grace. There's the promise. Will we believe it?

Remembering our Baptism helps us know where our true citizenship lies. When we gather at the Lord's Table, we give thanks as we remember our Lord's victory over the power of sin and death. We celebrate the transformational presence of our Lord's Holy Spirit, always gathering God's people into community, showering us with gifts for us to put into action. With Christ ruling our lives, we have been delivered from the ultimate power of anything that could possibly try to *separate us from God's love*.

In these last days of another year of faith, Jesus invites us to remember who we are: *frail sinners and failed saints. Forgiven saints*. God's own beloved children. And Jesus extends *to us* anew this invitation to Paradise, calling us to follow him *through death into life*, through the *cross into everlasting joy*. We believe that *we will forever belong to the Lord*. "*Today*" – we hear the voice of Christ saying, "*Today you are mine forever.*" May God's Spirit grant us *grace* to live each day empowered by *this promise*.

As we can see from our lessons today, questions about the *end times* have been with us from the very beginning. There still is a lot of talk out there. Popular movies paint varied and vivid scenes of total destruction, Armageddon and the zombie apocalypse. We hear of wars and rumors of wars, nuclear threats and worries about biological weapons. We learn of floods, droughts, famines, earthquakes, and ever new variants of deadly viruses. Are the end times happening now or what? What do Christians make of this? How do we live faithfully in such a world with such fears as these?

Many people try to pin God down, and predict *the very day* that the world will end. But, the *real* issue for us, as Jesus points out, is not “*when* will it end?” The real issue is “How does Jesus call us to live right now?” We don’t know *when or how* the end will come—even Jesus said he didn’t know *that*—but, here’s the *good news* that we can sink our roots into: *we know that God promises that we will never be left to simply fend for ourselves.* And although we don’t know when or how our *own* end will come, we can hold onto the Easter promise that death is no longer the last word for us. We don’t have to be held captive by our fears, paralyzed by our panic, diminished by our despair. God promises that we will receive *what* we truly need, *when* we need it, *whatever* comes our way. We can trust the promise that *nothing will separate us from the love of Jesus.*

The end of things is always hard for us to imagine and accept. It was close to impossible for those who first heard Jesus to predict the destruction of the Temple. In Jesus’ day, the Temple was a magnificent building. Some of its huge blocks of marble *were 67 feet long, nine feet wide and seven feet high.* The Temple was as high as a fifteen-story building! The eastern front and side walls were covered with gold plate, flashing in the sun. The rest was gleaming white, and writers from that era said that from a distance it looked like a shining mountain of snow.

The people in Jesus’ day believed that nothing could ever topple their temple, but in the year 70 A.D., the Roman army invaded Jerusalem and the magnificent building was reduced to a hopelessly ruined pile of rubble, just as Jesus had said. Just as all the world’s grand temples through history have fallen.

Jesus could have lifted his words from our headlines. We worry: can we be safe from violence? Will there *ever* be peace in the Lands that three world religions call Holy? Will polluters ruin our air and water? Is global warming unstoppable, melting the ancient ice, fueling disastrous superstorms? Vast cities lie on active earthquake faults; territories deal with terrible floods and catastrophic droughts; innocent refugee children, left hungry and hurting-- one heart-wrenching disaster after another.

How do we respond to the ancient hatred of people for their neighbors, the naked warfare of nation and tribe against their fellow humans? What do we make of the power of meth or crack or alcohol— or fear or greed — to take possession of people’s lives and the lives of those around them? We pray “*Come Lord Jesus,*” but in the meantime, how do we *keep the faith when the time drags on*, and the problems seem so big and scary and overwhelming and God can seem so far away? How do we *not* “grow weary in doing what is right?”

In 2001, our nation saw the destruction of a temple of sorts: the World Trade Center. The Twin Towers were symbols of our country's strength and power, yet these grand buildings collapsed within an hour. We harbor anxiety about what the future could hold if an emblem of our power can crumble so quickly. That's when the words of Jesus remind us that our enduring security comes from clinging to *him*.

We all have our temples, where we all-too-often *misplace* our ultimate trust. Perhaps we should think twice before we pray in the Lord's Prayer "*thy kingdom come*." Because when we pray this prayer, we also ask God to expose those false gods that we ourselves have set up --our temples, the symbols of our own greatness that we want to *be able* to take for granted, forces so deeply woven into our world that they blind us to their power over us.

A life of serving God and our neighbor -- this requires the endurance of a disciple. Until that unknown final Day of Judgment, the enemies of God will not be going away anytime soon. In the meantime, how do we avoid compassion fatigue-- "*growing weary in doing what is right*?"

To focus on nailing down the *exact date* of the end of the world diverts our attention from living fully responsible lives in the world as it is, *today*. Jesus says *this is not the time to check out*, to become defensive and isolated, and wait cowering in a corner for the awful inevitable to unfold. *Fear* can cripple our souls and wound our spirits. Jesus offers us a way each day to *live and love unafraid*.

"*The days are coming. . .*" says Jesus. "*When? Where? How?*" They are anxious questions. You'd think Jesus might take advantage of this, and try to *terrify* people into doing just what he wants them to do. *But Jesus doesn't do that*, because *fear* is not at the heart of Jesus' message. He says, "Do not concern yourselves with such things. Just know this: the God who has watched over you in the best of times has the power to see you through even the worst of times." Martin Luther is said to have stated that even if he knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, he would still *plant his apple tree* today. You do not have to be anxious or dismayed. Go about the business of living your life as a faithful response to the love of God. God's got the rest.

How do we live as faithful followers of Jesus in the meantime? We draw on the hope that *Easter* offers us, trusting that God is working through the mess of this world, blessing us in often surprising and hidden ways. In his book *Surprised by Hope*, N.T. Wright. [p. 108] says: "Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk, every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support. . . ; *and of course* every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world -- all of this will find its way, through the resurrection power of God, into the *new creation* that God will one day make."

As Jesus says, frightening times like ours are a “*time for you to bear testimony.*” There can be no better work for us than to testify to our trust that there is only one thing which truly endures, and there is only one name where we place our hope: “*No matter what the world hands you, the world is in the hands of God*” -- the God we meet in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

The end of this *old world* comes in the faith of a teenage girl in a little town who said *yes* to God. It comes in the face of *her fragile newborn*, in the message of the shepherds that *God is doing a new thing*. It comes in the hopeful words of the ancient prophets, as Jesus rolls up the scroll in the synagogue and begins to teach and live out God’s vision for the world. The *end of the old world* comes with the powerful words of forgiveness and mercy, *received* and then *shared* each day. God’s new creation comes in lives empowered to *get up* each day and start anew, trusting God to break through our fears and sustain us in love.

The end of the old world comes at an empty tomb on Easter morning. We can say our *yes* to God’s promises, we can testify to God’s love in our lives, and advocate for God’s love enacted for all our neighbors, always striving to live out the Good News of Easter triumph of life over death. We do not have to be afraid. Even when we can’t see the pattern, we are still woven in as a thread in the divine tapestry. God has claimed us and *we will never be left alone*. *Jesus stands with us* even to the end, no matter what. And thank you God for that!

Today is the church's "Memorial Day." Since the ninth century, All Saints' Day been an occasion to remember and honor God for the faithfulness of those who have gone before us. We lift up both those *extraordinary* heroes and heroines who made the history books and the *ordinary* saints who lived their lives drawing, however imperfectly, on God's steadfast love.

Today we remember those who have gone before us, yet this is also a day when we celebrate that *we are all saints* already now, called to be God's holy people, claimed by God in Baptism—saints because even now, we have been made a part of God's Communion of Saints, which we confess together in the Creed.

Today opened our worship by singing a hymn that has a special place in my heart.

(1) *"For all the saints who from their labors rest/ who thee by faith before the world confessed, /Thy name, O Jesus, be forever blest. Alleluia."* [ELW #422]

Last month was the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of my Dad's death. The morning that he died, I phoned my Mother to tell her when my plane would be arriving. She asked me about my thoughts on the funeral service, which family members would be planning with her pastor later that morning. She said, "We would like to sing '*For All the Saints*,' but I'm a little worried that some people might get the wrong impression, like we were bragging, making Rolf out to be some kind of perfect person." I told her, "We couldn't make him into a saint; you know God did that. God made him a saint on that morning in 1925, when at the Lutheran church in little Nevis, Minnesota, God's baptism promises were spoken and splashed.

Who are these saints we remember? Definitely the saints we bring to mind today with our prayers of thanksgiving. And yes, the saints include the folks gathered here today. But it is much greater than that. All Saints Day helps us remember that there is a vast web of connectedness, back in time and reaching into the future, a community in "*every place and every time*," woven by God's grace into the same promise of Jesus, who lived and died and rose again for us.

On All Saints' Day, we anticipate God's final transformation of all that is opposed to God's purposes, and we get a glimpse of God's future in our present day. We can include among God's opponents those implied by our Gospel lesson for today—greed, selfishness, oppression, and the cold lack of concern for the needs of others.

God's future is at work even now—in hidden, and surprising, and often challenging ways. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours *is* the kingdom of God." This is a verb in the *present* tense. You have the blessing now; hang onto hope. {21} "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." {22} "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." Did you notice? These are *quite* clearly not the places where we would usually expect to see divine blessedness. God's ways catch us off guard; they truly challenge our usual assumptions.



Luke's Gospel takes the teaching further than more familiar Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Luke includes a stark series of "woes" parallel to the "blessings." {24} "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." {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." {26} "Woe to you when all speak well of you." This list is an extremely uncomfortable warning that hands and hearts that are already all filled up with this world's treasures lack the capacity to receive the outpouring of God's gifts.

To those who struggle deep in the pits of life, God says "*Don't despair. I am with you and I promise to stay with you. You are part of my own people; you have my pledge of your inheritance among the saints.*" But to those who have anchored their trust in themselves and what they can get and keep, God says, "*Follow me instead, and draw on my power and love.*" Whether you are tempted to despair about God's love and care, or tempted to cling to trusting your own resources, know that God has more in mind.

The lesson goes on to shed light on God's challenging vision for the lives of the saints. {27} "But I say to you *that listen*, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, {28} bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." *And the teaching ends with the deceptively simple "Golden Rule."* {31} Do to others as you would have them do to you. A challenge indeed, especially as an ugly season of electioneering comes closer to its conclusion this week. Luther says God's people are all *simultaneously* "saint" and "sinner;" seems it's generally a lot easier to see the "sinner" part than the "saint."

*(4) And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong. Alleluia.*

The movie "*Amish Grace*" tells the true story of a pacifist religious community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, who practice a simple farming life without modern conveniences. They suffered a shocking invasion into their world when a local milkman, Charles Roberts, broke into a one-room schoolhouse, shooting 10 young girls, leaving five of them dead. During the ordeal, one of the girls, 13-year-old Marian Fisher, offered to be killed first in hopes that the others would be spared. A commentator wrote of this event: "*I cannot ignore this unbelievable act of love by a girl this young. In my mind, this little girl did no more or no less than Jesus did for us on the cross.*"

Within hours of the shooting, the families of the children who had died not only expressed their forgiveness of the killer but reached out to his family, giving food and raising money for his wife and children. Ruben Fisher, an Amish bishop whose granddaughter Marian was killed, visited Roberts's wife just hours after the shootings. He told Mrs. Roberts that the Amish had forgiven already. It doesn't mean they didn't grieve the terrible loss. They just let God free them of the burden of hatred and vengeance.

Herman Bontrager, a spokesman for the Amish, explained, "The Amish believe that we must forgive because we ourselves need to be forgiven. [We're] trying to live the way Jesus lived. He turned the other cheek, he told us to love everybody, to love our enemies." Another commentator shared: "The message of forgiveness, rather than vengeance, goes to the heart of

how we should behave toward each other. If the Amish can forgive the man who killed *their children*, how much more should the rest of us be able to forgive the petty hurts and perceived insults we receive each day?”

Adel Bestavros {1924-2005} was a Supreme Court lawyer in Egypt and a leader of the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church. In 1981, he was arrested at his home in Alexandria. During the five months that he was detained in a number of jails and prison camps in the outskirts of Cairo, Adel Bestavros wrote some of his most insightful spiritual reflections, including this saintly wisdom:

*“Patience with others is Love, Patience with self is Hope, Patience with God is Faith.”*

We are all saints-- MADE holy, not by what we do or don't do, but by God's grace. Nadia Bolz-Weber, an ELCA pastor and theologian, writes in her second book *Accidental Saints*: “What we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but the fact that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, *human beings*, all of whom are flawed.” Saints are those who trust *not in themselves* but in God's promises of new life, won for us on a cross. As we gather together in remembrance, we retrace the Baptismal cross on our foreheads, renewed over and over again in the water, wine, and bread.

With that wine and bread in the Lord's Supper, God joins us with the saints of every time and place, and gives us a foretaste of the feast to come. With angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, with all the saints who have gone before us, all those who are here in our midst, and all those who will follow--we anticipate today, as we gather around God's table, eating together the great and promised feast.

And we hear, even now, that distant triumph song. Listen:

*(7) From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia!*

I enjoy working on genealogy, discovering the various branches of my family tree, and documenting their stories. Today is a day when we remember stories of our *faith* family history, as we celebrate Reformation Sunday. We take time to give thanks for lives transformed by God's amazing Grace. We give thanks that God reaches out to connect each of us to the family tree of Jesus Christ.

It was about noon on the day before All Saints Day-- October 31, 1517. A monk named Martin Luther approached the Castle Church at Wittenberg, Germany and nailed a printed list of 95 theological questions for public debate to the community bulletin board—the large wooden door there. Luther did not know that those hammer blows would shake the whole church and be heard centuries later by Christians gathered here today, as we remember and celebrate our own *genealogy of Grace* on this Reformation Sunday.

The Gospel text says “*You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*” What is this promised truth that frees us? As Christians in Luther's branch of the family tree, we focus on God's grace. We do *not* have to earn our way into God's family; we are invited to put our trust in God's promise that we are forgiven and freed as a gift from God, freed *for* a life of faithful service sharing God's love. The lessons for this Reformation Sunday help us to focus on this Good News.

Nearly 600 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Jeremiah spoke a word of hope to a people in deep trouble. Jerusalem was under siege by the armies of the Babylonian Empire, which covered areas in modern Iraq and Iran. Within the city's walls, food and water were rationed. Soon those conquering armies would break through the walls, destroy the Temple, and turn the city to rubble. Almost everyone would be driven out of their homeland into exile, hundreds of miles away. Would they also be exiled from their God?

In the midst of this unimaginable disaster, Jeremiah has a message: “God promises *Life*. A New Covenant.” It's an amazing promise-- God tells them, because I *love* you, now I will pick up the broken pieces of your relationship with me. God does *this* new thing in the midst of the crippling loss and despair. “*I will remember your sin no more.*” And this is still how God is putting our broken pieces back together again. Forgiveness.

How do we dare to trust God's promise of forgiveness? In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we have seen the face of a fiercely loving God. We are saved “by faith in Jesus Christ, through God's grace,” Paul's word in our Second Lesson. *This* is what Martin Luther discovered; the jewel of the Reformation, the story of God's love: passed on like a precious family heirloom.

Such transformational faith is not “*checking off all the YES boxes on the list of holy right answers.*” Faith takes root within a *relationship*; it is placing our whole-hearted trust in Jesus through thick and thin. This saving faith is trusting that, even when we feel broken, utterly exiled from the self we want to be, God is still there-- as God was there in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God is still there, reaching out with the promise of forgiveness that we don’t deserve and can’t possibly earn. Now, that’s good news! God is still at work, putting the broken pieces together, in God’s way and on God’s timetable.

Jesus tells his disciples that “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” We know of many kinds of truth: philosophical truth, scientific truth, psychological truth. These can *contribute* to the freedom God has in mind for us, but by themselves they aren’t enough to make it happen. We need a deeper, spiritual truth, a hard truth: *human life as it has come to be in this world is not what God has in mind for us.* This Spiritual Truth is more than just “*knowing stuff.*” Knowledge is a wonderful gift from God, but if the brokenness were merely about “*not knowing enough,*” then learning more *true things* could fix us. But *the faith that saves us isn’t about what we know and accept, it’s about who we trust and follow.*

Martin Luther looked for the truth about his relationship with God. The Church of Luther’s time used fear of a punishing God to keep people in line. Luther thought, if I am *commanded* to love God with my whole heart, *truly love* a punishing God whose justice keeps careful score forever of where I miss the mark, how can I ever love God *with my whole heart*? Luther was bound up by his fear, looking for a truth that would free him from that fear, free him to love and live and serve with joy.

Our Reformation Gospel lesson says “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” But first the truth *may* make you miserable. Or perhaps, as the wonderfully quirky author Flannery O’Connor once put it, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you *odd.*” The truth will point out our broken pieces: we turn away from God and turn in on ourselves. It’s so difficult to admit where we have failed. When God offers Freedom to us, do we also demand to know, “whoa, *where’s my bondage?*” And how does Jesus answer? “*Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.*” That’s the bondage. And we cannot free ourselves. Truth frees us, but we must face the lies that bind us.

The lies that bind us are also the lies that blind us. The truth is “we’re *all* woven into a world tangled up in sin, all in it up to our eyeballs.” But we have an even *deeper* truth, our GOSPEL truth, the good news of grace: we are *forgiven* sinners. God knows the mess, and God has acted. Grace. God’s love has come to us and it offers us a way back. *Here* we have forgiveness, forgiveness for thinking we don’t need it; forgiveness for thinking we can earn it, forgiveness for thinking we are too sinful to really be forgiven, accepted and loved by God. Forgiveness for living as if God’s forgiveness and promise of life wouldn’t make any difference anyway.

The truth about ourselves, and about Jesus, frees us from fear, as we remember the bloodline that runs through God's family tree: in Christ, we are truly forgiven. Martin Luther based his hymn *A Mighty Fortress* on Psalm 46, which assures us:

<sup>1</sup>God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

<sup>2</sup>Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,  
and though the mountains shake in the depths of the sea;

<sup>3</sup>though its waters rage and foam, and though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

The Psalm speaks of earthquakes and floods, destruction and war. That was the psalmist's list, things that frightened him in his day. Our list of things to fear seems to grow depressingly longer with every passing day. Wars and rumors of wars, storms, fires, drought and flood, an earth ravaged by greed and abuse, a pandemic that still menaces, hatred breaking out in places we had thought were safe; anxiety about the economy and the institutions of our nation. Martin Luther came up with his list: "*though hordes of devils fill the land / All threatening to devour us; We tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.*" Luther's list states the ULTIMATE FEAR like a slap on the face: "Though life be wrenched away."

"Be still, then, and know that I am God;" – there's the Psalm's invitation to remember our place in God's family tree. "Therefore we will not fear." "The Lord of hosts is with US," we join in the psalmist's song, "*the God is Jacob is OUR Refuge!*" We are forgiven. And no matter what is going on out there, or *in here*, to make us sad or afraid, God can break through fear, and hatred. God is big enough to find a way to deal with sin by forgiving it, God is great enough to deal with death itself. The truth of the loving and forgiving God we meet in Jesus Christ frees us from being ruled by fear. And that means that now you can look for how God is at work *in* you and *through* you and *around* you.

Jesus does for us what God promises to do with Jeremiah's New Covenant: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." In the Lord's Supper, we have the New Covenant of God's forgiveness in a form that we can *touch and taste*. Here we celebrate the victory that Jesus has won over the powers of death and the devil. Here we can begin again, each day anew, to *live in faith, not fear*; to strive to love one another as God has loved us, and to always seek out ways to serve others and share the Good News of God's grace.

"If you continue, faithfully, in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you *WILL* know the truth, and the truth *WILL* make you free." God is faithful, God will be with each of us, to work through us to *care for* and *heal* broken hearts and *re-form* a broken world. Remember, this is the God who brings life through death, salvation through the cross. We are, by God's gift of grace, the heirs through Jesus Christ to that life, and empowered to live it and share it.

The Temple, an ordinary day. A few people here and there. Up front and center, a defender of all things good and holy, the Pharisee. And in the shadows, a Tax Collector-- a Jew ripping off *his* own people, in cahoots with their oppressors, the Romans. He knew he was not welcome-- the *cold stares, the whispers*; he knew he had no claim on the place. Two men praying. And Jesus tells their story, a story told “*to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*”

For the past several weeks, we’ve been talking about responding with thanksgiving as faithful stewards of all that God has given us. It’s a *good* thing to be grateful to God for our lives and all that fills them. The Pharisee in today’s parable thanked God, but there was a *problem* with his prayer. It seems there’s a *wrong* way to give thanks. In God’s eyes, the Pharisee might fit Mark Twain’s comment: “*He was a good man in the worst sense of the word.*”

The Pharisee may have lifted his voice *to God*, but *in his heart*, he is actually *talking to himself*. Some of the translations even say that: The Pharisee was praying, not “*by himself*” but “*with himself*.” He “*trusted in himself that he was righteous*,” and piously congratulated himself that he wasn’t like those other losers, the lousy ones like the tax collector back there in the shadows. When you place your trust in *your own* righteousness, you need to watch that you don’t hold *others* in contempt. Jonathan Swift wrote that “sometimes we have just enough religion to make us *hate* but not enough to make us *love*.”

Luther spelled out that where you place your trust, *there is your God*. The Pharisee judged *himself* righteous—and superior-- because of his actions, and put his trust there; in effect, made himself his own God. I suppose it only makes sense that he was “*praying with himself*,” even if he *says* “God” with his arms extended in the position of public prayer.

He strokes his own ego by comparing his *law-keeping* to the *evil misdeeds* of the unworthy ones in the shadows. Jesus compares him to the tax-collector, too. But, *surprise!* The *end result* of this comparison turns the tables. The tax-collector, that low-life, cheating traitor to the Jewish people-- he didn’t lift his hands, he didn’t lift his voice, not even his head. But he lifted his *heart*, his humble, broken, pleading heart. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

The Pharisee boasts, “*I’m thankful that I’m not like the tax-collector.*” Jesus says, indeed he IS *not* like him. The tax-collector, begging for mercy, *connected with God* that day, and his prayers were answered. *He received mercy*. He returned home knowing that God had forgiven him. And the Pharisee-- he left the temple still disconnected from God, still wrapped up in himself, still trapped by the need to build himself up at the expense of others.

The problem here is not that he was righteous, but that he was relying on his *Self-Righteousness*. The problem was not that he was giving thanks, but the context and content of the thanksgiving. The problem here was not that he was praying, but that he was praying with a *sideways glance*. He locates his righteousness entirely in his own actions and being, and he thinks that will set him above the others who don’t measure up.

The Pharisee boasts of his giving; it may be safe to assume that he was also “*giving with a sideways glance*,” like the showy givers who Jesus compared with the poor widow in the shadows who stretched to give two pennies. The problem is not with his 10 percent. *The problem is in his heart, not his pocketbook.*

The Pharisee saw the tax collector as a “*sinner*,” no surprise there. But *that* doesn’t get to the *core* of the matter. The Pharisee would indeed *agree* with this man in the shadows that he was *a sinner*. *So would everybody else in the place.*

The tax collector also saw in *himself* what the Pharisee saw. Sinner! He was caught up in the web of overcharging and taking his cut, cooperating with the occupying evil empire. “Whatever would give him the right to think that he could get mercy anyway?” And there he was, at the Temple, praying to God, begging with a ripped-open heart for mercy. *A sinner in need of God’s grace.* Jesus tells us a deeper truth: the tax collector was indeed a sinner – just like the Pharisee was a sinner, just like we are all sinners. Each one a sinner who must rely on the gift of God’s forgiveness and grace, just as we rely on the gifts from God we receive every day.

God has given us everything and more. We have received the good news of Jesus Christ, present with us and for us. God has called us friends and given gifts to each of us-- our time, our talents, and our treasure -- given freely, but with one command: God says “*take care of it in my name, and use what I have given you to glorify me and serve my world.*” Not to *serve* yourself, and not to *save* yourself.

Well, easier said than done, right? The world is full of temptations, and we can fall into them as blindly as the Pharisee who gave thanks so wrongly. Trusting self is the world’s default position. And many people keep the rules of religion because of *social pressure*, to *impress* others, or simply as “fire insurance” because the Law tells them they’d *better obey or they will go to hell*.

We often see in our culture an emphasis on the “prosperity gospel.” It proposes a basis for congratulating God on how well we’ve done for ourselves. The mighty Crystal Cathedral went bankrupt, calling into question the message of a God who is like a cosmic *candy machine* dispensing the goodies we crave in return for the right change in the slot. God does bless us, but what do we make of our disappointments and set-backs? Can we let God be god, no matter what is happening? Can we *let go* of our urge to justify ourselves, and instead turn toward trusting the grace of a servant-savior Jesus?

Here’s another trap that we can fall into as we look at today’s lesson. If we’re proud and thankful that we’re *not* like the Pharisee, then, *oops*, we may be *exactly like* the Pharisee. How can we avoid setting up a new law: *righteousness = humility*, so you’d better work hard at being *really good* at your humility. Luther started as a monk trying his very best to be humble so he could be righteous in God’s eyes. He knew himself to be a miserable failure at such a project of self-righteousness-- until he read the book of Romans, and saw something else there. *Our righteousness is given to us, and we take it in through trusting God, and we use it through living out our faith.*

The tax collector “*was justified.*” This is what the grammar gurus call “*a passive participle*” – he’s not doing it *himself*, it is done to him, accomplished for him. Achieving God’s righteousness is not something we can do *ourselves*. As the saying goes, “*If God is your co-pilot, maybe you need to switch seats.*” We put our trust in God because Jesus, the one who took it all on at the cross, offers us his righteousness, his strength, his power for hope and transformation.

God the Creator knows the creatures well, how very easily we get caught up in an anxious drive to *get and keep our standing and our stuff*. It’s so very easy to slip into living as if the *stuff* of our life saves us and not the *Giver* of all that stuff. It’s easy to forget that God also gives freely to others who may be standing in the shadows. God knows us well-- so we are given a discipline to help us respond by honoring God with our whole life. Give first fruits, intentional and proportionate, off the top, giving thanks, trusting God’s promise to bless and provide and sustain. Let God be the pilot of your whole life, and know that we all stand in the *shadow* of sin, and in the *light* of God’s mercy. As Jesus shines through us in our life together, we will all reflect that light.

God’s grace and mercy are amazing, and powerful. My mother has a wonderful sweatshirt. On the front it says “*We never did it that way before.*” But on the back, “*Ponder anew what the Almighty can do.*” Turn our eyes and our hearts to you, O God, that we may be your faithful agents of caring and curing wherever you send us.



How do we hang in there, when we are wrestling with difficult realities in our lives? Jacob had that all-too-human dilemma. It was night and Jacob was alone, facing the fearful river he needed to cross. Twenty years earlier, he had tricked his brother Esau out of half of his inheritance, stealing the elder twin's birthright and the father's blessing that went with it. Then Esau, full of rage, had threatened to kill him. Not wishing to go eyeball to eyeball with the brother he had bested, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban's household. There he worked, "*wheeling and dealing*" until he eventually grew rich; but bad blood had developed with his uncle. So now he's headed back home.

He's at that river he needs to cross, because *now* he must *face* his brother Esau, the brother he had cheated. Jacob sends messengers ahead, and they come back, breathless with the fearful news: *Esau's on his way*, and he has 400 men with him! Jacob sends lavish presents ahead to try to appease his brother. Jacob is afraid, *and he has good reason*. He sends everyone and everything else across the river, split up so in case one group gets attacked, at least the other might be safe. Facing his own unsavory past and the uncertain prospect of his future, Jacob who was always grabbing for *control*, now finds himself wrestling in the night with having to reckon with his past. Wrestling perhaps also with doubt and shame: would God keep the sacred promise to *be with him*, even now? Could he trust that? Would he?

What makes it possible for Jacob to keep on wrestling with the mystery man long enough to see the light of a new day? *Jacob holds onto God's promises*. As the dawn breaks, *Jacob demands a blessing*, and Jacob – who had tricked his way into his *father's* blessing, now is given *God's* blessing. He sees the face of God and he *lives*. His faith, tested in the all-night wrestling match, discovers grace in his struggle. He does not deserve it, this blessing from God; he cannot control it. It is a gift. A blessed gift of God's grace, the start of a new life. The gift of God's many blessings to each of us calls for sharing those blessings, as agents for the Jesus-work of loving and healing the world. Stewards of the blessing, called to share.

Jacob sees the face of God and wounded by the struggle, now he also *limps*. Anne Le Bas writes of this passage, "*The symbolism of the limp is powerful – I love the way it points to the blessings that are found in brokenness, and the way in which healing does not necessarily mean wiping away the marks of the struggle. Healing doesn't need to wipe away the marks of the struggle.*" God works through brokenness, the brokenness of a cross. God can work through *each of us*, no matter what.

Just as Jacob hung in there in his wrestling, so our other lessons today also talk about hanging in there, growing in our trust in God no matter what is happening in our life. Our second lesson, 2 Tim 4:2 tells us, "*Proclaim the message: be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.*" Hang in there.

Jesus told the parable in our *Gospel* lesson about the unresponsive judge and the persistent widow as an encouragement to keep up the faithful prayer-connection so we can be encouraged, even when God seems as absent as that judge.

The life of faithful stewardship of God's gifts calls on us to pray persistently because, in the persistence, *you are changed*. In the persistence, you end up growing in the blessings of trust, self-awareness, humility, patience, insight, and compassion. Transformation, God's persistent work of turning us around to be faithful and effective stewards, takes time and trust. Parents, what if you gave your child whatever he or she wanted, right away, all the time? The child would never learn *resilience*, would never develop the capacity for *delaying gratification*, would never discover a space to *see past self-centered wants* to the *needs of others*. The human heart does not wait very well. *We want what we want, NOW*.

Most of us probably know quite clearly what it feels like to struggle. We try hard. We try to keep it all together. We try to work out the conclusions to life's confusions, to find solutions to impossible dilemmas. We try at least to *look as if* we know what we are doing. We want to succeed—or at least be acceptably adequate. We want to be right, we want to be winners. We *hate* to admit we've limped our way to the limits of our capability. We are inclined to turn in on ourselves, and turn against others; but we find out – *one way or another* – that our self-serving doesn't release us from the grip of that crippling spiritual wrestling match.

At a very low point in seminary, facing a difficult decision about my future, I told a friend that I was *weary from wrestling with God*. My friend asked me, "*What did Jacob do at that point?*" Well, Jacob demanded a blessing: "*I won't let you go unless you bless me.*" Are you wrestling? Hold onto that promise which has been wrestling with you, let it wound you, let it change you and give you a new identity--but *by all means, in the midst of it, look for the blessing*.

It is the moment when I admit defeat that I discover what I *really* need to know – that *God has been there all the time*, in the *struggle*, in the *darkness*, working in my life, blessing me *through* the difficulties not *despite* of them. It's often not in the *answers*, but in the *questions* that I make progress in finding God; not in the *certainties*, but in the space of the *doubts*; not in my *triumphs* and *strengths*, but in my *failures* and *weakness*. When, like Jacob, I can accept that I am locked into the struggle and dead tired from hanging on, it is then that I may discover the true depths of God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

What do we wrestle with? I think we struggle to hold onto trusting the promise of God's forgiveness, and healing, and love. We need to be persistent, even when God *seems* to be slow in answering--like the widow in the parable. This parable is another one of those "*how much more*" parables. *If even a callous and uncaring judge will relent in the face of stubborn persistence, how much more will God, who loves us and cares about us, hear and answer?*

It is God who wrestles in the darkness with our unfinished selves; it is our connection to Jesus, crucified and risen, that makes us into who we really are, as individuals and as the people of God. It is God who calls us by our true names, and who wants us to persist in struggling with all the injustices, all the pain, all the unfinished business, all the shame and guilt that we wrestle with in the *darkness* by life's rivers that must be crossed. It is God who calls us to be faithful, and it is God's promise to be with us that gives us strength, courage, and perseverance in the reckoning. It is God who comes to us, and whose face we see in the loving gaze of Jesus our Savior, who crossed the river of suffering and death for us, and now risen to life again, still goes with us.

In his last book, *Credo*, the famous preacher William Sloane Coffin offers a response to those who claim religion is a crutch. “*Of course, it’s a crutch,*” Coffin says. “*And what makes you think you don’t limp?*”

Don’t get discouraged. When finally, the light begins to dawn and we find ourselves limping, exhausted, we can *dare to hold on for a blessing*, to claim for ourselves the goodness of God’s grace, and even while facing rivers that we must cross. When Jacob has crossed his river, he sees the face of God yet again, this time in the daylight, the face of God reflected in the face of his brother Esau’s welcoming embrace.

Whatever guilt or judgment we may have felt, whatever anxiety and fear we may wrestle with, whatever struggles the future holds--for we *will* be called on to cross many rivers-- may we, limping and loved, know that we are held in the constant, grace-filled presence of God. Thankful for the many blessings that we trust have come from God’s hand, may we share generously in your work, in the dawning light of the risen Christ.

“I live about an hour’s drive from Santa Claus.” *Indiana*. Each year before Christmas, many thousands of letters written to Santa make their way to the Post Office there. For more than 100 years, Santa’s volunteer elves have made sure every child gets a *personalized letter*, written in red ink with a Santa letterhead, and with their famous holiday postmark. I expect that many of those letters included long lists of requested gifts. I wonder how many “*thank you notes*” to Santa come to that post office *after* Christmas.

It is very easy to focus on ourselves, to take the gifts from God for granted, and to miss seeing the generous Giver of those many gifts. If we miss the Giver, we also miss the blessings that come when we respond to God’s gifts with an attitude of gratitude.

Our Gospel reading introduces us to ten men who had “Leprosy,” which not only caused *physical pain*, but the pain of *social rejection* as well. If you had any of the many skin diseases that were collectively called “*leprosy*,” you had to “social-distance,” calling out “*unclean, unclean*” whenever you were near another person. The 10 men call out to Jesus-- from a distance—“*save us, have mercy!*”

The *Samaritan* man with leprosy was excluded on two counts: for his *physical* illness *and* for being a Samaritan. Even if he is cleansed of his leprosy, a Samaritan is still rejected by Jewish religious tradition, still excluded as an outsider... but *not* by Jesus! Jesus *breaks down* walls, physical and social.

When the one leper, the *Samaritan*, for heaven’s sake, comes back to thank Jesus, he tells him, “*Your faith has made you well.*” Now, this can seem a bit strange, right?. After all, the man has *already* been healed, before he *alone* turns back to give thanks. The other nine who do not return have *also* been healed, as they went on their way to whatever they would do with their healing. What’s *different* about this one?

All the sick men were healed, but this one *grateful outsider* received more from Jesus than miraculous healing! He returns to Jesus and gives praise and thanks to *God*. This one man healed of leprosy knows that Jesus brought about his healing and shares the good news. He had done nothing to earn it; he has *received mercy*, and his faith-response is worship, an *attitude of gratitude*. All ten were healed. But only *one* made a connection with Jesus. Without the response of gratitude and praise, the healing *isn’t finished* yet. Those who just go on their way miss out, because gratitude strengthens your spiritual life.

It is clear that *all ten men* with leprosy were healed, and that *did not change* because *only one* came back to say thanks. We don’t know what the other nine did. They probably tended to the legal requirements with the priest—as Jesus had told them. Their failure to return thanks *did not make God’s goodness go away*. As Christians, we believe that God’s grace is directed to all people. Yet we know that only some people respond with praise and thanks to God, and only some of the time. But the *grace* remains, no matter what.

Clearly, *giving thanks* is preferable to *not giving thanks*. But the central point is *not* that God just warns us: *you'd better give thanks, or else.*" At the heart of this story is the goodness of God – all ten were healed, and *how they responded* to the healing did not change *that* fact. Jesus healed them because of His mercy. This grace moves us from self-centered greed to gratitude that honors God and serves God's world.

St. Paul writes in Romans 5:8-- "*The proof of God's love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*" We had *no faith*, so God sent us Jesus. God does not say to us, "*If you have enough faith, then I will send Jesus to suffer and die for your sins.*" No—it is *because* Christ died for us, *therefore* we can respond with joyful thanksgiving.

Giving thanks doesn't always come naturally. The pace of life can cause us to move quickly to the *next thing* on our relentless to-do list, and we never stop to thank those who have made the *last thing* a blessing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* that, "*In ordinary life we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich. It is very easy to overestimate the importance of our own achievements in comparison with what we owe others.*"

Sometimes I forget to pay attention to the blessings, and then I fail use those blessings to be a blessing to others. I don't want to short-circuit the flow of God's love and mercy and grace. The *attitude of gratitude* powers the life of true stewardship of God's many blessings – even when it doesn't come easy. It makes a difference.

Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman's comic strip "Zits," makes on-target observations about a surly 15-year-old. Here's Jeremy at the breakfast table. His mother chirps, "*Good morning, Jeremy!*" "*What's good about it?*" he glowers.

"*You're always so gloomy in the morning,*" she remarks. "*Maybe you'd feel better if you tried looking on the bright side for a change.*" "*The bright side,*" he reflects, and then, with the dripping with sarcasm, he waxes eloquent. "Golly! Why didn't I think of that? I can solve all of my problems by simply having happy thoughts! I see that the sun rose right on schedule again! [Sniff!] Ahh! Good old oxygen! Don't you love how paint sticks to walls all by itself?" And then, waltzing out the front door, "Well, I'm off to take advantage of another day of free, taxpayer-supported public education! Lucky me!" The door closes behind him, his put-on smile disappears, and then he mutters, "Crud. I *do* feel better!"

And so it is with us. When we give thanks, when we cultivate an attitude of gratitude, we do feel better. And that gratitude equips us to face all manner of spiritual bad-hair-days.

You can't compel someone to be truly thankful; thankfulness comes from within. But like grumpy Jeremy in the Zits comic, we may find that paying attention to the graced gifts of God offered to us, and practicing an *attitude of gratitude* can sustain us on our walk of faith.

If you think you don't have much to be thankful for, spend a few minutes in the evening thinking about your day and what there was about it that you could *be thankful for*. Make a list.

It's a simple exercise, but you'll find that it will heighten your awareness of the daily miracles in your life. And you may even find yourself offering prayers of thanksgiving for things you'd always just *taken for granted*. You may find yourself comforted and strengthened by a *renewed* awareness of God's presence and continuing goodness and care, *no matter what else* is happening in your life. It is not *receiving* the benefits of God that sets us apart, *remember the other nine lepers*-- but it is recognizing where they come from, and using them to the glory of God and in service to our neighbor.

We give thanks when we gather at the Lord's Supper, the "Eucharist." That word means "*to give thanks*." At the table, God works in us as we put our trust in the promise of the cross of Christ, "given and shed for you." This faith guides and guards us on our way. We can give thanks for the healing waters of baptism, made whole just as Naaman in our first lesson was made whole as he went to the river and washed, as the prophet had told him.

Lord, give us grace to always remember and give you thanks for your many blessing to us. Lord, help us to see *you* in the many gifts you give us, and to always turn our hearts to you. Free us from greed. Give us an *attitude of gratitude*, with eyes and hearts to see your grace and goodness. Each day, we pray: work in us and through us to turn our thanksgiving into "thanks-living."

There is a story about a man sawing down a tree. A friend came by and told him the job would go faster if the saw was sharper. The man replied, “*I don’t have time to sharpen it—I’ve got too much sawing to do.*” We can be impatient like this fellow; impatient with God or *discouraged* with ourselves as we tackle the daily work that God gives us to do. The lessons today help us sharpen our understanding of a crucial spiritual tool for living: *faith* -- what it is, what it isn’t and what it can do.

We Lutherans talk a lot about faith: *we are saved by grace through faith*. Martin Luther had tried to *ensure* his salvation by working harder than anybody to do *everything* that God commands, perfectly. Yet, the more he *drove* himself, the more he *knew* that he fell short of God’s righteousness. Our First Lesson, the only reading in our three-year cycle that comes from the book of the prophet Habakkuk (1:1-4; 2: 1-4), includes that famous line, quoted by *St. Paul* in Romans, chapter one, and claimed almost 1500 years later by *Martin Luther*. “*The righteous shall live by their faith.*” We hear the good news of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, revealing “*the righteousness of God.*” Paul writes, “*I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.*”

Luther’s came to understand that the righteousness of God was not a *goal* he could achieve by what he did or didn’t do. Being made right with God is a gift, freely given *by God*, and put to use in our lives *through trusting Jesus*. So there we are, FAITH. Well now, what *about* this faith?

Jesus is teaching his disciples about faith in today’s reading from Luke. He has just told his disciples that they must forgive those who have wronged them, as much as “seven times” in one day. Not once, or twice, or even three times. *Seven!* In other words, *stop counting*. Well, how were they *ever* going to be able to follow this Jesus and actually do what he is calling on them to do? So, they cry out – Jesus, we’re going to need a radical faith upgrade! But when it came to understanding “*faith*,” they were like a dull saw trying to cut wood. They assume that faith is *something* you can count and accumulate – so the more you *have*, the more you can *do*. And if things aren’t going right, that must mean that you just don’t have ENOUGH of this thing “faith.”

Some days, Jesus was really hard to follow. He tells them, “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.” Mustard seeds were small, but it wouldn’t have mattered if Jesus had said “*faith the size of a football*, or the *football stadium* for that matter.” Even with a really dull saw, it’s a whole lot easier to *cut down* a tree than to make it *transplant itself* into the ocean.

Jesus goes on. It’s not about you, friends. This faith thing, it’s not about *you*. This giving-service thing, it’s *through* you but it’s not *about* you. This mission thing, it’s not about *you*. This *faith thing* isn’t a *thing* at all. It isn’t *something* you can *count*. It’s *someone* you can *count on*. You don’t *need a lot of* faith, because faith isn’t really something that comes in sizes; it is the beating heart of a living relationship. Faith is trusting in the promises of a faithful and loving God, *no*

*matter what* is happening or not happening, trusting the God we meet in the person of Jesus. Thank God, it's not about us-- although it is for us and God's blessings happen through us.

Jesus talks about the life of serving that our faith calls us to. The Lord gives us good things, but God does not owe us anything. That Greek word that is translated as “worthless” slaves in today's lesson loses something in translation. Some old Middle Eastern texts translate that word as “owed nothing.” If it's “*not about us*” then our life of serving others becomes simply a *response* to God's goodness--a stewardship of our gifts, a harvest of the fruits of God's Spirit at home in each of us.

Folks often think of faith as *agreeing wholeheartedly with a collection of statements of fact*. In that view, the opposite of faith is doubt. And then, you think “*If I have some doubts, then I don't have faith.*” And that would be very bad news. . . . If it were all about us. But it *isn't* “all about us,” because faith is about God; it is about trusting a Power who loves us *no matter what*, for Jesus' sake. Faith doesn't *remove* doubt, it gives us courage to move into a fearfully unknown future *in spite of* our doubts. In spite of *everything*. . . . And that is very GOOD news.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Paul Tillich said *courage* is what faith will *look* like when you see it. Courage is daring to act on your trust that *God is faithful*. Faith gives courage to keep on going, even when you are *disappointed* and want to *give up* --but you *keep on going* anyway. When things get tough and we have to wait and wonder, and wait some more, we can *indeed*, like the disciples, fear that our faith is not going to be *up to the job*. Faith is about daring to *trust the promises* of a loving God-- to be *with* us and *for* us, to work *in* us and *through* us. When we understand that faith isn't our fragile thing that WE ourselves must protect and defend, then we can begin to see that the *opposite of faith is not doubt*, but fear and anxiety.

Anxiety promotes impatience, crowds out creativity, provokes unproductive panic even. All we can see is a paltry mustard seed. But when *God* looks at that seed, God sees *the full-grown tree* - -but in its own time, of course. God says, “*all I need is a tiny opening. Planted in that tiny opening, it is my Holy Spirit that gives the growth.*” Faith gives the courage to risk reaching out even when your knees are trembling and your heart is fearful. Those times come plenty often in our world that *shakes its fist* at God's Way and God's Word, *tries to twist it to its own intentions*, or merely *turns away from it*. God says, trust my promise and presence -- and you will be better able to let go of your anxiety.

In our second lesson, we hear this call to courage in a pun on the name of Timothy. “*Your name is Timothy, not Timidity.*” God can work *through* us to help others find life, as God had worked through the courageous witness of Timothy's mother and grandmother. It's not *how much* faith we have, but what we trust God will do with what we have.

Faith connects us with the rhythm of forgiving and being forgiven. It's a life-giving rhythm made possible because God forgives us for Jesus' sake and calls us to carry that forgiveness out into our lives. Faith connects us with God's love in service to others, actions made *possible* because we are freed from needing to tie up our energies in justifying ourselves and protecting our prerogatives. We are freed from needing to somehow drum enough faith to pass holy



muster. So, trusting Jesus, we can be faithful stewards who offer ourselves, using our gifts to serve others, no matter what is going on.

God's methods seem "upside down" to us. God makes good of evil-- the death and resurrection of Jesus shows us that. God gets things done in ways that blow our anxious expectations into the water—trusting God, even with a mustard seed-sized faith, God can grow a huge tree. Coming into our world as a tiny human baby, Jesus can overcome sin, death, and the power of the devil. Psalm 37 invites us to trust the powerful promise of God's love: "*Put your trust in the LORD and see what God can do.*" It's not about us, and that's *very good* news. It's about the Holy Spirit given to us, working in and through our lives. See what the Lord can do with our gifts. Oh, and watch out for flying Mulberry trees.

John D. Rockefeller was once asked, “*How much money would it take to satisfy you?*” He smiled and quickly answered, “Just a *little* more!” It’s hard to know if the famous billionaire’s answer was serious or not, but it does seem to express how many folks feel about their money.

When Olympic athletes compete, we say that they are “*going for the gold.*” But, when it comes to living out our lives, the goal should not be “*going for the gold,*” but rather “*going for the real thing*” the life that really is *life*. As our second lesson puts it, God’s people should “*Store up for yourselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that you may take hold of the life that really is life.*” 1 Tim: 6:19

All of the lessons today remind us of the dangers of letting our *gold* become our *god*. “*Going for the gold*” becomes a cause of broken community, social injustice, and personal unhappiness. Life that “*really is life*” doesn’t set its hopes on the stuff of this earth. The “*real life*” sets its hope in Jesus, and then uses the “gold” to honor God in service to others, in Jesus’ name.

God cares about what we do with our money -- because God cares about *us*, and because God cares about the *Lazarus* at our gate. God *cares* about what *we do* with the gifts that God has given to us. *Good stewardship* of our lives is what we “do” after we “say” *I believe*. The little daily choices we make, in the long run, can end up having a profound impact on our whole life, and the lives of those around us.

It matters to God how we use what God has given us. Our stewardship matters *because it’s about what we worship*, where we hang our hopes, whether we are connected to God or turned in on ourselves. How do we manage “*godliness with contentment,*” in the age of non-stop advertising, where “*money never sleeps?*” How do we keep from being like John D. Rockefeller, always craving *more* in order to be content, no matter *what* we have already?

It matters to God how we use our possessions, because our loving God doesn’t want them to *take possession* of us. And God knows how easily this can happen, and how hard it is for us to acknowledge it. To be possessed by our possessions is not the abundant life, not “*the real thing*” that God wants to give us. When we rely only on our own achievements, we can miss God’s grace, the gift we receive through what Jesus has accomplished for us.

So, what *does* God want us to do with our time, our talents, and our treasure? First and foremost, we do well to take the time to remember, all of it is *gift*, granted by a generous and loving God. As stewards, not owners, we answer to God for how we use these gifts.

Putting our faith into action through intentional, off-the-top giving worships God and helps tame the “*money beast.*” Such giving as a response to God’s goodness isn’t *primarily* driven by the budget or the bills. Faithful stewardship of our possessions and talents is an act of worshipping God, and *helps to free us from putting our ultimate trust in our stuff*. Giving strengthens our faith in God, so it matters to God.

It also matters to God how we use our resources because *it matters to Lazarus*, and all those who have been shut out, from the days of the prophet Amos, all the way up to our own times. The nation of Israel back in the days of Amos was wealthy, booming, and bragging that they were *God's own chosen nation*, so nothing was going to bring them down. In their worship, those who had grown powerful and wealthy congratulated God for blessing them and choosing them. But Amos told them that God could see that their hearts were set on protecting their wealth and status, not on serving God. Amos could tell that their hearts weren't really listening to God, because the *poor suffered and the self-centered "chosen ones" didn't even notice*. The prophet tells them, it matters to *God* that you have forgotten about doing justice. It matters to God that you live as if it's simply all yours and this life is all there is.

The rich man in the Gospel lesson didn't see the human need at his doorstep. Lazarus means "God helps" but the *people* around him didn't help. The bread that Lazarus wanted was the first century equivalent of the napkin, used by the guests to wipe their hands on, and then dropped to the floor. But he didn't even get that much. The dogs ate better than he did.

The rich man's *dogs* noticed Lazarus, but not the rich man. He knew him as a *beggar*, not a *brother*, and was quite content to leave it that way. In life, the rich man's choices kept digging a trench between them; in death that trench could not be bridged. Even in death, Lazarus is still treated as a beggar by that *formerly* rich man. Tormented in the fires of hell, he wants Lazarus to *step 'n fetch* for him by bringing a taste of water his way, or perhaps to help him out by returning to earth to warn his brothers, like the ghost of Marley warning Scrooge about his greed, in Dicken's story *A Christmas Carol*. But the dreaded words echo out; NOW it's too late for you, and your brothers *have* all they need already.

The problem is not money itself, but the *love* of money, and the indifference to God and to the needs around us that too often comes from selfishly zeroing in on money, power, possessions, and reputation. One day a rabbi paid a visit to a wealthy man who was not known for his generosity. The rabbi pointed to the window and said, "What do you see?" The rich man said, "*I see people walking around.*" Then the rabbi held up a mirror, and again asked, "*What do you see?*" The rich man said, "*I see myself.*" "Yes," said the rabbi. "*There is glass in the window and glass in the mirror. How strange that when you add a little silver, suddenly all you can see is yourself.*" Luther described sin as being "*curved in on oneself*" -- like looking in a mirror instead of out the window.

Just as Amos didn't need to look very far to see a false trust in wealth and privilege, and the spiritual blindness that this false trust brings, one doesn't need to go very far to see evidence in our own world. We may find that we meet *Jesus* in the Lazarus at our gate. Will we notice? Indifferent, self-satisfied, seeking strength in our own resources, we can forget that they aren't actually *ours*. When we need help, do we prefer to dictate to God just *how and when* we'd like the help to arrive? You may have heard that when some people say that want to *serve God*, they mean "*in an advisory capacity.*"

Lazarus doesn't come back from the dead to help the rich man's brothers in the parable. Will they turn their lives around? The parable doesn't tell us. Maybe *we* are the rich man's brothers and sisters, and we are writing the rest of the story with *our own* lives. How will we respond to the one who has been raised from the dead, God's abundant life for us, the life that really is life?

Week by week we dare to confess that we have pursued our desires at the expense of others. We hear the word of forgiveness, the promise of God's renewing love in our lives. We are called and equipped to see more clearly the broken world at our gates, and offered opportunities for being God's hands at work bringing healing and hope.

It does matter to God what we do with our resources, and it matters very much to God where we hang our hopes. For our sake, and for Lazarus' sake, we are challenged to respond to God's gifts, and look for ways to serve. The Good News is that there is still time; and someone *has* risen from the Dead. Jesus forgives neglect and fear and false worship. The Spirit of Christ invites us each day to begin anew, forgiven and strengthened, blessed to be a blessing to others, worshipping God with all we've got.

Did you hear the one about the two-headed snake? It seems the two heads fought each other about which one would get to eat the live mouse that the keepers put in the cage. In the long run, the mouse got *bored* watching the struggle and the two-headed snake *starved* to death.

*“No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”* Trying to serve two masters leaves you in worse shape than that two-headed snake. Jesus knows that if you do not serve God, then *something else* will be calling the shots in your life.

In his explanation to the First Commandment – *“You shall have no other Gods before me”* – Martin Luther asks: “What is it to have a God?” He gives a very basic – and very useful – answer. Where you put your bottom-line *trust* is your God. Where you look for *meaning and hope*, where you find the *reason and resources* to go on living, *there* is your God.

Our dollar bill may say, *“In God We Trust”* but more often, it’s like the sign in the store: “In God We Trust: All others pay cash.” In our materialistic world, “trusting cash” speaks louder than “trusting God.” It has been said that “Our pocket-books may have more to do with *heaven*, and also with *hell*, than our hymnbooks.” Jesus says that you cannot put your ultimate trust in God *and* in your goods. Serve *God* with your goods; because if you make your *goods* your God, your goods will ultimately own you.

Today’s Gospel lesson follows directly after the parable of the Prodigal Son. The Greek word used in today’s lesson to describe the manager’s actions in *“squandering his master’s property”* is the same word used to describe the actions of the Prodigal Son when he *“squanders his inheritance with dissolute living.”* Jesus doesn’t commend the *injustice* of the Manager any more than he commends the Prodigal Son for wastefulness. This isn’t really one of those *“Go and Do Thou Likewise”* parables. This is a *“How Much More”* story. Jesus argues here that if the wicked can do this much, **HOW MUCH MORE** should *you* be doing.

In our first lesson, the prophet Amos is pretty straightforward in his condemnation of those who exploit the poor in order to line their own pockets. But the Gospel lesson is much more difficult for us to understand. What do we *do* with this puzzling parable?

A rumor gets back to the wealthy absentee landlord that the manager is squandering the landlord’s resources. He has to fire the manager, and the manager knows it. It’s *not just the manager’s dishonesty with the resources*. The owner’s reputation is at stake. He has to fire the manager to save his honor, for he is living in a culture *where honor counts for more than money*.

There’s a tiny window of opportunity when the manager knows he’s fired, but the news hasn’t gotten out yet. So, he cooks up a plan. He shrewdly goes and quickly *writes off* huge portions of the debts owed to his boss by one tenant after another. These amounts that he forgives might have been, in effect, the whopping interest charged -- *contrary to religious law* – by a landlord to tenants who just kept sinking deeper and deeper into *debt and despair*. Or he might simply have been continuing a pattern of squandering the master’s property *for his own gain*.

At any rate, *now the tenants might assume it is actually the landlord who has authorized this forgiveness of debts*, so the actions of the *manager* have changed the *landlord* in the tenants' eyes from being a skin-flint Uncle Scrooge into a generous *hero*. The landlord's reputation would have been *hurt* by having employed a bad manager; but now the picture shifts, and his reputation is *helped* by the stories of generosity. When he shows up to take the keys and the books from the manager, the tenants and their families are lining the road, cheering. *So now what's he going to do?* Take on the dishonor of telling them he's *not* the generous guy that the manager is making him out to be?

*A similar kind of thing happened to Henry Ford:*

Henry Ford was visiting in Ireland. Two trustees of the local hospital learned he was there, and managed to get an appointment to see him. They talked Ford into giving the hospital five thousand dollars (this was the 1930's, so five thousand dollars was a great deal of money). The next morning, at breakfast, [Ford] opened his daily newspaper to read the banner headline: "American Millionaire Gives Fifty Thousand to Local Hospital." Ford wasted no time in summoning the two hospital trustees. He waved the newspaper in their faces. "What does this mean?" he demanded. The trustees apologized profusely. "Dreadful error," they said. They promised to get the editor to print a retraction the very next day, declaring that the *great Henry Ford* had given *not fifty thousand, but only five*. Hearing this, Ford offered them another *forty-five thousand*, under one condition: that the trustees would erect a marble arch at the new hospital entrance with a plaque on it. For Ford, the statement on the plaque had a double meaning. It read, "I was a stranger and you took me in."

So, what do we do with this parable? When it comes to our stuff, the world tells us: *some* is good and *more* is better -- and by all means, always look out for number ONE. These goals are *false* Gods. What does it mean to live as *children of light*? How does it shape how we are to act in the world? We are *not* told to flee from money (that would be impossible anyhow.) *We are to use our gifts shrewdly, not to save our own skins, but to serve God and others*. This parable calls on us to ask some uncomfortable questions: how does being a follower of Christ shape your relationships, your budget, your workplace? How does it affect your wallet and your calendar? Challenging questions.

Here's another thought: the manager forgives debts. If the manager has forgiven things that he had no right to forgive, we can note that *right after today's reading*, the Pharisees are thinking *Jesus* has no right to forgive. Now, true, *the unjust manager* forgives for personal gain, and to improve his chances for the future by making his boss look good. But *forgiveness* is what he decides to do.

Jesus brings his true riches to us when our *spiritual books don't balance*. In his self-giving love and mercy, Jesus wipes out our spiritual debts, and forgives us 100%, not simply 20% or even 50%. We were "*bought with a price*" -- God's true riches are "*entrusted to us*" as we take on a disciple's life of faith. We can dare to place our trust in the *promise* that these riches of Jesus do in fact cancel our spiritual debt. We get to draw on this *new credit* that is ours in Christ; we are no longer tied into the uncertain reliance on our stuff to save ourselves.

Our stuff – the material wealth of this world – *can* serve and not enslave us. But *only if* we trust *God* and use our *goods*, rather than the usual trick of trusting our *goods* and trying to *use God*. We are *stewards* of our stuff, not *owners* of it. We answer to a generous God for how we use the gift of our life and all that fills it. We serve God with our talents because we follow Jesus. *It's as basic as that.*

Jesus gave up all claims on worldly wealth and power for us. Even though that led to DEATH for him, God brought new life from this dying, shining the *light* of Easter into the *shadow* of Good Friday. Rooting our trust *in God* is the only way to bring us the “*true riches*” that aren't threatened by death and decay, and to save us from the deadly predicament of the two-headed snake. As we put our trust in Jesus, we are freed from clinging to our own resources to save us. We are freed to use those resources more wisely and well *to God's glory*, to care for *others*, for *ourselves* and for the *world around us*. May God guide our growth together in wisdom and faithfulness, with God's grace always active in love.

The fifteenth chapter of Luke is the Bible's "*Lost and Found Department*." Jesus tells three stories, the two that we heard today and the familiar Prodigal Son parable. Each of them is about *losing* something, *seeking* it out, and *rejoicing* when it is found.

Jesus is with Pharisees, who are complaining that Jesus is a "*sinner-lover*." From their perspective, this was *not a compliment*. But God is a sinner-lover. That thread is woven throughout today's readings. In our first reading, God's *love* for Israel wins out over God's *anger* at seeing them worshipping the golden calf at the Holy Mountain of God. Moses pleads for the people, trusting that *God is a sinner-lover* even when it goes against God's --*shall we say*--"better judgment." God slaps an angry Ace of Spades on the table, when Moses plays the lowly Two of Hearts. The heart wins out.

In our second reading, God *seeks out* the early Church's "*public enemy number one*," Saul who became the Apostle Paul. God loves that "*chief of sinners*" clean into being a "*chief messenger of the Good News of Jesus*" to others who are lost. God is a sinner-lover, searching for the lost ones --*no matter what the risk and the cost*. We see that cost in the life and death of Jesus. And the risk and cost can be very high for those who follow in Jesus' footsteps.

In the movie "Romero" that dramatized his life, El Salvadoran Bishop Oscar Romero seeks out the lost-- and pays the ultimate price. When the *rich and powerful landowners* hear Bishop Romero boldly *speak out* on behalf of the *wretchedly poor and dispossessed* people in El Salvador, the politically powerful insiders accused him of "*abandoning*" them. They called him a *wicked priest*, and they set in motion a plan to *assassinate* him. But Romero had not in fact *abandoned* his calling as he pointedly *challenged their conscience to stop the unjust cruelty* that oppressed the people. And the wealthy power brokers shot the sinner-lover, Bishop Romero, while he was standing at the altar leading worship. Shot dead as he held up the chalice -- "*this is my blood, shed for you*." They stopped the messenger, but they could not stop the message. It is God's outreach, God's mission.

Luke's "*lost and found*" stories emphasize *God's* faithfulness in searching and *God's* joy in finding. Notice -- this isn't about lost ones resolving to somehow get ourselves "*good enough*" to be found. The searching shepherd and the sweeping woman *choose* to *faithfully* seek out what was lost. And as for *joy*, a grimly legalistic investment in moral self-preservation will leave little room for rejoicing. It is *deadly serious* work.

But God doesn't just dutifully hunt us down, mumbling and grumbling, and when we are finally found, send us to our room without supper. When the lost are found, God throws one whale of a party, and invites *us* to join in. Rejoice with me. Let the *Feast of Victory* begin, for what was *lost* has been found. What was *bound up* has been set free. What was *broken* has been mended.



Psalm 51 prays: “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation.*” In order to really share in the joy, you have to recognize that you have first received the mercy. Paul, who calls himself chief of sinners, gives thanks that he has received mercy. *Give thanks for God’s patient and persistent love.* Now that’s something I can cling to when I am afraid that I’ve gotten lost, *drifted* beyond any earthly hope of being found. In the *cross and resurrection of Jesus*, we see that hope comes out of even the worst of situations.

Trusting the promise of God’s mercy, we can find courage to look for God’s grace at work when we have wandered off, been less than we could be, grumbled as one of the ninety-nine about a “*shepherd out looking for the one who’s gone off and done who knows what,*” maybe worried that *we’ve been neglected or even abandoned* by a God who goes after the outsider with such abandon. We must face it: *God’s mercy doesn’t follow our rules.* We tend to want mercy for ourselves and justice for everybody else. We can confess these things, ask for help to live the life God wants for us, and for trust that God gives us what we need to do the job.

In these little “*lost and found*” dramas, look who plays the role of God! A woman and a shepherd. Although in that culture the shepherd had been used as an image for rulers and even for God, flesh-and-blood shepherds, (and women), were invisible, insignificant, embarrassing people. I’m guessing that the upright, uptight religious regulars who heard Jesus tell these stories had a hard-enough time accepting that *God breaks the bank to seek out people who don’t fit their bill.* But to cast those outcasts in God’s role, that’s taking sinner-loving to a new place.

God searches patiently for all who are lost, whether by *choice or by accident or ignorance.* Often *our* patience falls short; or maybe we find ourselves patient with others, and relentless in beating ourselves up. We don’t have to do that. God knows our *gifts and our limitations*, and promises that we will be able to experience the “*joy of God’s saving help.*” Trusting this promise, celebrate God’s patience, mercy, and forgiveness, we can turn our *focus* away from our own selves, and concentrate on the Good News of God’s love in Jesus, the message that the Holy Spirit is wanting to offer to us, and through us, to others.

Paul thanks God: “*I received mercy; the grace of our Lord overflowed for me.*” The Lord Jesus is a “sinner-lover,” who (fortunately for us) displays perfect patience, seeks us out, makes hopeful new possibilities out of the messes of our lives.

Over a hundred years ago, in a Scottish seaside inn, a group of fishermen were relaxing after a long day at sea. As a serving maid was walking past the fishermen’s table with a pot of tea, one of the men made a sweeping gesture to describe the size of the fish he claimed to have caught. His hand collided with the teapot and sent it crashing against the whitewashed wall, where its contents left an irregular brown splotch.

Standing nearby, the innkeeper surveyed the damage. “*That stain will never come out,*” he said in dismay. “*The whole wall will have to be repainted.*”

“Perhaps not.”

All eyes turned to the stranger who had just spoken. “*What do you mean?*” asked the innkeeper.

“*Let me work with the stain,*” said the stranger, standing up from his table in the corner. “*If my work meets your approval, you won’t need to repaint the wall.*”

The stranger picked up a box and went to the wall. Opening the box, he withdrew *pencils, brushes, and some glass jars of linseed oil and pigment*. He began to sketch lines around the stain and fill it in here and there with *dabs of color and swashes of shading*. Soon a picture began to emerge. The random splashes of tea had been turned into the image of a *stag with a magnificent rack of antlers*.

At the bottom of the picture, the man inscribed his signature. Then he paid for his meal and left. The innkeeper was stunned when he examined the wall. “*Do you know who that man was?*” he said in amazement. “The signature read “E.H. Landseer!” Indeed, they had been visited by the well-known painter of wildlife, Sir Edwin Landseer.

God can take the stains and disappointments of our lives and transform them into a thing of beauty, not merely *erase* them or try to *whitewash* them. Only God can truly “create a clean heart” within us. What we thought was lost, God *finds and transforms*, and then invites us to *see and celebrate*. To w

hat we thought was dead and buried, hopeless, God gives the new life of Easter.

GOD WANTS US, even if we feel sometimes in our lives that nobody else important really does. Not getting picked for the team, not getting the promotion, having the cute kid in school ignore you, being rejected by your *family*, wondering if parents who are fighting with each other *don’t care* about you any more, being lonely or sick, feeling worn down and hopeless: God’s out there, *beating the bushes* for you.

SO, I invite trust that you are loved and valued now, not “when you can finally get your act together.” Loved now, gathered into this place, fed and forgiven, now. *Found* by a well-known public “*sinner lover*.” So *let the party begin*.

God's *grace* is free; Luther highlighted that good news. We put our faith in the promise that we are saved through Jesus. God's forgiveness and healing through Jesus come to us freely, but following Jesus in our world has a cost. Today we hear about that cost of discipleship.

You may have noticed that the second lesson today has no chapter number listed. We heard the first 21 verses of this little book of Philemon. It is only 25 verses long, but it gives us one of the most dramatic stories in the whole Bible; it shows the cost of following Jesus. The church in the city of Colossae met in the house of Philemon, to whom this letter is written. Philemon was a Christian convert through the preaching of the apostle Paul, who was now in prison because of that preaching. Onesimus, a slave owned by Philemon, was one of 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire.

Onesimus had run away from Philemon and made his way to Paul in Ephesus, the busy port city a hundred miles away. Onesimus means "*useful*" in Greek, and was a very common name for a slave. Imagine living with a name of "*Handy*," or "*Has a Strong Back!*" The runaway slave found Paul, and he had become "*very useful*" to Paul (to continue the pun). Paul helps Onesimus grow in faith, and he helps Paul in prison. Now as Paul writes to Philemon, he wants Onesimus to continue his work with him, but as a *brother* legally freed, not as a fugitive slave.

More than that, Paul wants to transform the Christian Community back in Colossae. He wants to *free not only the slave Onesimus*. Paul wants to help free the slave-holders. He wants them to "*do the right thing*" – to pay the cost of discipleship – from the heart, out of goodness and grace, not because Paul has the authority to demand it.

So, Paul writes this letter, delivered by Onesimus himself. When Onesimus chose to return to Philemon and the church in Colossae, he was taking his life in his hands along with this letter. It was common in the Roman Empire for wealthy persons to hold slaves. The economy depended on it, and the punishments for run-away slaves were like those in our own country's history with slavery: severe, intended to be a public warning. There was even a law at that time that prohibited giving slaves over to wild beasts *without the approval of the proper authorities*. So, you can figure there were times when that approval was granted.

Even if his life were spared, Onesimus *could* have been quietly taken back, *still enslaved* --and his master might have been praised by his church members for not punishing him. What gave Onesimus the courage to risk going back, with *so much* to lose? With such a price to pay, what gave Philemon and the church in Colossae the courage and vision to go beyond what the world holds dear and fully acknowledge Onesimus as a freed brother in Christ? How could they be freed to send him back to Paul?

Paul reminds his listeners that, because of their relationship with Jesus, they are living in a new reality with each other: they are all *one in Christ*. Paul challenges them to reorder their priorities, increasingly transformed by the power of the *cross* and *resurrection* of Jesus. Living as God's people makes a difference for us too. We will no longer just fit easily into the world's ways. Being a disciple of Jesus has a cost. *Grace is free, but it is not cheap.*

Our Gospel lesson today zeros in on the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. The crowds were following Jesus, as Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, *on his way to the cross*. He counsels them to count the cost of following him. Jesus uses some strong words here, but it is helpful to know that we lose a bit of the meaning in translation. "*Hate*," in the language that Jesus spoke, is a strong way of saying that whoever loves any of these things—self, family and possessions--*more* than they love Jesus will not be able to walk the Jesus-road. Being faithful will mean that the way of Jesus Christ comes *first and foremost*, before and beyond everything else. And when following Christ is the one central, most important thing in our lives, our lives will be transformed.

Philemon the slave-holder and those around him are challenged to give up owning the service of Onesimus. This meant they would have to deal with the urge for control within their own hearts. We too have to wrestle with Paul's appeal to freely and lovingly "let go and let God." Giving up control means paying a price: it means giving up *the urge to manipulate the people and things around us for our own purposes*. Our lives change when we choose to confess that our life and everything about that life comes from God, and *we* really don't actually own any of it. God *lends* it to us to use for good and loving purposes. Clearly, this runs counter to the values and priorities of the world around us. God asks us to freely give up these competitors for our trust, so we can more faithfully follow Jesus as we serve our neighbor in his name.

This means risking ridicule from others, or even revenge. Imagine what the other slave-holders in Colossae would have to say about someone who publicly, cheerfully and willingly releases a run-away slave? What kind of dangerous, subversive clap-trap is this? Philemon will lose the privilege of the rich and powerful. If we truly live as disciples of Jesus, we will be counted as fools, fools for Christ. Count the cost, as the Gospel lesson says. THEN remember that "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of true wisdom*," no matter what the world out there says about wisdom and foolishness. Will Philemon be wise, and hear what Paul wants to tell him? Or will he scoff at it?

There are always plenty of scoffers. Still, Onesimus gives himself up, Paul gives up his right to *order* the desired behavior--he rather "*appeals*" for it. Philemon gives up his right to punish, and he gives up the social and economic *power that comes with the privileges of his place in society*. And here's the thing. We follow the *example of Jesus* if we live as disciples. Jesus gives up his right to *command* our obedience and instead loves us enough even to die for us, and to risk having us reject his love. And scoffers will

always be there. If we are truly honest with ourselves, we may see that we may even be among those who would really rather not count the cost, *most* of us at least *some* of the time. But the powerful Spirit of God also works in and through us, no matter what's going on in our lives, striving to *bring us back* on track and move us forward.

We don't really know how the drama of Onesimus and Philemon turned out, but we have some hints. About 50 years after this letter arrived in Colossae, there are stories of a certain Onesimus, bishop of the church in Ephesus, who had been "*very useful*" to the ministry there. Could this be the same run-away slave who risked his life at Paul's urging, to confront the church at Colossae with the opportunity to make their actions match their preaching? Who put *his* faith into practice, trusting that God would take care of him within the Christian community?

The power of love changes *Paul*, it changes *Onesimus*, it changes *Philemon*, and it changes the *church at Colossae*. God's love changes *us*, too. We hear the call to let Jesus change our lives, clear down to the roots--one risky, vulnerable, loving step at a time. What does it cost to "*take up our cross*" to follow Jesus? Jesus claims our whole life. What do we receive when we spend our lives as disciples of Jesus? A whole *new* life, a way to *trust* in an *untrustworthy* world, a way to *forgive* and *be forgiven* in a broken and cruel world, a way to *be free* even as we *are bound* in loving service to our neighbor. I pray that God's Spirit will guide our discipleship, so that we can spend our lives sharing the life of Jesus Christ at work among us.

The comedienne Lily Tomlin once said something that I think is pretty wise in this world that is so focused on trying to “come out on top”: “The trouble with the rat-race is that even if you win, *you’re still a rat.*” In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus has something to say about this rat-race problem.

Jesus has been invited to a Sabbath meal at the house of a Pharisee. These were the insiders, experts in matters of correct religious behavior, all those rules for “how you were *supposed* to act.”

And Jesus just *kept on breaking* those rules. Some who ate with Jesus on this Sabbath were “*watching him closely.*” On the Sabbath Day it was against God’s holy law to do any work. On that particular Sabbath Day, Jesus healed a man who was sick. *Jesus the healer made him well,* but the other guests saw only Jesus the *lawbreaker.* They did not rejoice with the healed man standing before them. They really didn’t even *see* a rescued brother. But Jesus sees through them; *hypocrites!* -“you would rescue a *farm animal* on the Sabbath, so why not rescue a hurting human?” And they had no answer.

Jesus tells two parables at this uneasy dinner party: the first one to the striving guests and the second one to the hostile host. The places nearest the host or the guest of honor had the most *status*, and up-and-coming *social climbers* were jockeyed with each other, sorting out the *social pecking order*, trying to *promote themselves.* Embarrassing situations could follow. It’s like, if you were invited to a wedding and sat yourself down where the best man should go. *Awkward!* Or if you attended a state dinner and got there *early* just so you could sit up front *near the head table*, only to be ousted when the *Under Ambassador to Upper Slobbovia* arrives, and in full view of all the guests you’d be ushered to a seat next to the swinging door to the kitchen.

As he speaks to his fellow guests, Jesus is reflecting the Scripture lesson which we heard in our First Lesson. The guests had no doubt heard the advice for the young official at the royal court, the original context for that wisdom. But what Jesus is saying goes beyond sensible self-help counsel. The Gospel doesn’t intend to offer a better way to feather your own nest.

Jesus tells us not to *pretend* to be humble as a *strategy for recognition.* Did you hear the story of the man who was so humble that the town gave him a medal for humility? However, they took it back when he *insisted* on wearing it all over town!

There’s a story of a turning point in the life of Psychiatrist Robert Coles. Coles was in medical school, studying to be a psychiatrist, proud of his *status*, and also proud that he had *volunteered* to work with Dorothy Day, who had become famous for her many efforts in helping the poor. He arrived for his first meeting to discover Day sitting at a table, deep in conversation with a really tough-looking street person. She didn’t notice Coles had come into the room until they had finished the conversation. Then she asked, “*Do you want to speak to one of us?*”

Robert Coles was astounded by Dorothy Day's humility. She made no distinction between herself and the person she had been speaking with. Dr. Coles said it changed his life. He wrote that he *learned more* in that moment than in his four years at Harvard.

God tells us, again and again: "*Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" "*The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*" Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang: "*God has humbled the proud in their conceit, and the rich have been sent away empty.*" God wants us to know that when we insist on *putting ourselves front and center*, we hinder our embrace of God's grace. Jesus challenges our human rules and assumptions, for God values things in a different way than we do.

The upstanding religious leaders who attended this party "*were watching Jesus.*" Well, Jesus has *also* been watching them, and he sees them scrambling for the *center stage*. They are trying to cement their status and self-worth through *anxious, self-centered* actions that focus on protecting *themselves* and those who *are like them*. Jesus challenges them to see that *there is a better way*.

Jesus tells us that God just *isn't swayed by our efforts to impress*. True humility is rooted in knowing that your worth comes *from God* because God made you. True humility comes from acknowledging our own *frailty*, and embracing God's kindness to us.

The second parable, the one Jesus directs to the host of the party, tells us that Jesus always *reaches out beyond* our usual guest list. Just like the banquet host, we need to hear this word. From the beginning, God's people have sometimes shut people out, played favorites, shamed those with less, let the hungry go away still hungering. We need to keep on asking, "Where are the ones Jesus calls on us now to welcome *in his name*? Those who unsettle our *sense of comfort*, who challenge our dream of having everything well under control *on our own terms*?" "When you give a banquet . . . invite those who cannot repay." This reminds us that the only kind of feast that Jesus CAN give is one where we the guests *cannot* repay the invitation. We're all there by God's grace alone.

God invites us to a banquet each time we gather around the table, giving thanks and remembering the grace of God given to us in Jesus. Jesus frees us to share God's life and love in new and unexpected ways. We cannot repay God, but we can seek to be as gracious and hospitable to others as God has been to us, to *reach out* beyond ourselves, to focus on God's mission rather than sticking with our own assumptions. The second lesson reminds us: in reaching out, we may even be entertaining angels unawares.

God will never fail us or forsake us, so we are invited to trust God. "*The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid.*" We may even realize that we are the *beggars* in need of the undeserved invitation to the banquet. We have been the *sinner*s, the *snobs*, the ones who end up putting *ourselves forward* at the expense of the very ones we are called on to serve. We are the ones who Jesus loves and for whom Jesus died. Even when your best efforts somehow turn out all wrong, *God still loves you* and promises to be with you, to help you lead a renewed, forgiven life of a disciple.

This is the foundation for transformation, the transformation that our E-Connect process will help us to experience. This grace is the foundation for the new community of welcoming and being welcomed, for Jesus' sake, so that we can discover and do the will of God in our lives together.

In his introduction to his 1997 book "Sources of Strength," former President Jimmy Carter wrote - "After a personal witnessing experience with Eloy Cruz, an admirable Cuban pastor who had surprising rapport with *very poor immigrants from Puerto Rico*, I asked him for the secret of his success. He was modest and embarrassed, but he finally said, "Señor Jimmy, we only need to have two loves in our lives: love for God, and love for the person who happens to be in front of us at any time."

Putting *grace* into action by expanding the guest list – this pleases God, who is the only one whose praise *really* matters in our lives. Let these *liberating words* free us from being driven by the need to succeed in the rat races around us, the vain contests for power and esteem. We don't have to scramble to move ourselves into the spotlight, for Jesus comes to us where we are and says, "*take and eat. I am here for you.*" For Jesus' sake, God's love sets a place for us at the table of life.



It was the Sabbath, and Jesus was in his usual place, in the Synagogue. And yes, the faithful were there, in their usual places. God said very plainly that on the Sabbath you didn't do any work; you *went to synagogue*, and you *didn't work*. Anyone who cared to keep God's commandments knew that. The leaders were there, and so were many others. The men in the front; the women out of sight in the balcony or behind a screen. And on this day, Jesus was sitting up front and center in the teacher's chair, *teaching*!

I wonder what those leaders thought about Jesus, the rabble-rouser rabbi. You can almost hear them: "Huh! A *carpenter's* son acting just like he's *God's gift* to the world or something." The *upright and uptight* folks were upset; they thought this Jesus was way out of bounds. They believed that "God has rules, and God wants us to keep them, and everybody else should keep them too." It's not that Jesus *doesn't know* God's Law. He *knows* it, but he goes *out of his way* to break it, to break Sabbath law right *here* in the synagogue. They could see that Jesus is just *out of control*, and they could see that the people are *following* him. They're afraid that God will surely punish them all if they do not put him straight or find a way to shut him down.

The religious leaders claimed that their way of life was shaped by scripture and that their actions – or in this case, their *inaction* – had God's blessing. Jesus tries to set *them* straight, to show them that they were *not* keeping the spirit of God's law, even as they were zealously enforcing the letter of the law. And Jesus challenges that hypocrisy, their loveless behavior done in the name of the God of steadfast love.

Jesus had during his ministry confronted the *political* establishment, refusing to accept the godlike claims of the Roman Empire and their puppet governments in Judea. Confronting the *religious* establishment was a much more demanding task for Jesus and his followers. I think that's why we read so much about Jesus' interactions with the "*scribes and the Pharisees*." In time, both the *political* and the *religious* leaders act together against Jesus with an arrest, a trial and a cross.

Jesus is like the energetic four-year-old who takes the coloring book and colors "outside the lines." In today's lesson, Jesus was acting "outside the lines." The work of healing was allowed only if it was clearly necessary, right at that moment, to save a life. This woman had been bent over for eighteen years—those who accused Jesus figured "surely one more day wouldn't hurt."

Jesus was coloring outside the Sabbath lines, yet even if this healing had been on, say, a Tuesday instead of on the Sabbath, this act of Jesus would have strayed outside the lines of *acceptable* behavior for those times.

First, this was a woman who was healed. Jesus speaks to her, calls out to her, and she slowly, slowly makes her way into the midst of all those startled men, breaking into their sacred Sabbath space, as Jesus crosses the line that said only men should have center stage with God. Jesus includes her—her life matters to him. Surprisingly, he calls her, quite pointedly, "a daughter of Abraham," even though in Jesus' day, there was not much compassion for those who were

chronically ill or handicapped. People assumed that such a person was being punished by God, and they should keep their distance.

Yet, Jesus crossed a line by touching her. The text tells us that he “*laid his hands on her*,” and she stood up straight. Imagine the sound of her praise, after 18 years--a *woman* making such a scene right there in the middle of the *synagogue*, on a Sabbath! She could at least have kept this breach of God’s Sabbath commandment quiet, instead of shamelessly shouting it out for everyone to hear.

The leader of the synagogue, all red-faced, raises his voice, livid, trying to defend the Law of God and bring things back under control. This one who cares so deeply about keeping the letter of God’s law is *also* all “*bent out of shape*” because Jesus straightened out the bent-over woman ON THE SABBATH. *How dare Jesus make a point of violating the Sabbath*, right there in the synagogue? After they had *allowed* him to take a place up front to teach. And he didn’t just *happen* to bump into her. He called out to her, and had her make her slow, difficult way forward. And the *worst thing* is that he *claims* he’s *speaking for God*! The leader figures he’d *better* “straighten Jesus out.”

It’s interesting to note that Jesus doesn’t actually use the word “*healing*” or “*curing*.” The *synagogue leader* does that. Jesus uses the term “set free.” “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Even when he mentions untying the animals to give them water and food on the Sabbath, in Greek he uses a shorter form of the word “set free.” Jesus is talking about giving freedom.

It’s easy to rush into condemning the cold-hearted and self-righteous synagogue leader. You know the line: *Round up the usual suspects*. Well, not so fast. I wonder what the equivalent crime of “*healing on the sabbath*” would look like in our churches today? How often do we end up *resisting* God, when *maybe* the Spirit of the Lord wants us to be *assisting* God in making ourselves and others whole, by coloring outside our comfortable and cherished lines of *black and white, us and them*? Sometimes, just when we think we finally have God all figured out, God goes and upsets our spiritual appcart.

It is easy for our faith life to become a *to-do list of laws* rather than an apple-cart-upsetting call to love. One person drags out a strict laundry list of what Christians *should not* do, and another person waves a strident list of what we *should* do. They may be getting “*bent out of shape*” over different *particulars*, but spirits still become bent overbearing the yoke of accusation and anger, frustration and failure, resulting in separation from God and each other.

Many people come to church, with their spirits bent out of shape on the inside. They have spiritual wounds that they have carried, sometimes for years. What will set them free? Every Sunday, we hear it: “*Through Jesus, your sins are forgiven*.” The Gospel is the most potent medicine in the world if we will truly take the words to heart. Too often we listen to the Gospel about the same way we listen to the instructions flight attendants give on airplanes. Life-saving information to be sure, but, *yawn*, we’ve heard it before.

God “*straightens us out*” by pushing us past the lines that we draw for ourselves. And sometimes we grab only the black and white crayons, “*us and them*,” “*good guys and bad guys*.”

That burdens us with fear and divisive defensiveness. This isn't how God has colored the creation. God promises us that it doesn't *have* to be that way.

We get bent out of shape by forces that work to turn us away from trusting God. *What has you "bent out of shape" today?* Sometimes the ones who *need* to be set free the most are the ones who insist the loudest that *they for sure don't need it*. Sometimes it shows in our physical bodies, but nearly always, it shows in our bound-up spirits.

Sometimes God colors outside our lines, and we need to "*let go and let God.*" When God is acting to make healing happen, we have two options: we can resist God or assist God. God reaches out across the lines that lock us down.

We hear God's word of healing: "You are set free from your ailment. You are a child of the Promise, and I love you enough to give my life for you. You are mine."

You are a *somebody* in God's eyes. Whether you are more like the hurting hunched-over woman, or the synagogue leader indignant at God's messy and inconvenient mercy, God has a word of healing and freedom to *straighten us up*. You are loved, you have the promise of forgiveness, and so also do those people who differ from you. God, give us the grace to see how your grace-filled picture of love and healing extends outside of our lines, calling us to give thanks for God's mercy. *Calling us to share it in service to others.*

Our second lesson from Hebrews gives us the example of running a marathon. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*” A runner can’t carry any extra weight in this endurance race. In the *spiritual* race, we must be laying aside everything that gets in the way of finishing the race.

The writer C.S. Lewis has some great images of laying aside those parts in ourselves that burden us in our spiritual life. The *Chronicles of Narnia*, Book 3, “*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*,” begins with these words: “*There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb -- and he almost deserved it.*” He’s a dreadful kid, snotty, self-centered, greedy. His greed turns him into a *real* dragon, so in the magic of the story, the boy who acted like a dragon *becomes* one, in fact. Young Eustace Clarence Scrubb might even have adjusted to this new dragon reality, *somehow*, and not grown beyond it, except for a very unwelcome *pain*. A gold bracelet, the one he had *tried to steal*, which fit loosely over his *arm* as a little boy, now cut deeply into his dragon-leg. It hurt. It was his *pain* that first allowed Eustace to know his dreadful dragon-ness, and become *able* to be transformed.

Poor Eustace Clarence Scrubb, *in dragon form*, finds his way back to his companions, who have been *hunting* for Eustace Clarence Scrubb, *the boy*. As a dragon, he then actually begins to make himself useful to the others, as he had never done when he was a boy who *was acting like* a dragon. Yet, as it comes time to re-board the “Dawn Treader,” they worry: how can we take a full-sized, fire-breathing dragon on our wooden ship? “*Poor Eustace realized more and more that since the first day he came on board he had been an unmitigated nuisance and that he was now a greater nuisance still. And this ate into his mind, just as that bracelet ate into his foreleg.*”

As it turns out, he didn’t have to worry his about his fiery dragon-breath burning the boat, or being left behind to fend for himself. As he keeps on searching for a way to ease the *pain* of that stolen bracelet digging into his dragon-leg, something quite remarkable happens to him. He encounters Grace, and he is transformed. His discovery happens like this:

One night, Eustace the unhappy dragon got a visit from a very special *Lion*, who glowed like moonlight, *though the night had no moon*, a Lion who could somehow speak directly to his heart. This Lion led Eustace, the dragon, to a garden on a mountain top.

In the middle of the garden there was a well. The dragon-boy explained: “*I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells--like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg, which you remember had a gold bracelet cutting into it. But the Lion told me I must undress first.*”

So, Eustace the dragon sheds one dragon-layer, and another dragon-layer, like a snake slithering out of its skin. By his own efforts, he removes *some* of his dragon self. Yet, his reflection in the water of this font, in the garden on the mountain, showed him that he was . . . still a dragon. Dismayed, he says: “*As soon as I looked at myself in the water, I knew it had been no good.*”

Eustace hears from the Lion a word that in his pain, he is now prepared to hear: “*You will have to let me do it.*” Eustace says “*I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let Aslan do it.*”

When the Lion takes the final dragon skin off, the tear is deep, and it hurts-- the shedding that Eustace had done on his own had not been particularly *painful*, but it had not been really *effective* either. That powerful, gentle Lion places Eustace, boy-skin now raw and on fire with pain, places him carefully into the water of that Baptismal font on the mountain in the moonlight, and he is *healed, dressed* in new clothes, and *sent* back into the community of his friends.

Aslan the Lion in the Narnia stories is Jesus Himself, and C.S. Lewis has just told a vivid story of *baptism*. Repenting—seeing the dragon within—unlayering the sin that clings as closely as our very own skin, we can return again and again to the healing waters of our own baptism, to shed our own “dragon-ness.” Of course, we would like a nice tame, we might even say “*peaceful*” transformation, one that we can do on our own terms, that doesn’t hurt very much, and doesn’t mess that much with us. But for Eustace Clarence Scrubb, only the claw of Aslan, a trustworthy and loving power from outside of himself, could take away that final layer from him and make his life new again.

The struggle against sin wears us down too, and we find ourselves as *divided inside* as those families in the gospel text. God confronts us with a demand to change our lives, disturbing the *false* peace of our dragon-shaped status-quo. God calls on us to lay down the excess layers and leave the dragon of our self-serving ways behind. At that moment, we can either hear it and heed it, turning to God for forgiveness and renewal, or we can turn away. Jesus promises his peace to his followers, but the enemies of God are still out there, stirring up the battles, so there will always be divisions--within our communities, within families, and in our own divided hearts as well. We have certainly seen that happening in our world. Jesus says, count the cost, be prepared to go the distance.

Jesus promises peace like the world does not and cannot give, but this does not mean it will be a *walk in the park*. Trying to *love others as God loves us* brings strong, divisive *resistance* that can really drag us down as we try to run the race as followers of Jesus.

God knows we can’t finish this marathon on our own steam. So, we are given encouragement and support. The cloud of witnesses, unseen, have gone before us, and even now surrounds us. God is present within that cloud of witnesses, to guide us through the wilderness of our struggle with the power of sin--just as surely as God was present in the cloud to guide the people of

Israel through the wilderness to their promised land. God is present for us in that cloud of witnesses, even when things don't *feel* all that peaceful and secure.

We run surrounded by a crowd of those who have finished and cheer us on, sinners all, but winners all through the grace of God that *we* have now received in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Abraham who lied, Sarah who laughed at God, Jacob with his scheming and swindling; David who had poor Uriah killed to get the beautiful Bathsheba, Rahab the prostitute hiding enemy spies--a ragtag bunch, but found faithful-- trusting God when the race got rough.

God's *true* peace is not an easy one; it is risky, sometimes painful. Yet, if Eustace dragon-boy had not had his own version of "peace" disturbed, he would never have followed the Lion. He discovered that he needed to change, and that he could *not* do it in his own familiar way. God's peace does not let us just shed an old skin or two, but cuts deeper than we dare to. God wants healing for the human heart, laying aside every weight, providing joyful new possibilities for running God's race faithfully.

*So, then let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Have you ever gotten a message informing you that “you’ve already won a million dollars?” Who believes that? “We only need your bank information and your Social Security number to get you the money.” Right . . . The more we learn about our world, the more we learn not to put our faith in such extravagant promises.

We do look to put our faith somewhere. Our Second Lesson from Hebrews 11 says that faith is “The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In his down-home Bible paraphrase *The Cottonpatch Gospels*, Clarence Jordan puts it like this: “Faith is.”

We do “bet on” lots of things in our lives. If the guy in line ahead of you gets his lottery ticket and tells you that that THIS one is *going to win*, you’d think “*OooKaay, buddy.*” There’s not much “assurance” in playing the lottery, only wishful thinking. And even if you actually *win* the jackpot, as we heard last week, nobody takes a U-Haul to the cemetery.

God assures us that if we bet our lives on the unseen reality of the promises of Jesus Christ, we get the gift of a hope that doesn’t quit. This biblical hope is *not merely* wishful thinking that ignores the realities, seen *or* unseen.

And *biblical hope* is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism may *in fact*, unlike wishful thinking, *see* the real difficulties of the world. It tries to hold onto something *like hope* in the face of these difficulties, but relies solely on one’s own resources: a steely character, the energy of an upbeat personality, the perspiration of gritty persistence, or practicing the focus-group-tested techniques of motivational speakers on late night TV.

The *hope* that God invites us to hold onto *takes in* the realities, but isn’t *done in* by them. Authentic biblical hope is rooted in *faith* that relies on *God’s promises*. We trust that, *for Jesus’ sake*, God will do for us what God has already done *in Jesus*. We can look for Easter life and joy breaking through the bleakness of whatever burden we are carrying.

In our first reading for today, Abram-- or Abraham, as he will be renamed --faced just such a difficult and dark time. He had amassed a fortune in the faraway land that God had led him to, but now Abraham and his wife Sarah were old and still childless. Didn’t God *promise* that their *own* heirs would be as impossible to count as the stars in the dark night sky! Hey *God!* How can there be heirs when there is no child?

Do you suppose that sometimes Abraham just got angry with God? Maybe *we* get angry too, at a God who makes these *great big promises*, and then leaves us wandering around and wondering, wrestling with our *own* versions of “What will you give me, for I *continue* childless?” What about all those promises of life and hope and healing? Is this the best You can do, God? Really??

Or maybe Abraham just went on with his life, gamely cutting the grand promises down to a *manageable* size. We might also join him, “making do” with our own, spliced-together plans, with perhaps barely a nod to God. Maybe, in his lowest moments, Abraham wondered: was he

being punished--for doing wrong, or maybe for just *not being right enough*? This “faith” thing, it’s not easy.

Maybe *we* find ourselves afraid to bet our lives on God’s unseen realities, afraid that God intended those amazing promises only for those who have never failed in their lives, those who have never put themselves first, those who *always* call on God for help and praise God no matter what happens-- the beautiful people, the successful or the popular people, the pious and patient and sweet-tempered people. Maybe God helps only those who have never gotten discouraged, those who have never been angry or arrogant or thoughtless or greedy. Maybe God simply *will not keep* the promises except for those who are somehow “*more worthy*.” The bullying conscience whispers *a little too loudly* what we all fear already: we just *don’t deserve anything* like those incredible promises that God says are *ours for the trusting*. Shamed by that voice, we may shrink back, feeling shut out of God’s life.

Whether because of *anger* or *shame*, we find ourselves afraid of God—not the “fear and love God” kind of reverence, but a terrified fear. This *fear* crowds out *faith*, for you cannot truly *trust* what you deeply *fear*. This may be why, so often in the Bible, the first words from God to us are “*fear not, do not be afraid*.” Faith disarms our fear, and here, today, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus is offering the *gift to lift* us out of this spiritual hole: “*Have no fear, little flock*.”

The words of Jesus are neither *wishful thinking*, nor even a resolute *optimism*. The reason we can dare to “*bet our lives on the unseen realities*,” it that God *WANTS to cut us in on the Divine Plan of Healing the Whole World*. God wants to give us what we couldn’t possibly earn. God says, just trust me.

Robert Farrar Capon in his book *The Astonished Heart: Reclaiming the Good News from the Lost-and-Found of Church History* gives the following illustration of faith: “Faith doesn’t do anything; it simply enables us to relate ourselves to *someone else* who has already done whatever needs doing. Imagine that I am in the hospital, in traction, with casts on both *arms* and both *legs*. And imagine further that every time you visit me, I carry on despairingly about the fact that my house, in my absence, is falling apart; the paint is peeling, the sills are rotting, the roof is blowing away in the wind.

But then imagine that one day, after a considerable interval, you come to me and say, ‘*Robert, I have just paid off the contractor I engaged to repair your house. It’s all fixed--a gift from me to you*.’ What are my choices in the face of such good news? I cannot know that you have fixed my house for me. I can only *disbelieve* you or *believe* you. If I disbelieve you, I go on being a miserable bore. But if I believe you -- if I trust your word that you have done the job for me--I have my first good day in a long while.

Capon goes on: “Look at it another way. Suppose I had decided, while staring at the hospital ceiling, that if only I could work up enough faith, you would undertake to repair my house. And suppose further that I had *grunted and groaned* through every waking hour trying to get my faith meter up to red hot. What good would that have done unless *you* had decided, as a gift to me in response to no activity on my part whatsoever, to do the job for me? . . . Faith is not a gadget by which I can work wonders. It is just *trust* in a person who actually *can* work them--and who has promised me he already has.” pp. 40-41



God makes good on the promises, but often not as we expect. Our lives will call for us to be patiently faithful, prayerfully practicing our faith, watching for signs of the Spirit present and working among us. God invites us to trust and not be afraid or anxious, as we *live into* our hope even when we can't see how it will turn out.

Thomas Merton, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Trappist monk, wrote this remarkable prayer about living in faith. "My Lord God, *I have no idea where I am going*. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really *know myself*, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am *actually* doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you *does in fact please* you, and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road *though I may know nothing about it*. Therefore, I will trust you always. Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, *I will not fear*, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my peril alone."

We know that our *ultimate* hope does not depend on what we can see and control. We can bet our lives on spiritual realities uncertain and unseen, knowing that God wants to be at work in and through us and that, in the midst of it all, God has promised that *nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus*.

Even in the midst of troubling times, God says to us, "*Fear not--I want to give you the kingdom!*" So, we ready ourselves for action: carrying the lamp of God's promises, and clothed in the Spirit's gifts--the first of which is faith, *the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. You can bet your life on those unseen realities. And for this, we give thanks to God.

There is a short story about a man who had, magically, gotten a copy of the New York Times, dated a year in advance. He was overjoyed--he thought he could make a killing—knowing what stocks to buy and sell, what lottery numbers he might plan on playing----until he saw, on the obituary page, his own death notice.

Have you heard that saying: “He who dies with the most toys, wins?” In today’s lessons we are warned that the one who “dies with the most toys” is, well, still *dead*. Trusting in *stuff* to give security is actually a foolish game plan. We are called, instead, to treasure the promise of God’s loving care.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus has been teaching, and the young man in the story goes to him, asking for help in sorting out his inheritance -- which, then as now, can be difficult. Jesus side-steps the presenting issue and cuts right to the chase. “Watch out! Be on your guard against greed; a person’s *life* isn’t about having an abundance of possessions.” And then he tells a chilling story about misplaced trust and misdirected devotion.

The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy told a similar story about another farmer who was told he could have all the ground he could walk around from sunup to sundown on a single day. He started eagerly at dawn. He saw a fertile field, and he wanted that; then a woods, and a lake, and another field and so on. Soon he was running, coveting for himself every attractive piece of land he saw. The sun began to set. He was exhausted, but kept pushing to make it back to the finish line. At last, gasping what would be his dying breath, he dropped over the finish line just as the sun dropped below the horizon. All the ground he needed *then* was about six feet long and three feet wide. His greed had cost him his life: “*This night your soul shall be required of you.*”

There was the funeral of a famously wealthy woman in New York some time ago. Afterward, a reporter called the woman’s accountant. “How much did she leave behind?” the reporter probed. The accountant thought for a moment and then replied, “*All of it.*” You never ever see a U-Haul hitched to a hearse.

God does not want our possessions to “*possess*” us. As today’s world-wearied first lesson from Ecclesiastes tells us, (in the verse that follows what we heard today) only if we keep *God* as the center of our lives can we “*eat, drink, and enjoy our labors, as a gift from the hand of God.*” Then what we truly need (not just what we *think* we *must* have) will be “added unto us.”

Does the person who “dies with the most toys” -- or the biggest barns, or the baddest car, or the fattest bank account, or the most social media followers – does that person really “*win*?” Our lessons today tell us God’s answer: *NO!*

The second lesson today reminds us that trusting in our stuff is setting up a false god. Sometimes our idolatry comes in coveting—being *possessed* by striving after what

someone else has or needs, or it may show itself in simple greed--the passion to *gather up goods for oneself*, no matter what the cost to others or one's own spiritual health.

It is not bad to *have* money. Money *in itself* isn't the real problem. Our attitude toward our possessions is at the heart of the matter. The problem in the parable was that the *man trusted in his overflowing barns*. "Soul, you've got it made in the shade," and so for him, God has been *at best* demoted to *supporting actor* in this drama, or left out of the script entirely. If we follow the wisdom of the world and hang our hearts on our stuff – intent on having and holding onto more and more for ourselves, then Jesus warns that we will find ourselves shut off from God, from others, and from our own best self.

This story of Jesus speaks to us, no matter *how much* money or how many toys or stock options or off-shore accounts we have, because it talks about our *attitude* toward material goods, not how *much* or how *little* we have. It affects all of us, because *death* mocks all our efforts to secure our future by relying on bigger bank accounts or fancier security fences. We can be cut down at any moment-- a simple trip to the grocery store, or gathering to watch a holiday parade, or being swept away by the rushing floodwaters. At the moment of death, material wealth is shown to be a vain and empty "*striving after the wind*."

The author of the book *Gods, Graves and Scholars* has written about the excavation of the ancient city of Pompeii in Italy, which was completely buried in the sudden and catastrophic lava flow from Mt. Vesuvius. "The first body uncovered was a skeleton, with gold and silver coins that rolled out of both hands; hands still seeking, it seemed, to clutch them fast."

The drive to gather money can take over while we are *still living*: our possessions can indeed possess us. Howard Hughes died a billionaire, but he had lived for a long time *alone and unloved*, crazy, utterly isolated and paranoid that someone would come and take his money away. One hopes that the person who won the billion-dollar lottery this week will find a way to be blest and be a blessing with the winnings.

It is sheer "*blowing in the wind*" vanity to use God-given talents only for self-protection and self-promotion. God calls us to a radically *new way of life*, as we follow our Lord. Jesus refused to become entangled in the legal wrangling about division of property; he is following another agenda, a focused itinerary of *risky love* and *radical service*. He is *on his way to Jerusalem*, on the road to the cross. He calls us back to spiritual home base; he challenges us to hang our hearts on God's humble hook.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to overcome the vain emptiness spelled out in Ecclesiastes. The enemies of Jesus thought that they had the last word, after a sham trial and a shameful execution, nailed up on a cross—profound *emptiness* surely evident to everyone. *Except* that the cross-borne power of *God's love* for us turned out to be *anything but empty*. And that began to be surprisingly evident on Easter, as we encounter the risen Jesus: the gift of his new life which will go with us, wherever our paths take us.

How do we deal with the emptiness and futility which comes out of idolizing material wealth? Each day, we can turn again to a trustworthy giver of good gifts; turn our hearts over to the God who *forgives us our false trust*, and makes us “rich toward God.”

Being “Rich towards God” is not simply about being really pious, or having “spiritual” feelings that just discount the material world. Being “Rich toward God” includes being accountable for how we handle our resources. We answer to the God who loves the whole creation, and calls on us to *use* the gifts we have been given to help care for the world and those who live in it, putting God’s love into action with wisdom and compassion.

When we get asked, “who are you?” we often answer with a description of *what we get paid for* doing, or, if we have retired, we have to figure out *how* we’re going to answer that question. When we ask, “How much is a person worth?” our world is most likely expecting an answer about assets and property deeds and stock portfolios. But it is altogether different when God asks those questions.

No, when God asks the questions, “*who are you*” and “*how much are you worth?*” nobody’s employer or teacher or banker or accountant can answer them. In the person of Jesus Christ, God has given us an answer to those questions. God sees the worth of a person through the lens of that person’s reliance on Jesus, and God rejoices in the fruit that such a faith produces in their lives: fruit of concern for others, love toward God, generosity toward those in need, patience in our daily tasks, the willingness to take up our cross and risk our own lives for the sake of furthering God’s peace and justice here.

Who are you? *God’s own beloved child*. How much are you worth? *Enough to die on a cross to save you*. Enough to send the Spirit to *empower* us wherever we are called to go. Thanks be to God, whose love for us makes us free us to love others and receive the love from others that fills us and makes us whole.

The comedian W. C. Fields was not exactly known for his religious piety. So, it was a surprise when he was caught reading the Bible on a movie set. When asked about it, he replied, “I’m looking for loopholes.” People will go a long time without a lot of things, but really, just try going a single day without a *rationalization*. Truth is, we *all* look for loopholes sometimes. When we try to defend the rightness of our own opinions and actions instead of trusting God to make our lives whole and healed, we can end up feeling like we have to look for loopholes in the Law.

Today’s Gospel lesson includes the familiar parable we call “The Good Samaritan.” It’s a story Jesus tells an expert in the religious laws of Moses who has come to put him to the test. “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus answers the question with another question. “*You tell me, what does the law say?*” “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.” Right! (*The man knows his catechism.*) Jesus goes on: “*Do this and you shall live.*” . . . . And then Jesus waits for the other shoe to drop. *He’s testing the tester now.*

*Love God, and love your neighbor.* Sounds so easy, but Jesus knows better *and* I think at some level, so does his questioner. The legalist still wants to make things right for himself through keeping the law well enough. Yet, there’s a problem. If he’s gonna buy into a “*do-it-yourself*” salvation, he’s gonna need to put up *walls* around his loving – and come up with some *loopholes*. So, he asks: “*And just who is my neighbor?*”

Now, *I think* he is *really* asking Jesus: “Who is *NOT* my neighbor? Who am I allowed to ignore or to neglect, or perhaps even encouraged to hate? What is the *manageable minimum* that I need to do to keep God’s law of love? Who am I allowed to *cross the road to avoid?*”

The lawyer has asked Jesus a rather strange question: “What must I **DO** to **INHERIT** eternal life?” He doesn’t know the good news that God has, through Jesus, *already* written us into the will. We don’t *have to* do anything to make ourselves *good enough* to earn God’s love. That’s good news; but *before* we can get to the good news, we stumble over the bad news: we *can’t* make *ourselves* good enough. So, the other shoe drops: the legalist tries to justify himself. “*Who is my neighbor?*” Jesus answers, as he so often does, with a story.

The road from Jerusalem down to Jericho was a notoriously dangerous, desolate place. Steep and winding, it was perfect for an ambush. Maybe the *priest* and *Levite* blamed him for traveling alone on that dangerous road, as they crossed the road to the other side. And if the bloodied man at the side of the road was actually dead and the priest had touched the body, he would have been rendered ritually unclean for a time, unable to serve in the Temple if called on. Or maybe it was a set-up, and *they* would become the targets. Even if it *was* a legitimate need, responding would take a lot of time and money.

Although the first two respectable citizens passed by the battered man, there came a traveler who did *not* pass him by, but who stopped to help him. We have heard the phrase “*Good Samaritan*” so often now that it has lost its original punch. But it isn’t likely that *any* Samaritan would *ever* be called good by a Jew in Jesus’ day. Samaritans were entrenched enemies of Jews, not generally seen as “neighbors” and certainly not the likely hero of any stories, either.

The Samaritans were descendants of Israelites left behind in the Northern Kingdom after the Assyrian Empire deported the leading families in 722 B.C.E. Those who remained had intermarried with the foreigners who were brought in to colonize the land, and although Samaritans still followed the law of Moses, they built their own temple on Mount Gerizim near the town of Shechem. Remember that, at a well in Samaria, Jesus spoke with a woman about *where* one should worship. This competing Samaritan temple and surrounding city were destroyed by a group of zealous Jews a little more than 100 years before Jesus. Samaritans lived in the neighborhood of Judea, but Jews and Samaritans certainly didn’t consider each other “*neighbors*.”

The man from Samaria might *himself* have been quite the target for robbers; he has a beast and enough money to pay the innkeeper two days wages to continue the care of the injured man, and promise to cover any further costs. Yet, he stops to help, in hostile territory, and shows compassion. This surprising Samaritan hero stops to take care of the injured man, using wine to disinfect, and oil as a salve.

Jesus tells the tester: “*Go, and make a habit of acting with compassion, day by day.*” We are included in that call, challenged by Jesus to look for ways to reach out in love to neighbors who are crying out in need. What neighbor does God want me to see and reach out to respond to? How can we be God’s healing love in such a world? These are challenging and heart-wrenching questions in a world where neighborliness seems too often to be languishing in the loopholes.

It’s been said that there are three kinds of people: those who beat people up, those who pass people up and those who help people up. We *like* to think of ourselves as helpers, but sometimes we discover that isn’t how things turn out. We can better answer the question “*who is my neighbor*” when we open ourselves to seeing “*who needs my compassion*?” “*What keeps me from loving others* as I have received God’s love?” What loopholes do *I* look for?

While he was busy looking for loopholes, the lawyer was missing the healing wine and oil of Jesus. While he was building defensive walls, he was shutting out the amazing love of God that was ready to reach out to him. Freedom from the need to look for loopholes comes from the powerful good news of God’s forgiveness. God’s loving grace breaks down our many types of walls – *barbed-wire barriers* of fear, hate, prejudice, cruelty and misunderstanding that keep us from seeing “*the other*” as our neighbor and responding accordingly.

It was not likely that most Jews at that time would even say the word *Samaritan* without sneering. Samaritan. *Euww!* The victim lying by the side of the road – presumably Jewish -- has to accept help from a person he would probably have rejected under less dire circumstances. Who is it that, if you were dying on the side of the road, you would be most upset to see there to rescue you? Who might your unsettling neighbor be?

A youth group studying this parable was asked to write down the basic meaning. One young man wrote, “*This story means that when I am in trouble, my friends should come and help me out.*” He got it all backwards. When your *enemy* is in trouble, then you should offer the help. He *also* missed the point of the “other-ness,” the *Samaritan-ness* of the helper. It was his friends who the young man figured would be the ones helping him. That’s just what DIDN’T happen in the parable.

The parable of the Good Samaritan doesn’t simply lay down another law about being “*a good neighbor.*” It points *beyond* that to what God is doing in Jesus to love and heal the world, and how we can be part of *that*. This parable isn’t *just* a message telling us to “be kind to those we hate”--*though it does say that--* it’s a reminder that it may *well* be the one we despise who helps and heals us, a moment of amazing and transforming grace, a down payment on God’s “new creation” through the cross.

When God’s love fills our hearts and God’s Spirit leads our lives, we become more free to respond to the needs around us. We can *dismantle our fear-fueled walls*. Drawing on the love we have received from the crucified and risen Jesus, we can begin to live out the call to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” Compassion and forgiveness are more possible when you *see* and accept what you and your enemy share, *the image of God*. Remember the words of wisdom from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: “*Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding a deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*”

May God open our eyes, our hands and our hearts to *trust* God’s love more fully, and free us to *share* it more openly and effectively with our neighbor. The cross of Christ frees us to love and be loved. We can let go of looking for loopholes. We can dare to forgive and be forgiven, to speak the truth in love, to risk the unknown, to serve and be served. Thanks be to God.

On this Fourth of July weekend, the roads and airports are full of people. It's travel season. Traveling means packing, and we know what a job *that* can be. In the mid-'80s, I traveled with a seminary group on a 3-week study trip in Asia. Most of us brought way more stuff than we needed, and in time we got very tired of lugging it around. But not Professor Bob Bertram. He was a real packing ace who carried a briefcase and a medium-sized duffel bag. He knew how to travel light. He never wearied from carrying *his* baggage—though he did do a lot of laundry in the sink.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is telling his advance teams to travel light. On his way to Jerusalem, the city where a cross will await him, Jesus sends 70 of his followers on ahead of him in pairs, each team to a different town where Jesus was hoping to visit. Travel light, says Jesus; on this trip you won't be relying on what you can pull out of your own bag. It's easy to get bogged down with our own "baggage" as we are sent out to be God's love for our neighbors. God wants to equip us so we have what we need, and leave behind what will get in the way.

Jesus doesn't sound like a very persuasive travel agent. "*I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.*" Wasn't it Woody Allen who said something like, "*The wolf will lie down with the lamb --- but the lamb won't get much sleep!*" I wonder if those followers of Jesus were having second thoughts about the journeys that Jesus was sending them on.

In today's *second* lesson, St. Paul has some words to the Galatian Christians about burdens and baggage. As they wrestled with how to share the good news of God's love in a diverse and changing context, Paul encourages them to carry with them *only* those things that truly matter to their identity as disciples of Jesus. He gives them guidance about what will help them to not "*grow weary in doing what is right.*" Bear one another's burdens; don't get caught up in destructive reactions, defensive nit-picky and self-serving legalism. Being *God's people* is about *God's agenda*, not *our own*.

We carry a lot of baggage that wearies us in our hearts and in our heads. What do we need to leave behind in order to travel light? We need to leave worrying behind. My mother once gave me a pad of notepaper with two little angels on each page. At the top it said "*Angels Don't Worry. They Believe,*" but the rest of the page had lines *for making "to do" lists*. Worrying can come along with all those lists. "Do I have everything that I need? Will I *be* everything I need to be? Will there be enough money? Will there be enough people?" Worrying can really bog you down.

Leave envy behind; it is *way too heavy* to carry around. In Christ, we are freed to put old grudges out with the trash. Declutter all those things that we think we *need* to cling to, layers of fearful self-protection and smug self-justification or just plain-old selfishness.



St. Paul recognizes *legalism* as excess baggage. Folks who think they have God all mapped out, with all the rules and regulations necessary to “*get right with God*” – often are good at applying the law *more harshly* toward others than toward themselves. Legalists focus on their own strengths and other people's weaknesses, zeroing in on the failings of others, since it makes them seem *better* in comparison. St. Paul says we should carry our own load as we are given the strength to do it, and each other's load when they need the help. *Bear one another's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.* Leave the legalism behind. Travel light.

I lived for a year in Omaha, working as a chaplain in a hospital where dealing with *uncertainty, pain, and even tragedy* would often fill my day. On my day off, sometimes I would travel light and put my apartment key in my pocket and just enough change for a single dip Baskins Robbins cone—to enjoy after I walked in a nearby city park with a lovely rose garden. This was fine for an afternoon, but it requires much more to live our *whole lives* traveling light, placing our trust in God. Traveling light means we will need to trust the hospitality of others, and offer hospitality as though you were serving Jesus Christ himself--because you are.

*What's in your suitcase?* Don't carry around baggage that wears you out and diverts your focus from your purpose. God's love and forgiveness allows us to leave the burdens behind. We cannot rely on our own resources to protect us and provide for us on this journey of the Spirit. Trust the message, and not your *stuff*. Trust what God gives and look for what *God* is doing--new life that comes on the Easter side of the cross of Jesus.

Here's another thing to know that will help keep us from becoming weary. We could be pretty spooked by the wolves, as we little lambs venture out, vulnerable, on the journey of God's mission. We have seeds of hope and love to plant, but *it's God's harvest*. God is at work in the world and we are called to be a part of it. God works in the world through secular institutions like government, the economy, schools and such, when these structures – however they are set up – serve to care effectively for the needs of people and the creation. It is not the same as the saving work of the Gospel, the message that the church is called to live and share, but it is a part of how God the Creator preserves the Creation. We need to remember that wherever we are headed, *God is already there*, even if we do not easily see it. There's freedom in that. Just keep on being faithful to the crucified and risen Jesus. Extend the invitation to follow Jesus by what you say and do. God's Spirit gives that message its power; and the Spirit is in charge of the response.

I've talked about some of the baggage we need to leave behind. What do we need to pack into our spiritual bag? Jesus tells us to “*Love others as I have loved you.*” Pack forgiveness (after all, you need some *laundry detergent* if you are going to live out of a duffle bag), pack honesty, make room for patience and humility; put faith into your spiritual duffle bag. When we notice and rejoice in what God has done on our journey, rather simply trusting what *we* are able to accomplish on our own, then we will be less likely to fall into “*compassion fatigue.*” Encouraging each other to trust God's faithfulness, we will be more able to “*not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up.*”

DON'T GIVE UP: I am encouraged by a song, written by Holly Near: "Let us be like drops of water, falling on the stone. Dropping, splashing, dispersing in air, weaker than the stone, by far; but be aware, that, as time goes by, the rock will wear away. And the water comes again."

We go out, splashed in the water of Baptism, marked with the cross of Christ, like lambs in the midst of wolves. What we carry is *not* an armload of statistics, not the latest surefire strategy, not dazzling charismatic personalities or super computers with quick and easy answers; not even supermajorities and the power of the sword.

What we have is the Word of God, the proclamation that God will care for us like a loving mother for her infant. We have the promise that Jesus will be here *with* us and *for* us, as we have seen in his death and resurrection. We are *sent people*, called to go out and witness to our Lord. Jesus gives us help in doing that--*travel light, don't go alone, keep your focus on the task*. Always remember that you are a *beloved child of God*. Then you will not *grow weary in doing what is right*.

In Matthew chapter 11, Jesus promises: "*Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my load is light.*" Now that's a spiritual holy-day, true freedom for living.

The 70 advance messengers return, amazed at the signs of the defeat of Satan. They could have gotten bogged down in boasting. These powerful things they have done are cause for rejoicing, not because they can boast of their own amazing new powers, *but* because powers hostile to God's purposes will *not* be able to win out. Trusting this promise can give us confidence. We are heirs of eternal life, written into God's eternal will. Do not boast in what you have done, or lose heart because of what you haven't done, but find your glory in the cross alone and the hope of a new creation *already* breaking through. *Everything else is excess baggage*.

Proper 8C Galatians 5:1, 13-25

The flags are appearing, the firecrackers are beginning to pop, and the stores are featuring their holiday specials. All around us, preparations are being made to celebrate the Fourth of July, the birthday of our country, commemorating the Declaration that our nation would be free and no longer be subject to the King of England.

In today's second lesson, the Apostle Paul sounds like he might fit right in with these festivities: *"For freedom Christ has set us free!"* Shades of Patrick Henry: *"Give me liberty or give me death!"* Or maybe Thomas Jefferson: *"We solemnly publish and declare that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES."* It sounds like St. Paul is a true American two thousand years before his time. *And yet. ...* And yet if we read carefully what Paul has to say in the next verses of Chapter 5, we see that *St. Paul's freedom isn't really about politics*. What is this *"freedom"* that we have as disciples of Jesus?

Back in the sixties and seventies, so-called *"free love"* was all the rage in some parts of the popular culture. *"Do your own thing; if it feels good, do it: no rules, no regrets."* St. Paul's freedom is not about such a self-indulgent, even narcissistic, *"free love."* He's not even talking about the ideals of political freedom and personal rights. For St. Paul, true freedom comes from the *"free love"* that *we have received as a gift from God*. Disciples of Jesus do not subscribe to the world's version of *"free love;"* we celebrate our *"freed love"* that we are putting into action when we serve our neighbor in the name of Jesus.

St. Paul writes, *"If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law."* That can sound a lot like *"no rules, no regrets."* *"Don't submit to a yoke of slavery. You were called to freedom!"* So, is this *"I can do what I want, and nobody can tell me any different?"* No accountability? Sounds frankly like a formula for chaos or disaster – especially because, *well, you know, all those other people just won't do what they are supposed to.*

So, what are we to make of this? As the followers of Jesus Christ, we have good news to offer the world: we have *"freed love"* to share, love that we have received because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus tells us that *"love of God and love of neighbor is the sum of the whole law."* St. Paul says *"through love become slaves to one another."* Through love freed up from the need to justify one's life, freed from the compulsion to fill the aching *hole in the soul* with one busy project or consuming conquest after another. Love freed from the weight of shame and guilt, nagging regrets and cruel recriminations; love freed to love God, to love others, and to begin to love ourselves a bit more like *God* loves us. Love freed from the heavy yoke of the Law's accusations. Sounds pretty wonderful, right?

Hmm. Or does it? When you look at it more closely, it can be very unsettling. Many centuries ago, St. Augustine said a truly shocking thing: “*love and do what you will.*” Now St. Augustine lived in a time of staggering, frightening change. After a thousand years, the Roman Empire was collapsing, the barbarians were camped out at the gates. If anything, in such a time you’d think he would be anxious to circle the wagons, put up the walls, and whip everyone into line. *But no*: St. Augustine had been reading St. Paul, and so he says, “*Love and do what you will.*” The objections echo down through the centuries: *shocking, dangerous, irreligious and irresponsible!* The Gospel is and always has been radical stuff.

In our Gospel, we heard “*Let the dead bury their dead. Follow me.*” It was shocking when Jesus said it, even as he was making his way to Jerusalem where his own shocking death on a cross awaited him. “*If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the Law:*” it was shocking when the old Pharisee Paul said it. “*Love and do what you will:*” it was scandalous when Augustine said it, and when Luther said “*you are saved by God’s free gift of grace, made your own through faith in Jesus-- your good works don’t get you into heaven,*” it split the Church and launched the Reformation.

It’s so easy to get it wrong. We glibly confess that we live by the grace of God, but we secretly slip in our *own version* of what God says. We deceive ourselves into believing that the Gospel means we are now *free to secure our salvation through living by the law* closely enough. The freedom that Christ gives is freedom *from playing any foolhardy games* about the holiness of our life. It can free us *from* judging others when they fall short of our expectations for them. It even frees us to let go of our lingering judgments of *our own* failures which deny us the healing, transforming power of God’s forgiveness.

St. Paul does warn the people who decide *not to bother with God’s law at all*. The end result of behavior that abuses freedom is really *not freedom* at all. The “sin” that the Law uncovers isn’t simply “keeping or breaking rules or laws.” Sin is more profound than that. It turns us in on ourselves, and this cuts ourselves off from God. And, cut off from the true God, we make for ourselves little gods instead: *status, wealth, acceptance, security, getting for ourselves the biggest and the best, winning no matter what the cost.*

Eugene Peterson’s Bible paraphrase “*The Message*” puts verses Galatians 5: 19-21 into modern language:

“It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. This isn’t the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God’s kingdom.”

Whether people are striving to make their lives right with God through keeping the rules, or just trying to ignore God altogether, the Gospel offers us another way, a way that promises freedom from having to deceive ourselves that we can measure up and redeem our lives through our own efforts. God's love gives us freedom *for* others, not freedom *from* others. Luther put it this way: "*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*"

Paul wrote "*Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love becomes slaves to one another.*" A fellow named Horace Wood said it like this: "Before Christ, a person loves *things* and *uses* people. After Christ, that person loves *people* and *uses* things." *Loving the neighbor is how a freed child of God lives out the law of God.*

"*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*" This freedom is not *freedom from* life's burdens, not *freedom from* human limitations and pains. It is the freedom to move toward loving others as God has loved us. The freedom to make commitments and to take risks, the freedom to strive for justice for all people, the freedom to forgive and be forgiven, the freedom even to falter or fail, and learn and grow together from it, unashamed.

The Holy Spirit rooted within us bears fruit. Where there is love, there the Spirit of the Lord has been working; where there is joy, there the Spirit has been at work; where there is peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, there is evidence of God's Spirit leading us where God would have us go. *Slave of none, and servant of all.* The cross of Christ has freed us to put love into action.

"*If we have our true life through the action of the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.*" God, give us courage to trust your promises and act on them. Give us the wisdom to follow our crucified and risen Lord in lives of loving discipleship, serving our neighbor and honoring our Lord.

Today is *Juneteenth*, which observes the day when slaves in Galveston, Texas, were finally informed of their freedom on June 19, 1865 — two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and about two months after the end of the Civil War. This was a milestone in moving past the divisions and disruptions in our nation, but we still have work to do in our own day.

We mourn the murder of 19 children and two teachers at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. In Buffalo NY, a white man targeted and killed 10 Black people at a supermarket. The talking heads talk past each other about how to respond, with *fury or dismay or bewilderment*, painfully spotlighting the jagged rips in the social fabric of our country.

Jesus *names* the forces of evil and *frees* those bound by them. We struggle to name the forces that drive acts of unspeakable violence and betrayal, striving to comprehend. Even while some ramp up the language of fear and reinforce the walls of protection, others respond by fighting hatred with courageous acts of love, as the relatives of the murdered Emanuel Nine did when they spoke words of *personal pain and forgiveness* to the shooter. This week marks the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that Charleston massacre.

ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton released a statement in response to that event. She wrote: “*We live in an increasingly divided and polarized society. Too often we sort ourselves into like-minded groups and sort others out. It is a short distance from division to demonization.*”

What resources can we draw on for faithful living in a polarized world? St. Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia shows us that God’s people have struggled with deep and difficult divisions throughout the long history of the church, and it provides guidance for working out how we live together faithfully with our differences now.

In the early years, to be a Christian was to be a *Jew* who followed Jesus as Messiah. But soon, God’s promise of salvation was also extended to non-Jews. St. Paul received the call to share the Gospel with these Greek Gentiles. Jewish Christians treasured their *scriptures* which had for centuries told them what God wanted. But, what about the *Gentile* Christians? The issue that rocked that first generation in the church was this: “*Is it necessary to first become a Jew in order to be a Christian?*”

St. Paul was distressed that *Gentile* believers in Galatia were being taught that they must adopt *Jewish* Law, including circumcision, to be fully included among the followers of Christ. Paul goes back to basics: In the first verses of Chapter 3, he reminds them that they received the Holy Spirit by *trusting* the Good News they had heard about Christ crucified and risen. This Gospel Good News tells us God graciously forgives and welcomes us for the sake of Jesus; a promise received through faith, through trusting, not earned by our activity.

Throughout the generations, there remains the question: does God give us our identity in Christ through our baptism, or do we need *more* than that to be acceptable in God's family? What *is* it that tells us who we *truly* are? *It is not* the customs we follow, not the color of our skin, not our place in society, not being gay or straight, single or married, rich or poor, immigrant or native born, Democrat or Republican. *Who we are* as disciples of Jesus is not determined by which hymns or songs we like to sing or how we like to sing them. What gives us our identity as the children of God is not our denomination or any litmus test on a social issue or even a theological debate. St. Paul tells us: "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" So, therefore, "*there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female---you are one in Christ Jesus.*" "*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.*" On Father's Day when we honor our earthly fathers, we remember that all of us are also beloved children of a *heavenly* Father. We may divide people into "*us*" and "*the other.*" God does not.

We find our *core* identity and worth in our relationship with our brother Jesus Christ. Children of God brought together in Christ, the *Holy Spirit establishes and sustains* our connectedness. Differences in ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status do not magically disappear, of course: unity does not mean *uniformity*. St. Paul is clear that our *varied* gifts make the community in Christ *more effective* in living out our faith. Yet, our identity is not determined by these various identifications. Paul reminds us that whatever human categories may *describe* us, they do not ultimately *define* us.

But just how do *we* live as the children of God in such a way that honors God's will? Just as the first generations of the church struggled with including the Gentiles, the Body of Christ in *our* generation struggles with this question as it applies to various aspects of human sexuality. Back in the early 70's, the struggle was about leadership roles for women in the church. Synod Assembly this year included a belated celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lutherans ordaining women in this country. In 1974, when I went to St. Louis to go to seminary, most of the students and professors of Concordia Seminary there had, just a few months earlier, walked off the campus in the midst of the Missouri Synod Lutheran struggles over (among other issues) how to interpret Scripture.

This "Seminary-in-Exile" was at that time still officially Missouri Synod, and, although they had admitted a few women into the ministry degree program, they weren't at all sure what they would do beyond that. In 1970, other Lutherans in America had approved ordaining women, but not the folks I was with. The interpretation of today's reading from Galatians chapter 3 – *no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female* -- was hotly debated in those days. Some faithful people insisted that it should be taken in a "spiritualized" sense *only*, and did not apply to how we actually structured our lives together. They claimed that God's Law clearly said women must be silent and subservient. Ordination of women – and in some cases, voting in congregational meetings or even teaching adult males – was not to be allowed.

The specifics may change, but the struggle to know how to be faithful to God continues in each new place and time. The Holy Spirit has been with the people of God in the past, and we have the promise that the Spirit will continue to work among us.

We trust that, for the sake of Christ, we are forgiven and reconciled to God. *To add to that gospel is to take away from it.* God's gift doesn't depend on any of those other things that we use to set ourselves apart: our job, our gender, our race, our achievements, our family, our nationality.

Plenty of things can happen to threaten those things by which we are tempted to identify ourselves. We can lose friends, our employment, our spouse can bail out of the marriage, children grow up and leave, our health fails and we cannot do what we had prided ourselves on. We can lose our political power, or find that peace can't be imposed. We cannot insulate ourselves from a growing sense of anxiety or from the need to wrestle with the realities of violence around us. But remembering that our true identity is in Christ, we will be freed to let God work through us, joining our efforts with the whole range of people who share the identity of "child of God."

This does not mean that "anything goes." Paul has plenty to say about how we are to live out our freedom in Christ, serving others rather than our own self-centered aims. What does God want us to "grow into" as Christians? Bishop Eaton reminds us of how we get past demonization, and dive into what God is doing in this world. *"We must speak peace and reconciliation into the cacophony of hatred and division. We must live the truth that all people are created in God's image."* And from a traditional rabbinic commentary on Micah 6:8. *"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."*

A wise Christian was questioned by a fellow member who was trying to figure out whether she was "conservative" or "liberal." Refusing to be labeled, she responded by saying simply, *"I am a child of God. That's the only thing that really matters."*

I am a child of God. You are beloved children of God, baptized into the body of Christ, brought together and blessed with diverse gifts to share with a hurting world. This comes not because of what you can accomplish, or how you compare with anybody else. We know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Share God's good news, showing and sharing what God has done for you. *That's the only thing that really matters.*



June 12, 2022

Holy Trinity C

A little girl was busily drawing with her crayons. Her Sunday school teacher asked her what she was drawing. "I am drawing a picture of God," she said. Her teacher replied, "*But my dear, nobody knows what God looks like.*" To which the little girl replied -- without stopping her strokes, "*They will when I am finished.*"

We can't draw a picture of God, and we can't really nail down a definition of God, although that hasn't stopped folks from trying. We say "God in three persons." In Latin, the word "*persona*" refers to the masks that actors wore when they assumed a role on the stage. One God, whom we encounter in three roles? I think every preacher feels some need to collect images that might help us begin to get a clearer sense of the Trinity. Like ice, liquid water and steam -- each one a form of water. Or maybe like the Mercedes Benz symbol--the circle symbolizing the unity, and each of the three arms a way that we encounter God. But finally, no attempt at explanation is adequate. Today the Church celebrates the mystery of divine love, not a theological puzzle. Today we take time to worship our mysterious and amazing God--one God whom we meet in three "faces": God the Creator, Jesus of Nazareth, and the Holy Spirit.

The familiar greeting near the beginning of our worship service is a passage from Scripture that helped the early Church to spell out its teaching about the Trinity. *The GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ, the LOVE of God, and the COMMUNION of the Holy Spirit be with you all.* Those are words of connectedness. It's about our relationship with God, not our ideas about doctrine.

Holy Trinity is the last Festival in a season of church festivals that *began* in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Trinity Sunday leads into the long "green" season of the church year—all those "Sundays after Pentecost,"--"*ordinary time*" as it is sometimes called. Although in this case "ordinary" actually refers to the ordinal numbering of all the "*Sundays after Pentecost,*" still "God in three persons, blessed Trinity" can help us appreciate and celebrate God's resources for living in our ordinary day-to-day times.

The Old Testament lesson is a poem to Wisdom, described here as a woman. This *Wisdom of God* does not present a dreary collection of "*do's and don'ts.*" It encourages an awareness of the ongoing activity of a loving God, creating and joyously continuing to bless the world, and calling *us* to join in that creativity. This connects us to the Creator God, Source of all Life, the first person of the Trinity.

The Book of Proverbs tells us that Lady Wisdom prepares a banquet. She seeks out those who are chasing after their own selfish purposes. Although they pay no attention to God, the God's Wisdom searches them out, as a shepherd searches for the lost sheep, as a woman sweeps the house looking for her lost coin, as Jesus seeks us even when we have wandered away. Lady Wisdom enacts the grace of God, inviting all to the banquet of God's grace.

Wisdom rejoices in the inhabited world. She echoes the same word of blessing that God spoke over the creation in Genesis. *Tov, tov*--good, delightful. God delights in creation. In God's eyes, no one and no time is *simply ordinary*: every moment is full of *potential* for receiving and sharing God's love. And every moment, God's Spirit within us calls us together to *encounter, celebrate and share* God's love for the world, to respond out of God's longing for the healing of a grievously wounded Creation through the work of Jesus in us and through us.

And, here's a most amazing promise: *God delights in us*. Psalm 8 expresses awe over God's relationship with us mortals: "*You have made humans but little lower than the angels; you adorn them with glory and honor; you give them mastery over the works of your hands, you put all things under their feet; all sheep and oxen, even the wild beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.*"

We are a crucial part of the Creator's world. God delights in us and in our potential. We have each been given a special purpose, a unique calling. Created in God's image, we are co-creators with God, so we are also given the on-going holy work of loving the world and caring for it so that future generations also can be nurtured by its goodness, to the glory of God.

So, our amazing God delights in the Creation, and God invites us to share in that delight. The book, and then the movie, by Alice Walker "*The Color Purple*" has a scene that really highlights this. It gives the book its name:

**Shug** says to her friend Celie: *More than anything else, God loves admiration.*

Celie: You saying God's vain?

**Shug**: Naw. Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it ticks God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.

Well, if we're so delightful to God, if we are loved so much that Jesus became one with us, why is it so *difficult* for us to know wholeness, peace, joy, and belonging? Why is there so much need, so much brokenness out there? One way of understanding this is to acknowledge that we humans have a way of forgetting that we're creatures. Creatures have limits, and God is OK with those limits. We are CREATURES in God's image, *but we are not God*. If we act *as if* we have no limits, *as if* WE were the center and the final measure of the universe, *as if* we answer to no one and nothing else, then we will become disconnected from God, from others, and from the environment. Denying our own limits, not owning our vulnerability, stuffing our feelings, we end up with scant resources for dealing with that *ultimate creaturely limit*, death. Pride, self-protection and self-justification get in the way, and unfortunately, tragically, you really don't have to go very far to see that in the world around us. It's everywhere.

How can the creatures be “re-created” in the midst of such brokenness? In our second lesson from Romans 5, the Apostle Paul calls on us to rejoice in the *hope* of sharing the glory that God wants to shine through the world and the creatures who inhabit that good Creation -- to rejoice *even in our sufferings* (as opposed to being ashamed of them, as if suffering meant that God had *rejected* us as unworthy). The gift of the Spirit promised by Jesus allows us to be held by hope no matter what. We HAVE the resources, the divine blessing of Grace in which we live, which was the theme of the Synod Assembly this past week. It has been GIVEN to us, poured into our hearts. We can’t drum it up on our own - -and we *don’t have to*. Trusting this promise of God’s welcoming presence surely is a *resource for living in ordinary times*, even when that is risky and difficult.

God the Creator loves us, as part of the beloved Creation. God also blesses and loves us through Jesus. The Holy Spirit “*brings all this to mind.*” In Jesus, *God* has gone with us into the most terrifyingly cruel suffering, even to the cross. God goes with us through death, and blesses us with the Easter promise of Life. God’s love is powerfully at work even *here and now*. As Jesus promised, the Spirit of God makes a home in us; guided and empowered by that Spirit, we can flesh out God’s love in action.

So, we are gifted to be creatures and co-creators, even as *we* are graced to be re-created in Jesus’ image through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are blessed to be God’s delight and we are invited to *delight with God* in the created world, in all its amazing variety and challenging complexity. Look with open hearts into the space and the energy between the electrons, and see, coming into focus, Lady Wisdom dancing for holy joy, and the Trinity dancing, an image that goes way back to the early church. We can delight because God delights in the grace of what we are becoming in Christ. We are invited to the banquet of reconciliation and renewed life. Come, let us worship, and welcome the blessing of our Triune God:

*The GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ, the LOVE of God, and the COMMUNION of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

In my hometown, there was a volunteer fire department. One Sunday morning at Bible Class, the sirens sounded and the husband of our organist put his coffee cup down, got up from his chair, found the nearest phone, dialed a number he knew by heart, and asked “*Where's the fire?*”

Fire. It is powerful; when it is out of control, we need the fire trucks, because fire can destroy and kill. It can kill, yet how would we live without it? Fire put to the *right* use also keeps us warm, cooks our food and lights our way. Fire is the energy in the stars, and *spiritual fire* empowers our life.

*Where's the fire* in today's story from Acts, Chapter 2? I suppose the followers of Jesus huddled together, doors shut to the outside world, had some fire in that upper room: perhaps in the hearth, although maybe the room was warm already, crowded with people. Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims from many places, speaking their many languages, to celebrate Pentecost, the Jewish harvest festival 50 days after Passover.

As they were waiting in the city, as Jesus had told them to do, suddenly, in fire and wind, the power that Jesus had promised to them came to the people gathered in that upper room. God's Spirit fired up the folks and no one *needed* to ask “*where's the fire?*” They could see it; and they heard the sound of a powerful wind. This was the jumpstart of something *new*. You might say it was *the birthday of the Church*.

Where's the fire today? We can fix our attention on the massive out-of-control wild fires, but forget all about the quiet, steady little pilot light on the water heater, or a comforting campfire in the cold, dark woods. The promised *fire* of the Holy Spirit comes in many different ways, but it is the same God who is present in it.

The Spirit's fire in each of us stirs up gifts for sharing God's love with our neighbor. Our aptitudes and interests, our relationships and opportunities—*our time, our talents, our treasure*—these are gifts that spark the Spirit's fire. We offer these gifts to God as we seek to follow Jesus together, here and now. Using the Spirit's gifts, our life together--our mission-- takes shape and grows. The Holy Spirit works in us to bear fruit—*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*.

God challenges us to look for and trust the work of the Spirit, even when that is difficult. In a vision, John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, saw a man throwing water on a flame, and yet the *flame continued to burn*. He wondered how it could keep burning--until he saw that there was a helper *behind* the door pouring oil on the flame! God's Spirit stands, often out of our sight, fueling the flames of our faith, when perhaps all *we* see are the world's attempts to dump water on it, to turn it cold and dark.

Where's the fire in *our* Pentecost today? The fire is in the warmth of God's love for us and for the world, a God who envisions for us an *abundant* life and who challenges us to live a *faithful* one. A God who calls us to remember each day that we are forgiven, and then, to remember to forgive others as well.

Where's the fire? The first century Pentecost community put God's love into practice: they sold their possessions, lived together and served others—boldly welcoming folks in ways that burst through old boundaries, witnessing to God's new life among them. Something powerful happened among them--and their neighbors could see it.

What are the signs of God at work in our world now? Our neighbors can also see evidence of the Spirit's holy fire when they experience God's welcome put into action through us. They feel the breath of the Spirit's new life as we embody the good news of God's love, each offering our gifts to serve others in the name of Christ where we live and work.

The crowd asked Peter: “*what does all of this mean?*” He could have reminded them that the word for Spirit, in both Hebrew and in Greek, can also be translated wind, the wind that had roared into the room and filled it. He could have pointed them back to the Spirit of God, blowing *over the chaos*, making creation unfurl, as our Psalm for today celebrates. “*You send forth your Spirit, and they are created.*” Although the Jewish Pentecost festival included a celebration of the gift of the law to Moses, Peter did *not* remind them that *Moses* encountered God in the fire of the flaming bush, and again in the wind and fire on *Mount Sinai* where he received the Law from God. Moses, by the way, may have been the first person to download from the cloud onto a tablet.

Peter did not even dwell on the thrilling burst of new energy, or the astounding miracle of the speaking and understanding among those who had received this new fire of the Spirit. No. Here is Peter what does: Peter *tells the story*. In the story of God's grace that we have known through Jesus Christ, his life *among* us, his death *for* us, and his resurrection *ahead of* us—there's the fire. The story of Jesus carries the Spirit's power, *lighting up* our life, *encouraging* us, *sustaining* us in hope, even when we can't see how new creation could possibly come out of the fearful chaos around us. The Spirit stands by us, as our Advocate, fanning the flames of hope and trust, guiding our way each day in living out the promise of our baptism.

There's a story of a mother, who, wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano, took her boy to a concert of the famous musician Paderewski. After they were seated, the mother spotted an old friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her. Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually *explored* his way through a door marked “*NO ADMITTANCE.*” When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and saw that the child was *missing*. Just then, the curtains parted and spotlights

focused on the impressive Steinway piano on stage. In horror, the mother saw *her little boy* sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out “*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.*”

At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy’s ear, “*Don’t quit. Keep playing.*” Then, leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon, his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running *obbligato* above the simple melody. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed what could have been a disastrous situation into a wonderfully creative experience. The audience couldn’t recall what else the great master played - only the classic, “*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*” -- transformed.

God sets a Pentecost Spirit-flame on each of our heads; we are *candles on the birthday cake of the Church*. We have each received unique and valuable gifts from the Holy Spirit, given so that we would look for ways to use them to honor God with our whole life. *God stands by us*, making our simple acts of love, words of welcome and expressions of care into memorable masterpieces.

Be prepared to be surprised: as the Spirit’s unexpected gifts to unexpected people are shared among us. God’s vision sends us out in new and unimagined directions, rooted in our past but not bound by it, alive to the present possibilities, and hopeful for the future that God will reveal. God’s fires dance on our heads too—inviting us to be open to new dreams. God’s Spirit continues to work through us, and among us, carrying out Christ’s mission in the world, as we live drawing on God’s love. Look for it, expect it, trust it. *Where’s the fire?* Right here, in the good news about Jesus. *Where’s the fire?* Here, *in* you and *among* you. You are God’s beloved children, freed and filled with the promise of God’s peace, and sent out from this place to share the fire-- the transformational love of Jesus. *Seek it, celebrate it, and share it.*

On this Memorial Day weekend, we prepare to honor the memory of those who have lost their lives in military service to our nation. They gave their all to serve others in dangerous and uncertain times, and for this we give thanks to God.

Today is also the last Sunday of the Easter season, and our Gospel reading speaks to an uncertain time of waiting and watching for new directions. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared in person to various witnesses over a period of 40 days. But now things have changed for the witnesses of the risen Christ. Yes, Jesus had promised his followers the gift of Holy Spirit, which they received on Pentecost, 50 days after Easter. But that hadn't happened yet. In the meantime, it's *waiting* and *watching*.

The prayer of Jesus continues his challenging call to *love one another*. Although Jesus prays this *before* his suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, please note that Jesus is *also* praying for *us* here and now; he prays “*on behalf of those who will believe in me through the word of his disciples*.” This is how Jesus wants us to live together and be the people of God in the meantime, before that final day envisioned at the conclusion of the book of Revelation, as we heard in our second lesson.

Jesus prays for us “*that they all may be one*.” In our painfully, *dangerously*, fractured world, we *continue* to need this prayer for unity. We might imagine that social media would have the capacity to connect us, the World Wide Web. But ironically, we live in a world increasingly splintered. We can hear, 24 hours a day, the news of one sect, one faction, one party, one interest group set squarely off against another. So many are barricaded off on their own bandwidth-- trolling, not talking. It can get so exceedingly ugly; it cuts us off from each other, and crowds out effective, creative and caring responses. We struggle to understand and respond to the evil violence erupting in the heartbreak in Uvalde and Buffalo and too many other sites, the senseless carnage of war in Ukraine and the ripple effects of hunger and homelessness, trauma and rage. Surely, we are not able to find the “*oneness*” that Jesus promises when we look to this world's way of doing and being.

What kind of “*oneness*” does Jesus have in mind here? A unity fed by fear and force? The *Nazis'* symbol of oneness was a bunch of twigs bound together into an unbreakable bundle, lifting up a rigid unity where anyone who breaks rank is shunned and shamed – or worse. *This is not* the oneness that Jesus is praying for. The oneness that comes from God will not be imposed and enforced, but implanted and nurtured by the *power of the Holy Spirit*. God will continue to be at work through those who have, in our identity as the baptized children of God, been “*marked by the cross of Christ forever*.”

Jesus prays that his followers may ALL be one, to witness to the love of God we receive in Jesus Christ. When the apostle Paul encouraged unity, between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, he used the image of the Body of Christ. Jesus continues to be present to the world in that Body, which has many different members, hands and feet and eyes and ears. We are united *in that Body*, just as Christ is one with the Father.

It is unrealistic to expect everyone to agree about everything; Christians often have legitimate, honest disagreements and different opinions. That's OK. *How do we embrace our diversity, while we live out our unity in Christ?* Jesus prays for us, "That you might be one, even as the Father and Son are one (v.21b)." God's love is the source for our unity in Christ. Even though we are different people with different gifts and sometimes very different perspectives, we can still work together and be church, Christ present in the world. We can *walk arm in arm* without always *seeing eye to eye*.

There are ways to disagree without being disagreeable, ways that honor each other in Christ as part of the Body. To quote the Lutheran Church Historian Martin Marty: "nobody ever says, *I won that conversation*." When we pass along the love that we ourselves have received from God, even when fears and anger and hurt make it difficult, loving beyond our differences bears witness to the unbounded love of God.

We can go beyond just tolerating our differences, and appreciate our diversity. Jesus envisions us, together in *all* our messy diversity, as a reflection of God's glory. Think of the glory of a well-cut diamond. The master creates many facets, and grinds and polishes each one. All are part of one whole, but each side has a purpose; the different facets are part of the master plan. Together, they sparkle in the light.

We need to be God's love in action *so that the world might believe*. Jesus wants the world to share in that love, through us. God's name, God's reputation, is at stake. We can give witness to what God is up to in our world, but *we ourselves are* what the *world witnesses*. The world doesn't know God, and needs to see concrete evidence of the presence of God, through Christians united in the person of Jesus, examples of resurrection at work in our world. People are going to make their judgments based on what they *see*. How we live matters; and so, Jesus prays for us to "love one another"

We carry that name of Jesus forever, the name we have received at our baptism. Amazingly, Jesus is lifted up in us as we live out our love for God, for each other, and for the people and communities around us. The message and mission of Jesus unites us, a unity found most powerfully at the foot of the cross. Self-giving love, vulnerable to suffering – doesn't seem very glorious to our usual way of thinking. Easter, yes – but Good Friday? The glory given by the Father to the Son is hidden in the cross; we *began* to see it on Easter, and it continues through the Holy Spirit at work in us, the body of Christ gathered here.

Think of this image for the *oneness of self-giving love*: embers on a Weber grill. Those coals spend themselves in their mission; glowing together, they are able to give off heat and warmth, so the food cooks and the marshmallows toast. When the embers are scattered, they grow cold. When our diversity is held together at the cross and the empty tomb, then we will radiate God's good-news glory of love in action.

Dr. Albert "Pete" Pero Jr. was the first African-American faculty member at a North American Lutheran seminary. Dr. Pero challenged us to "Live *into* the truth of the gospel: that we are one in Christ through our baptism." He said that ethnicity, social class, skin



color, gender and the like are our *identifications*, not our *identity*. A colleague put it this way, “We mistakenly root our identity in our identifications, which serves to divide us. But our true identity is in our baptism—in being a child of God. Our baptismal identity gets lived out through our identifications, but one identification is not better or superior to another. Pete was always interested in our common faith and what it means to be part of the whole Body of Christ.”

Our Good Friday lives leave us waiting, grief-stricken, stunned and broken. Now Jesus is no longer present in person, and we wait, praying as Jesus prayed for us, praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, praying for the power of Pentecost. The Spirit says “COME,” for the Holy Spirit continues to call, gather, enlighten, and empower the many parts of the Body in our calling to make Christ known. Our many gifts are diverse, and they are all valuable and necessary in our one mission-- God’s mission-- united in Christ around the cross, living in love, that the world might believe.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is preparing his disciples: he's going away, but Jesus will not abandon them. After his death and resurrection, Jesus will no longer be present among them in person, but Pentecost is coming, with the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, who will fire up each follower with the light of Christ. God will be "at home" within us, in the household of faith, gathered together by the Spirit for God's purposes.

What is it like to have "God be at home" in us? One *powerful* sign is the gift of peace. This is not the *world's* peace, the brittle peace of blinders and well-fortified walls. I have some relatives who stayed at an estate in Brazil. They said that, amid the desperate poverty there, the relatively wealthy build many walls for protection. Every time they drove in or out of this estate, they had to pass through 17 locked gates—somebody had to get out at each gate and unlock it; after they would go through, they had to stop and go back and lock it again. Then they drove to the next gate and did the same thing. This is a *kind of* peace, but not God's kind of peace.

God's peace is not the Pax Romana in force in Jesus' day, with the cruel armies of the Roman Empire crushing every revolt before it could spread. God's peace is not merely the temporary absence of wars and other calamities. The peace of Christ assures us that *nothing* can snatch any of God's children out of the hand of the Good Shepherd. The peace of Christ relies on this: *faith wins out over fear, giving us true freedom. God has the final victory, and we are included in it through Jesus Christ. This peace comes from God; we don't earn it – we can't. We don't buy it at a gun show or order it from Amazon. This peace trusts in God's power to bring life from the dust of death. Jesus gives peace, but not as the world gives it. Our world would never ever have imagined new life through dying, peace through loving, even our enemies.*

Our *second* lesson, taken from the book of Revelation, envisions what the final victory of God's peace will look like: the text shows us "The holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God." Verse 11 of Chapter 21, not included in today's reading, goes on: "*It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel.*"

To what can we compare this *New Jerusalem*? The old classic movie "The Wizard of Oz" comes to mind, with its glorious Emerald City: the beautiful, bright shining city at the end of the "yellow brick road." It has the glory of the great wizard, and the radiance of, well, an Emerald jewel – especially if you wear the green goggles they give you.

On that yellow brick road, you may remember, traveled a *motley crew*: the lion wanted *courage*, the scarecrow wanted a *brain*, the tin man wanted a *heart*, and Dorothy with her little dog just wanted to get *home*. They *each* sought the wizard in the glorious city at the end of the "yellow brick road," asking for help to get that *one thing* they wanted more than anything else.

But the *Emerald City* is not *Jerusalem the Golden*. Spoiler alert: the wizard is revealed as a fake, all smoke and mirrors, an empty show. He scrambles to keep up a good front.

*“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”* He comes up with a plan to send Dorothy and her friends out with a grim task: do away with the Wicked Witch of the West. Perhaps the wizard figured they wouldn’t be coming back to broadcast his con job to the whole City. They would probably die, or maybe, if somehow they did return, they would have gotten rid of a threat in his kingdom, making him look good.

The wizard, after he is found out, *finally* admits, “I’m not a bad man. I’m a very *good* man. *I’m just a very bad wizard.*” He’s right about being a bad wizard, but you know, looking at him through the lens of the 10 Commandments as he attempts to justify himself, it would seem that he falls short of being a “*very good man.*” This wizard broke the First Commandment by pretending to be God-like and all-powerful; he lied to protect himself and prolong his power; and he put Dorothy’s *life* at risk when he sent her to kill the wicked witch with only Dorothy’s companions and her little dog.

In *one* way, the “great wizard” is like Dorothy; he’s just trying to get home too. Dorothy and her friends are surprised, disappointed, even angered at seeing an ordinary man instead of a “*great and powerful*” wizard. People want their wizards --- *and their gods*--- to be “*shock and awe*” powerful. No vulnerability allowed; surely God wouldn’t stoop to act through a *human* Jesus—we want the wizard’s smoke and thunder! But *the Emerald City of this world is not Jerusalem the Golden*, and, in a profound *contrast* to the wizard, Jesus is not only a good man, it turns out he is indeed *also* a very powerful savior. Jesus doesn’t want to *get home*. Jesus is the way home. Jesus is our home along the way.

Our Way in life *is* like the “*yellow brick road.*” There is evil to be *resisted*, there are long scary nights along the way, there are *poppies* along the road (drugs, and other things that trap our attention.) Yet, on *our* yellow brick road, dealing with the “*lions and tigers and bears*” depends first and finally on the Holy Spirit guidance and support, and not just our own selves. A lot of people have the idea that getting to heaven involves just believing fervently in yourself. It’s actually, in effect, their religion, and the wizard’s Emerald City is their version of the New Jerusalem. But in God’s New Jerusalem, if your one *most important* thing isn’t trusting and following Jesus, crucified and risen for the sake of the world, then you are *on a road*, but it *won’t really take you home*.

We do not *earn* our entrance into the New Jerusalem through our bravery, nor even by simply hearing “*fear not, because, after all, you only need to find the bravery that you have had in you all along and figure out how to use it for yourself.*” We trust in God’s promise to be at home in us, and this can give us courage to attempt, each day, what God calls us to do. As we follow Jesus along the way, our gifts can be discovered and shared-- not to secure our own salvation, but for Jesus’ sake in order to help our neighbor.

Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*” In the Emerald City, *no one sees* the wizard, and the doors are shut. Dorothy needs to show her ruby slippers to get in. But in the New Jerusalem, there will be no one who practices falsehood (no huckster wizards blowing a lot of smoke, and

making a big impressive *empty* noise.) “*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.*” When we receive on our forehead the sign of the cross at our baptism, we are *marked with the name of Jesus forever.*

It is water that kills the wicked witch of the west – and each day we can remember the waters of our baptism. We get our “ruby slippers,” the Holy Spirit, that gift of God “at home now within us,” to help keep us connected to our Savior. We can trust the promise that *nothing* will separate us from the love of God in Jesus. And that *doesn’t depend* on what we do or fail to do. Our actions do not save us – so we are freed to serve our neighbor.

On our road of life, we also want to find our way home. Dorothy knew that the Emerald City wasn’t home. She wanted Kansas and Auntie Em. We discover that the Emerald City of this world isn’t our home, either. *In the meantime*, we have our own places and our own versions of Auntie Em, the people we love and who love us, and among whom we have our work to do.

The God who is even now at home in our hearts, gives peace, not fear. God’s name is on our foreheads, we are marked with the cross of Christ forever. *Do not let your hearts be troubled*, for God is here and God loves us. *Do not let your hearts be troubled*, for the Holy Spirit dwells within us and will work *among* us and *through* us to spread God’s love to our neighbors and to the whole world. We pray, give us your peace, and show us the way to our true home.

*“In the Meantime, Love”*

May 15, 2022      Easter 5C

Checking out the news can be pretty depressing: waves of wild weather, the worst drought in the Western U.S. in 1,200 years; raging wildfires in New Mexico that can be seen from space. The opioid epidemic continues--the CDC announced that in 2021 there were a record 100,000 overdose deaths, up 15% from last year. COVID numbers are creeping up again, and the virus keeps on mutating. There are wars and *rumors* of wars, and *worries* of wars-- *will Russia resort to nuclear weapons?*—with the inevitable *uncertainty* and *despair* of those caught in the crossfire. And in this country, more mass shootings, this time in Buffalo and Milwaukee—*it’s hard to even keep them straight*—a deeply divided nation, loss of trust in public servants; economic uncertainties, troubling inflation, record high gas prices.

Just where is this world headed? The Book of Revelation ends with this vision: *“Behold, the dwelling of God is with humankind. . . God will be with them, and will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”* In Jesus, can dare to trust the promise that this is how the story turns out, eventually.

But what about now? In today’s Gospel, Jesus is telling us how to live in the meantime. *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciple.”* We dip into God’s transforming newness as we love one another. But in this world where the New Jerusalem can’t be found on Google Maps, we certainly can struggle to see clear evidence that God is dwelling with us, as promised.

I really appreciate the profound theological insights from the comic strip “Peanuts.” Lucy stands with her arms folded and a stubborn expression on her face, while Charlie Brown pleads, *“Lucy, you MUST be more loving. This world really needs love. You have to let yourself love to make this world a better place in which to live!”* Lucy whirls around, furious, and Charlie Brown tumbles over backwards. Lucy screams, *“Look, blockhead--- the WORLD I love. It’s PEOPLE I can’t stand.”* Anybody here have Lucy moments sometimes? We love the *“world.”* It’s people we can’t stand.

Love one another. It sounds *so* simple. Ha! Don’t be fooled. God’s kind of loving *turns the world’s wisdom on its head*. God’s loving shows itself in a cross and an empty tomb, signs of God’s new age already breaking through. God’s love is very *different* from what passes for love in the brokenness around us: if you love those who are loveable, *this is nothing new*. If your love just serves your own self and those who are a lot like you, *this is nothing new*. If it is only a warm and fuzzy feeling when the going is good, *there is nothing at all new about that*.

Now--loving the unlovable, loving the enemy who betrays and abandons you, *this* is new. Foot-washing servant-love in the long shadow of a deadly cross, *this* is new. Love that gives up all claims on power and privilege, and empties itself for sake of others, *this* is new. Love that led Jesus to live and die for our sake, *this truly is* new. In the meantime, love. In the *mean times*, love. Amazingly, God is still at work making all things new, when we are loving others as Christ has loved us.

Note that Jesus says, “As *I have loved you, love also one another.*” That says a lot. We learn to love by *being* loved. Just as the *abused child* may become an abuser, a loved child learns to express affection. First year psychology students learn about an experiment that shows that *love is learned*. Baby monkeys were exposed to artificial mothers, made of wire and cloth. These babies, deprived of a real mother’s love, were unable to show love in return. Humans, too, learn about love through *being loved* by someone else.

The ultimate source of our love is Jesus Christ. The commandment to love isn’t merely another legalistic requirement imposed on us from the *outside*. If it were, it would be quite impossible. A little girl asked her mother, “How come whenever I open up a flower it falls apart, but when God opens it up it stays together?” The mother didn’t know how to respond, but then the little girl said, “*Oh, I know; when I open it up, I open it up from the outside, but when God opens it up, it is from the inside.*” Our love for others flows from the love we have received from Jesus Christ--unearned love, given freely. This kind of love surprises us; it challenges and transforms us, making our lives new from the *inside out*, one day at a time.

As Jesus is giving this new commandment, he has just washed the feet of his disciples, and watched Judas leave to carry out his betrayal. Such servant love is open to pain, and the possibility of betrayal. This vulnerable love is powerful, tough and tender, stronger than revenge, stronger than death itself-- the Easter promise.

Jesus knows he will only be with the disciples a little while longer. His presence from now on will be a matter of *faith* and *faithfulness*. The presence of Jesus *continues* to be known through our faithfulness in love that we show one another and the world. Such love is the very heart of God’s *will* for us and God’s *way* with us. Without love, no matter what it is that we do, we come up short of God’s newness. But through the love of Jesus, God can complete whatever we lack.

In the *meantime*, in our own *mean times*, we await the New Jerusalem. All the battles are still being waged (*tears, pain, death, mourning, anxiety, hate, brokenness*) as long as we continue to draw breath in this wounded world. The followers of Jesus are the advance outpost, a glimpse of that final victory, when indeed, ALL things will have been made new. Easter promises us: “*Hang in there, God’s not done yet.*”

How do we hold onto the promise of newness amidst the wreckage of the old? What do we do with those many fears and anxieties which interfere with our attempts to love people, especially when those people are not being very loving? Well, we lean on the love we ourselves have received through Jesus Christ.

How do we witness to the world that Christ is alive? We do it by being open to God's new thing. How do we witness to the world that God is love? We do it in the hard work of loving and supporting folks, warts and all, beyond our protective walls, as God has loved us. We do it by faithfully identifying and creatively using the gifts that God has given to us, and helping each other to do the same.

In the film *The Color Purple*, Sophie experienced some kindnesses that deeply affected her in a dark and troubling time in her life. Looking back on those kindnesses, she said, "It was then I *knew* that there was a God." Intuitively she knew that *this* kindness is the best evidence of the existence of God. In an unloving world, there are still people who really do care about others. Where did such love come from? From the very heart of God. With that love, God's love, we become Jesus active in the world.

We find Jesus in the love we receive from other people. Others who are seeking Jesus may find him in *your* love. The love we have received from Jesus makes it *possible* to love others. In the midst of that difficult task of sharing God's love, you will find the Spirit of God at work from the *inside out*, strengthening your connection to the love that Jesus has for you. Are we looking for hope, for signs of life? Trust the promise of Jesus, crucified and risen, for you. In the meantime, Jesus is alive, and because of him, we too will live, and love, and serve our Lord *here in this place*, and all the *places we will be led to go*. *Thanks be to God!*

This fourth Sunday in the Easter season has a special name—well, besides “Mothers’ Day” -- Good Shepherd Sunday. Each year, we share the words of Psalm 23, and hear a reading from the chapter in John’s Gospel where Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd. *My sheep hear my voice*, says the Good Shepherd Jesus. *Listen! Follow me.*

Psalm 23 addresses the *nearness of life-threatening violence*. It is far more than simply being a sweet and sentimental reverie about God’s gentle shepherding. The psalm knows about *danger*. The rod is a club to beat away the wild beasts that are intent on snatching the sheep; the hook on the staff – useful for hauling up lambs fallen helplessly into a ravine.

Sometimes this business of following Jesus could *rightly* scare us to death. For part of its time in St. Louis, my seminary leased several floors of the old University Club, high above Grand Avenue. Professor Bob Bertram used to say that following Jesus was like walking around the narrow ledge of the 11th floor (where the chapel was located) – on the *outside* of the building – keeping your eyes firmly fixed on Jesus out ahead, and your ears attuned only to his voice, just putting one foot in front of the other. It helps if you don’t look down.

“God commands us to not be afraid,” says Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. “*not* because there is *nothing to fear* but precisely *because* the world can be such a frightening place, and God realizes that we can never fulfill our potential as human beings if we are paralyzed by fear” [p. 23].” It’s a bit like President Roosevelt rallying the people in the dark days of the Great Depression. “*We have nothing to fear but fear itself.*”

This week’s texts all speak to the gut-grabbing fear that comes into our lives and our living rooms with the round-the-clock cable news and Internet headlines, the fearful unending incidents and accidents. Fear often lies at the core of behavior that falls painfully short of God’s vision, fear that splinters communities and walls us off from God, from ourselves and from our neighbor.

How do we understand the effects of fear and anxiety, and what helps us to get beyond it? Interim ministry training materials spell out how our brains react to the world around us in *three very different ways*. Deep in our brain is a portion that resembles in structure and function the brain of a reptile, the “lizard brain.” From this part of the brain come the instinctive responses meant to keep us alive, our “*fight or flight*” response to perceived threats. When the amygdala, located in the “lizard brain,” is triggered it causes the brain to immediately shift into survival mode, bypassing the influence of the *pre-frontal* lobes, that highly developed part of the brain where rational thought is situated, with the ability to live according to principles, to have empathy for others, to hope for the future, to be creative. When people are reacting out of fear, they literally *cannot think straight*.



The other major brain function, in between the reptile brain and the pre-frontal lobes, is the limbic system, or what they call the *mammal* brain. This area connects us to others, controlling the emotions that bring us together and hold us in our life-sustaining web of relationships. The freedom that comes from trusting God's care for us can allow us to sustain our web of connectedness with others.

The response of the amygdala is very quick, which protects us, but unfortunately it is quite slow to *shut down*. God keeps on saying "*don't be afraid*" to us precisely because it is difficult or *even impossible* to think clearly and act faithfully when we are still immersed in our "*fight or flight*" high-anxiety hormones. So, the advice especially for leaders is to function as a "*non-anxious presence*" in the midst of fear and anxiety.

How can we not be anxious and afraid? This week's texts all present us with a *powerful antidote*. The answer to the problem of fear is *faith* in Jesus Christ. Psalm 23 tells us that "*the Lord is my shepherd... who restores my soul*"; Our lesson from the Book of Revelation tells us that "*God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*"; and in the Gospel Jesus says, "*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.*" These are powerful words of reassurance that we all *need* to hear, and to trust.

I read an interesting observation about two of the Hebrew words *in this verse* from Psalm 23: "*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*" The word used for "*follow*" *usually* carries a sense of danger. Envision an army "*pursuing*," intent on *destroying* an enemy. But here, the Psalm *reverses* that meaning. The word "*surely*" could be translated "*however*." It sets up a contrast, before and after. Enemies *were* "*following*"—*stalking*-- before. But now, following the Lord as our shepherd, the feast is prepared "*in the presence of enemies.*" God's *goodness and mercy* pursue us *instead of* our enemies. Mercy catches up to us, so that we " *dwell in the house of LORD forever.*"

What can help us to not live in fear? Try reading the first line of the psalm aloud, putting the emphasis upon the word "Lord." *The LORD is my shepherd*. Jesus says "*My sheep hear my voice--*" the voice of Jesus, not the demands of *career* or *calendar* or *checkbook*; not *politics* or *politicians* or *pundits*; not the threatening voice of *bomb* blasts or *machine gun* arsenals; not the edgy voice of *ignorance*, *hatred* or *vengeance*; not the nagging internal voice of *fear* or *futility*. Only the Shepherd's voice.

The *National Geographic* ran a story about the Rabari people of India. The Rabari are a sheep-herding people. When the shepherds take their flocks out into the fields, they all come together *for the night*. As many as five thousand sheep of several different flocks will be crowded together. The shepherds will take turns keeping watch. Some sleep while others patrol the perimeter, alert for the presence of predators.

But at daybreak, things change. Each shepherd calls his own sheep. Each shepherd has different calls, handed down through generations. They give a certain morning call to move out and there are other calls throughout the day, for water, for instance. Each shepherd knows his own sheep and each sheep knows the calls of its own master. The sheep disentangle themselves from the huge flock and follow their own shepherd.

If the *Lord* is our Shepherd, how could humanity have strayed so badly? Think about this: a Shepherd does not *push* the sheep; a Shepherd *leads* the sheep. Some do not follow this lead. Some are so self-involved they do not see him or hear his call. Some go so fearfully astray that we are truly at a loss to understand it. Yet, in spite of it all, our Good Shepherd guides and cares for us *using the people around us* who do follow the call to serve as God's hands of forgiveness, healing and helping, extending the loving care of the shepherd. People like mothers, who we honor on this Mothers' Day.

Jesus our Shepherd "*leads us to the springs of the water of life, and. . . wipes away every tear from our eyes.*" We can trust the voice of our Good Shepherd because he is also, as our Hymn of Praise proclaims, the *Lamb who was slain, who has begun his reign*. We no longer need to be crippled by fear of our enemies, because God knows us and God's merciful goodness seek us out. God brings *Easter life* out of the *deadly trauma of Good Friday*.

The Good Shepherd promises to walk beside us even through the valley. It is *there*, with death's long shadow stalking us, that we truly discover the depths of God's abiding presence. We discover, when we thought we were alone, abandoned to our enemies, a great host of fellow travelers. Those who hear the voice of the Shepherd, who have found, even in "*the valley of the shadow of death*," the springs of the water of life. Those who were washed in the water of baptism, those who are invited to sit at God's table even in the shadowy valley—especially in the midst of that frightful valley. The flock of the Good Shepherd is feasting together with cups that overflow with God's promise of mercy, healing, forgiveness, and steadfast love, already anticipating together the final feast, sheltered safely forever in God's goodness and mercy. *Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.*

*Gone fishin’*. That’s what the seven disciples have done in today’s Gospel lesson. For them, fishing wasn’t for whiling away lazy afternoons. It was their way of life, what they *had* been doing before Jesus called them to follow him. But now, they were back at their boats. Sure, they had seen him, alive, risen from the dead—but he wasn’t actually there *with* them and just they didn’t know *what* to do next. So they went fishin’.

They had left their nets behind three years before, with such high hopes. “*We have found the Messiah!*” They took off, following Jesus. They had seen him feed more than five thousand people with five little loaves of bread and a couple of dried fish. They had heard him teach, felt the excitement of the crowds that followed him. They had *even* seen him raise his friend Lazarus from the *dead*! Yes, they knew Jesus had enemies, but they figured those enemies wouldn’t be able to touch God’s own Chosen One. Nothing terrible was ever going to happen. Everything would be super.

*So they thought*. Then they were horrified to see things coming apart, first with Jesus at that last meal with them. What happened after that, well *that* had inflicted on them gut-wrenching fear and then soul-numbing grief. Suddenly that terrible Friday, there was a grave, cold and dark and utterly hopeless.

Then, *Sunday happened*, and they began to see that a grave was amazingly *not* the end of their remarkable story. The story was not over, but nobody had a clue about how the next chapter would be written. So, they returned to what they knew. *Fishing*. Now they were sitting in the boat, like the work-a-day fishermen they had been not so long ago.

My mother tells me I liked to go fishing when I was a little girl. The truth is, I liked to be *in the boat on the water with my dad*, but I really didn’t care if I *ever* caught a fish. *I* didn’t care, but, if you fish for a *living*, an *empty net* can be a real problem. It may mean *empty plates* for breakfast--and maybe it just mirrors the *emptiness in your life*.

Like the disciples in their boat after that long night, sometimes we greet the chilly gray morning with empty nets. We can wonder whether dashed hopes and the scars of death at work are more real than visions of the resurrected Lord and his promise of new life. The human impulse is to “*go fishin’*”---to seek out old familiar ways, even if we come up empty in the process. The disciples needed a remedy for those empty nets and emptied lives. They needed the risen Jesus to fill up their nets, to show them what his Resurrection could mean for their lives.

And then ---- they hear a voice in the distance, carrying well over the water, “*No fish tonight?*” Jesus calls out and they listen. “*Put the nets on the other side.*” And, maybe they were bone tired and maybe advice from a stranger on the beach wasn’t all that welcome after a *long* night working on the water with nothing to show. But they do it.

Then, the incredible tug on the net; they jump into frantic action. Their net was suddenly filled with fish. One of them stood up to look again at the person who had called to them, and the light dawned. “*IT IS THE LORD!*”

We can see how excited Peter was: he didn’t even wait for the boat to get to shore; he jumped into the water and waded to Jesus! Peter was being, well, *Peter* again.

When they get to the lakeshore, Jesus puts on an apron and cooks them breakfast. An ordinary sort of meal, yet he gave them the bread and fish--*just as on the hillside he took the five loaves, gave thanks, and passed them around with the fish to feed the multitude*; just as on the night he was betrayed he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying “*This is my body . . . for you*”

Ah, now, the picture is getting clearer. The invitation to follow Jesus, the bread and fish, the healing, the raising of the dead—they are coming into a new focus. Fears and failures loosen their death grip and hope can emerge. Jesus showers them with God’s generous abundance. 153 fish in one net --some say that was thought to be the number of *different kinds of fish* in the Sea of Galilee, pointing to God’s outreach to everyone. Or it might have been just a remarkable detail of abundance, passed along by the eyewitnesses.

And for *us*--what about the distance between *our* hopes and our realities? Take note that Jesus *came to the disciples*, reaching out to them in spite of their doubts and disappointments, their betrayals and abandonment. So, here’s very good news: Jesus *reaches out to us too*, and loves each of us no matter *how* we have acted or failed to act. He continues to come to us just *as* we are, *where* we are, in the most ordinary workings of our lives—but he doesn’t leave us there unchanged. Jesus comes to meet us, here, in the ordinary sharing and caring, in the prayers, in the promises and challenges of the **Word**, in the breaking of the bread.

The story in John chapter 21 goes on, as we see Jesus reaching out *specifically* to Peter. After that remarkable breakfast on the beach, Peter had to face Jesus. “*Simon Peter, son of John, do you love me more than these?*” *Three times* Jesus asked Peter this question. Can you picture how pained Peter’s face was as he looked at Jesus then? Three times. Do you love me? We can imagine something like this passing between them:

“I’m ashamed. I . . . betrayed you.” “I know.”

“But I *denied* you -- three times.” “Yes. I know.”

“You mean . . . you’re not rejecting me?”

“No, Peter. I have work for you to do. So, you gonna’ fish *on my crew* or cut bait?”)

“*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!*” Peter is sent to serve: As Jesus has loved him, so he is sent to love others. Now Jesus says to us as well: use that love that I have given you to “*Feed my lambs and tend my sheep.*” Use my love to show love to others in my name.

God is still on a mission. The Risen Jesus accepts us *no matter what* we are, forgives *no matter what* we have done or failed to do. Jesus does not say “*three strikes and you’re outta here!*” He doesn’t make us sit on the bench until we somehow find a way to *earn* our place on the field again.

When Jesus fed and forgave them, he freed the disciples from their burden of their broken hearts and broken promises. Being part of God’s mission is *never predictable*, and it always carries a *risk*. Yet, Jesus meets us at the places where we encounter emptiness and confusion. *Even there*, Jesus is present, cooking breakfast on our beach, gently reaching out to reconnect, heal and encourage, no matter what manner of brokenness sweeps over us and our lives. The wreckage of the world simply doesn’t have to shut us down anymore. When we are no longer hobbled by guilt and fear, we can speak out and reach out with assurance--assured *not in ourselves*, but empowered by the Holy Spirit at work in the mission of “*being Christ in the world.*”

That mission began with Peter and Mary and John and the other followers of Jesus. The mission *continues*; for--in spite of failures and disappointments, denial and betrayal; in spite of the apparent repeated defeat of what we believe in and hope for, and in spite of the apparent triumph of what is *wrong and harmful* or merely *petty and dumb*; in spite of it all--there is *hope* offered beyond our wildest hopes. We can draw on God’s grace; we can work wholeheartedly, anticipating that great day of final victory which Easter promises to all of us--the day when *we* join in the great heavenly hymns of praise:

*“To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might, forever and ever. Amen.”* Christ is Risen. Alleluia! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

It was the first day of the week; it was the first day of their new life—although they didn't know it yet. The ragged little band of disciples, confused and discouraged, hid themselves behind closed doors, huddled together in fear. Their numbers definitely were down--Judas was gone -- Judas, who had betrayed them all; and Thomas was off somewhere, maybe arranging to return to his family and his job, resigned to moving on with his life.

And they were sad -- because, of course, Jesus wasn't there anymore. The tide had taken a bad turn for that inner circle of Jesus' followers, and they just didn't feel safe anymore. Peter had discovered that in spite of his repeated denials, the officials knew who he was -- connected to their condemned prisoner Jesus. All the remarkable history with Jesus had suddenly fallen apart. Maybe they would be next. Any little slip could mean disaster. So they were hiding; they locked their doors, for the same reason that people have always locked their doors and their hearts: They were afraid.

Things would never be the same again. Peter was all out of sorts -- shame will do that to you. Gone forever was his proud image of himself as a peerless and fearless believer. How could a strong person deny Jesus, again and again and again, like he had? And they all were terribly confused, with this weird talk about an empty tomb, and Mary Magdalene's story—that woman crazy with grief—about some hallucination of Jesus talking to her in the garden by the tomb.

It had been a strange morning, and, well, they just didn't know what to make of it. John kept wanting Peter to talk about they had seen at the tomb that morning. So, Peter, an “an empty tomb could mean that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, right? Jesus had talked about that.” But, John was just a foolish dreamer, and Peter was caught up in the fog of his own grief and pain. How could any of them believe those stories about Jesus? Why would they? After all, “better the evil you know than the evil you don't know.” And, crushing disappointment and cruel death—that evil they had come to know all too well.

There was no peace in that room on the first Easter evening, just a small group of the downcast inner circle. They had no real hope of a future- just sheer survival, trying to deal with their fatigue and confusion and fear. Grieving, trying to protect themselves and deal in their own way with the Powers that might kill them too. Doors locked, minds locked, spirits locked up tight. Sad and afraid.

In spite of the story about an empty tomb, in spite of the claim that Jesus was alive, the doors were bolted shut. “If we cannot have life,” they thought, “then at least we will try to protect ourselves better against death.” And there they sat, locked up and sad and afraid.

There they sat, until life broke through their bolted doors. At that moment, when Jesus was in their presence, their small numbers did not matter anymore, their failings could fade. Jesus was there. Peace, he said. Peace be with you. Three times he repeats it: *Peace*. This was not just a simple greeting. This Peace provokes a powerful outpouring of forgiveness,

new possibilities appear. Life broke through the locked doors, the locked minds, and the locked spirits—life that sent them out beyond their own barricades, and peace that gave them the power to go there. Jesus was with them, alive—not a figment of their grief-stricken imagination, not just a wish or merely a memory, but the Jesus who had died, and showed them the wounds in his hands and his side to prove it.

Jesus stood among them, and the text says they were glad. They were glad! When you think about it, surely this must be one of the great understatements of all time. Yet, perhaps their gladness took some time to really grab hold—because the next week, the door was still shut when they were gathered together. Transformations take time.

“As The Father has sent me, even so I send you.” To begin with, the frightened disciples received the peace of Jesus’ presence among them, in person in that place and at that moment. But that certainly wasn’t the end of it. Jesus goes on: “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The followers of Jesus now have a new future, and God will be with them to guide them and give them what they would need on the other side of those closed doors. Peter would be transformed into a powerful preacher, now boldly sharing the news of the risen Jesus Christ. And even poor Thomas, stuck forever with that unfortunate label – “doubting” – went to India in the year 54, according to the tradition, and spent 20 years there before he was martyred. There is still a group of churches that trace their history back to the work of Thomas among them, the Mar Thoma Christians of India.

Jesus stands here among us, too, going through our closed doors, and calling us out beyond our bolted barriers. And we can gain a new understanding of the fears and betrayals and losses of the past, trusting the Holy Spirit’s power to loosen their grip on our souls. When we trust that the risen Christ stands here now among us, reaching out with his word of peace and forgiveness, we are called out of our locked rooms of fear, called away from being trapped in our own losses, called out of our blindness to God’s resurrected presence now in this moment. Jesus is here: where two or three are gathered in his name, Jesus has promised to be present among us. And if Jesus is here, we have reason to be glad, as the disciples were. We can celebrate the astounding Good News: Jesus is risen from the dead, and death in all its disguises does not have to hold us hostage. Jesus has won that victory.

And Jesus is here today among us, as Jesus was present in that sermon preached to the unbelieving brothers by Mary Magdalene, as Jesus was in the witness of the disciple John. Jesus is here in the Word, read and preached and sung and shared. Jesus is here in our witness to God at work in our lives. Jesus is here in the bread and the wine, and the community when we gather together on THIS first day of the week. Jesus is here in that same gift of the Holy Spirit which the disciples received, poured out in baptism. Jesus is here in the power of forgiveness, received and given. Jesus is here in the power to move through locked doors, opening us into God’s presence and God’s future. Jesus is here in sending us out into our neighborhood, our community, our family, our places where we work and play.

God empowers us for service, for life. God unlocks our lives, and invites us to be glad at the Lord's presence. Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit -- to be open to the Lord's future, looking for new ways to serve and share God's love with others beyond our own walls, out there where we live.

With Thomas, we can bring our doubts to Jesus, although we are now in a different situation than Thomas was then. We can't put our hands into the wounds of a risen Jesus standing in person among us in the room. But that does not exclude us from the invitation to trust God at work in Jesus through us. Blessed are those who believe although they have not seen. These words are addressed to an unseen future audience—and then the house lights come up, and WE are there seated in the front row. We are the ones who have “not seen, and yet have come to believe.” We are the ones who are invited again and again to trust Jesus, the same Jesus whose story continues to enable that trust, and give us new life, day by day.

Lord, help us to believe, to see and celebrate your presence in our midst, and to be glad. Break through the locked doors of our spirits, and let us see you, hear your call and follow you. Give us wisdom as we seek out how you would have us serve you; give us courage to live out your mission; give us patience and forgiveness along the way. Breathe life into us on your road of love and service, to the praise of God's glory. Christ is Risen, Alleluia!



Isaiah 65: 17-25; John 20:1-18

On Easter we give thanks to God for the Light that dawns on a new day, a new world, full of the promise of abundant life. Jesus is alive, who once was dead. God's future has started to happen.

The prophet Isaiah in chapter 65 foresees this season of new life, of healing, and comfort and hope. A new creation, the promise of God's final transformation of a world beset by calamity and distress, binding the power of death and its deputies over all nations, in all generations. Isaiah names some of the scars of the battles with death, as he shares the promise of God's saving action. "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. People shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity," calamity like the children pulled from the rubble of the bombs-- orphaned, left with mangled limbs and broken hearts.

The Light of Christ has entered our darkness, and, as John proclaims in the first chapter of his Gospel, the darkness did not overcome that Light. In the darkness of that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene had gone to a tomb, expecting to find death. She saw the emptiness of that tomb; the body wasn't there and she wept for what she thought was another calamity besides the death itself. But God had other plans. Isaiah had spoken of God's promise to save us from fear and futility, from despair and death-- and on the Good Friday hill called Golgotha, Jesus broke the fearful power of death. Easter shows us that death doesn't have to have the last word for us.

The last word of God's new future lifts the darkness, dries the tears, and dissolves the distress of failures and disappointments, those little deaths that choke our hopes. They are gone in God's eyes, and God invites us to trust that. God had been saying to the people of Isaiah's time -- I'm here, I'm reaching out-- pay attention, but people didn't respond. But God keeps piling on the promises: before you call, I will answer; before you finish the sentence, I will be all ears. I am there for you.

We celebrate the light of Christ on this day. But the Gospel lesson starts out in the dark -- in more ways than one. Mary went to the tomb in the pre-dawn darkness. Seeing the stone rolled away does not produce resurrection faith yet. "Grave-robbers have taken the LORD's body. Where is the body?" Simon Peter and his companion are in the dark too. What did Peter make of the tomb, empty except for the neatly folded grave cloths? That's not a "grave-robber" sort of touch. "The Other Disciple" goes in and believes because of what he sees there. We are told that he hadn't yet connected the dots about what would happen in light of what Jesus had taught them. Leaving the empty tomb, the two disciples just went home. Were they stunned? Uncertain? No doubt they were afraid.

The following verses of John's Gospel tells us they were holed up behind locked doors. Mary is still in the dark when she encounters the angels. They ask her, "Why are you weeping?" Well, it is a tomb . . . Next comes another one of those times in the Gospel of John where somebody starts out misunderstanding the situation. Mary, still figuratively – and maybe literally – in the dark, has the question: "Who took Jesus, and what have they done with him?" When she had said this, Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there. But even then, she didn't know it was Jesus; she thinks she sees the gardener. She's still in the dark.

Now what goes in her ears opens up her eyes. Jesus calls her by name. Mary. Tears of grief turn to unstoppable tears of joy. Then, he sends her out with a job to do. "Don't try to hold onto me, I'm going to 'my God and your God.'" Where is Jesus going next? Everywhere! Mary has a message to share now. So, she takes her first step in sharing the word of God's new thing. She tells the other disciples "I have seen the LORD!" God's future, and ours, is unfolding.

Isaiah speaks of the new Jerusalem with the Temple on God's "holy mountain." He focuses on the city, not as the political capital, but as a religious center. The "holy mountain" represents God's presence. But Revelation 21:22 speaks to our spiritual territory after Easter: "There is no need for a temple for the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

The famous 20<sup>th</sup> century preacher, William Sloan Coffin, wrote that "Easter has to do with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power." Isaiah's vision of God's future has no place for violence. Where can we see this "new heavens and new earth" where "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain?" The heavens and the earth don't feel very new – there are a lot of loveless power plays that still prevail. Easter celebrates new life and hope—the "feast of victory for our God," for us. Are we there yet? No, but God's working on it.

What does this vision of a "new Jerusalem" do for us? What role does anticipation of the future have in our lives anyway? A vision from the future can help us because, as Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund reminds us: "You can't BE what you can't SEE." Our encounter with the new life of Easter, with the risen Christ, can help us envision a future "new earth" where "thy will is done on earth as it is in heaven."

What could it mean in your life right now to embrace the light of God's grace and goodness? God isn't remembering where we have failed, because God's new thing is happening. In the Light of the Risen Christ, God promises: "I will rejoice FOREVER in what I am creating." This is the day that the LORD has made. So, let us rejoice and be glad in it. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia.

After preaching, teaching and healing, challenging the *assumptions and presumptions* of his enemies, Jesus knows that now “*his hour*” has come. But instead of calling down legions of **angels** to wipe out his foes with their deadly plans firmly in place, Jesus *takes up* the **cross**. He willingly, lovingly, surrenders the glory due to him. The disciples were clueless, but Jesus knows that there will be a “**later**” that will *transform* their lives, and, on *the other side* of that “later,” will *continue* to have the power to transform.

But “**now**,” gathered with them in that Upper Room, Jesus tells his disciples that the Father had given *all things* into his hands, and that he had come *from God* and was *going to God*. Whoa! All things! *Can you imagine a **grander** statement of power and importance? And yet, we witness the most astounding and unexpected thing –the Lord Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself.* He is about to do the lowest **servant’s** lowliest job: **foot-washing**. None of the disciples has stooped to take on the dirty task. No, *they’ve* been jockeying around about who gets to be the *greatest*. Jesus shows a very different kind of greatness. He **insists** on serving. Holding the *whole world* in his hands, Jesus puts those hands *into loving service*.

Simon Peter is *shocked* that Jesus is **kneeling** there in front of him with the *towel and the basin*; “Lord, are **you** going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet.” Peter *thinks* he’s got it right, but he really doesn’t understand. Jesus answers, “*Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.*” So, of course, Peter jumps right in with *both feet* and then some: “Lord, not my **feet** only but also my **hands** and my **head**!” Ah, Peter! Jesus patiently explains, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” **Later.**

Peter makes some *assumptions* that are common in our world too. Jesus names a few – “***servants** are not greater than the **master**, **messengers** are not greater than the **sender**.*” Then the Lord Jesus **challenges** those assumptions about power and worth. He washes the feet of his disciples, even though he knew they would soon **abandon** him. Jesus stoops to serve *even Judas*, who is about to trigger the final **betrayal**. Jesus overturns the world’s proud presumptions-- in the *now* of the **towel and basin**, and the *later* of the **cross and tomb**.

What do you suppose **Peter** was feeling, sitting there with his sandals off? *Embarrassed? Bewildered?* As Peter prepares to eat, he does not know it will become the *Last Supper* with his Lord. *But whatever* he was feeling, it was *nothing* compared to the wrenching pain that he would soon face. *Before* we get to the stunning “**later**” of Easter morning, there is that crushing “**later**” of Peter **denying** Jesus three times and then his bitter tears. *Before the bright later of “Easter,” the bleak later of “Calvary”* includes suffering and dying, a cruel death that seems to spell “*never*” for their hopes of salvation. The cross was the Roman Empire’s execution of choice for the **lowest** and the **lowliest**. That *cross* of Jesus will put the lowly **foot washing** into sharper focus, as the disciples will come to look back at it **later** in the new light of Easter dawn.

*“You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”* What is it *exactly* that Peter will understand, **later**? Jesus has set an example that up-ends all the claims of **worldly power**. Our Lord, loving us to the end *and beyond* the end, doesn’t *lord it over* anyone. Jesus challenges Peter and the other disciples to understand a **new way** of being together, a way that the world doesn’t recognize. *“You call me **Teacher and Lord** — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have **washed** your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”*

We who live on the *now* side of Easter, are like the **disciples**, sent to **serve and share**. Christians serve, *responding* to the love of Jesus. Foot-washing before that Last Supper was a preview of the limitless love poured out **later** in the crucifixion. As we follow God’s mandate to wash one another’s feet, Jesus “*washes*” us again and again with a **forgiving** word that turns us **forward** to the *future* and **outward** to the *world* around us. The Easter undoing of the power of death presents God’s powerful love that *transforms* the world. Radiant with that love, let others see **Jesus** when they look at you.

Humble service in Christ’s name changes the world, no matter how seemingly insignificant it is. What does “*washing one another’s feet*” look like in your **family**? Among your **friends**, or in your **marriage**? What does it look like with your **co-workers**, with the **strangers** you encounter? Or what could it look like even with your **enemies**? The love of Jesus, put in action, is where the **rubber** meets the road – or maybe we need to say, where the **sandal** meets the mud and muck – or whatever *unmentionable messes* litter the roadways of our lives.

Jesus knows that the “*later*” of Easter will not magically take away the struggles of living faithfully and lovingly *now*. He tells us, “*If you **know** these things, you are blessed if you **do** them.*” As anyone who has tried to quit smoking, or follow a diet, or a budget, or an exercise plan can tell you, **knowing** and **doing** can be discouragingly disconnected from each other. Yet, Jesus gives a promise: you are **blessed** if you do the things that he has taught you. Trusting *that* promise takes letting go of **other promises** that our world makes, promises about **power** and **greatness** and **self-worth**; promises that are very **insistent** and truly **insidious**. Where do we get the **freedom** to be able to even *consider* this “*towel and basin*” kind of servanthood, and let go of trusting all those *other* promises?

Jesus says, “*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.*” Well, easier said than done, right? “*Love*” is an active ongoing commitment, not a private feeling. *That* kind of love cannot flow from our own feelings and private preferences. **It’s not about us.**

*Love just as I have loved you.* The real power comes **not** simply from the example of such love – “*here’s how you need to do it, watch me!*” The power to transform the world – and our own hearts – doesn’t come from the oughtness of it: “*I loved you, and now what’s wrong with you if you don’t get out there and **love** other people.*” The power to love comes as a response to gratefully *receiving* the servant love of the crucified one. That’s how we are made free to serve others.

Draw on the love of Jesus that **seeks** us out, that **dwells** in us through the Holy Spirit-- God *in the present tense* who keeps us connected to the Gospel. **Trust** the word of *forgiveness* that frees us, again and *again and again*, to be God's faithful, loving people in the world. God invites us to **remember** – and we *do* this, at the table as we will this evening, in remembrance of the servant love of Jesus ***poured out*** for us on the cross, and ***poured into*** us each day; **sealed** by the promise of gospel grace, and **seen** in the light of Easter hope and joy. God, give us **eyes** to see, and **hearts and hands** to serve you as we serve our neighbors, *powered* by your love.

*“Doing a New Thing”*  
Lent 5     April 3, 2022

It’s the fifth Sunday in Lent today, but for basketball fans, “March Madness” continues into April, with the NCAA tournament Final Four this weekend. Each team will have their eyes fixed on the prize. When they play the final game, all the past performances won’t count for anything--it comes down to the prize of winning that last game. Both Paul in our second lesson and the prophet Isaiah encourage us to “keep our eyes on the prize,” to laser-beam our focus forward in hopeful expectation. God is up to something, so turn your attention to God’s new thing and don’t let the past get in the way.

In our Gospel lesson, Mary has turned her eyes to the true prize, her dear friend Jesus. In her outrageously extravagant anointing, she honors the new thing that God is doing through Jesus, just days before his life would be also broken and poured out: God’s new path through the wilderness; an overflowing gift of sacrificial love. Mary pours out her treasure for Jesus because she had begun to see that God was doing a new thing.

The prophet Isaiah was pointing the people of ancient Israel toward God’s actions: “Don’t dwell on the past; I am doing a new thing: don’t you see it?” Isaiah begins by reminding them of what God had done, back when they were slaves in Egypt. Jews still share this story with their children at their Passover Seder Meal—recounting the powerful sacred story of how God had sent Moses, who delivered them from certain destruction when they were chased, with the Empire’s angry army behind them and the waters of the Sea dead ahead of them. How God miraculously brought them through safely, but the Egyptian army was “extinguished like a wick.” Glorious! How God had led them through hard times in the wilderness, and then across the Jordan River into a land that would be home for them. These things, these were the “former things.” God had commanded them to remember these things, and remembering them was the glue that held them together as a people.

Glorious! Yet, now listen to God’s prophet Isaiah: you think that was really something? “You ain’t seen nothing yet!” Something’s coming, so new, so amazing, that it will outshine even the most treasured memories. “I am doing a new thing. Look, don’t you see it?”

The prophet Isaiah spoke to exiles, hopeless, knowing that hundreds of miles of wilderness stretched between their beloved homeland and their refugee ghettos in Babylon, the cruel conquering empire. Business as usual in this world -- if you rebel against a ruthless empire and you lose the war, you can kiss your future goodbye. And when their nation got destroyed, people figured, well, maybe their nation’s God lost out too. Same old, same old. Bleak. Remember the good old days? Gone. Gone. All Gone. But now here’s God: “Look, I’m doing a new thing. Can’t you see it?”

Our Gospel lesson shows us that Mary was responding to a new thing. Earlier in John's gospel, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, soaking it all in, as her sister Martha serves. Later, Mary witnesses an incredible new thing when Jesus called her brother Lazarus back from three days dead in a sealed tomb. Now here she is with Jesus again. In just a few days, two days before Passover according to the timeline of John's Gospel, Jesus will eat another meal, with his disciples in an Upper Room. The day before Passover, Jesus himself will become God's own Passover Lamb, and shed the blood which will mark them for mercy and spare them from death. A new thing, indeed.

It isn't surprising that Mary's lavish response to God's new thing causes a scandal. People are seeing her devotion to Jesus, totally over the top. She takes a pound – a pound! – of expensive perfumed lotion from India, broke the stone jar that held it and poured it all out onto Jesus' feet. It was an extravagant act of love for him. Then she let her hair down and used it to wipe his feet. It was a scandalous thing for a woman to do, even in her own home, in the presence of men who were not family.

Then, we hear from Judas. He spits out his bitter judgement: "This is too much! A royal waste!" Judas rejects Mary's act of love for Jesus—he just sees money down the drain. As the heady perfume fills the house, Judas complains how the money (her money, her perfume, her gift) has been just wasted. He says, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Three hundred denarii was a year's wages for a day laborer. A fortune, just poured out on the floor, a total waste. Judas sounds like the older brother in last week's lesson. "Don't waste your partying on that no-good prodigal son of yours." And the father's unconditional welcome for the wayward? Too much, just wrong. Both Judas and the angry older brother can't bear the outrageously gracious gift, the extravagance that overturns everybody's expectations.

So, how about us? What keeps us from seeing the new things that God is doing? Maybe like those ancient exiles in Babylon, we know that stuck place, longing for the glories of the past, and discouraged because the present doesn't measure up. Maybe we think we need to do what Paul says he chose to not do: pull out our letters of recommendation, the scrapbook full of stories of our accomplishments, redoubling our efforts to promote our own agenda. All the while, God is saying, hey, don't you see my new thing? Well, no God. No, we strain to see it in this messed up world.

Judas and his ledger books and money bags didn't see it, just as the older brother grimly keeping score didn't see it when his father threw the party for that worthless bum of a brother. When we are busy focusing on the agendas of this world, we can miss God's new thing too. God's unruly grace doesn't add up, it messes up our plans; it can even scandalize us. Yet Jesus commends Mary's act of worship, her "royal waste" of the broken jar and poured out perfume.

The author Marva Dawn calls the act of worship as “a royal waste of time.” It can seem to us a foolish waste out there in our “real world--” a world that still runs by Babylon’s rules, where Judas pulls a lot more weight than Mary does, where Paul still looks foolish and weak. Those work-a-day rules: “Credentials and connections count, might makes right, look out for number one, no losers allowed, the golden rule actually means that the one with the gold gets to make the rules.” But Behold: God is doing a New Thing. Keep your eyes peeled for it, and your hearts open!

God’s new thing is often difficult to anticipate. A Jesuit pope from South America who rides the city bus and cooks his own meals, and cares deeply about justice for the poor. A Nelson Mandela who moves from apartheid prison to president in South Africa. The slow and often uncertain – but continuing --struggles for human rights. The Web and a world now wired together and moving at warp speed toward exciting and unsettling new ways of knowing and being together. New voices, hope insisting on persisting, the courage to speak the truth, and say no to evil without being evil about it.

God was doing a new thing through Jesus;, making a way through our wilderness. A new thing: that God should finally act on countless generations’ worth of promises--that the creator of the universe should finally come down—all the way down-- and – can we look at this confounding new thing? – allow himself to die a common criminal’s death on a cross, disgraced and abandoned. Who could accept this new thing? Really, who could perceive it? Who could have known it? And a truly new thing: an empty tomb. Death does not have the last word! An amazing new thing!

Trusting God’s new thing opens up the possibilities of God’s future. God’s Spirit transforms the wilderness of the cross into the way home for the exiles; God’s new thing continues to pave a way for us to come home to our Creator who loves us. . . . “you are my chosen people whom I formed for myself that you might declare my praise.” The promise of God’s future invites each of us to let the Spirit break us open so we can pour out our treasure for God. Our Savior’s grace frees you to give of yourself without counting the cost; the sweet perfume of God’s saving grace will continue to spread all around. God is still making a way through the desert. Watch for God’s new thing at work in your life, personally and as a congregation. Look for what God is up to among you. Welcome the love of God that keeps on embracing us through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.



## *The Other Brother*

Lent 4 March 27, 2022

Today we've heard a familiar teaching story of Jesus: "The Prodigal Son." The younger son demanded his inheritance early, even while his father is still alive, then ran off and became "number one party central" until his money ran out and then so did his friends. Dragging his sorry self home, prepared to beg for the basics, he found instead a wildly generous and totally undeserved welcome home.

So—it's a story of an unwise and wasteful younger son returning home. Yet, there are three main characters in this parable. The father, waiting and watching, his welcome home party as "over the top" as the wayward son had ever been. And then there is the third character, the Other Brother. The younger brother is lost, and there are joyful celebrations when he is found. Except, not everybody celebrates. The elder son is lost too, only he never even left home. And the parable ends before we see whether he will respond to the father's loving invitation and join the party.

Jesus tells this parable to folks who are scandalized that he chooses to hang out with the "worst sort" of sinners, breaking every holy law on the books and claiming that God was blessing every bit of it. These Pharisees are the "elder brothers," and Jesus confronts their judgmental self-righteousness.

At its heart, it's a story about the foolish and forgiving love of the waiting father. Amazingly, shockingly, he doesn't set up any hoops at all for the younger brother to jump through. Can't you just see him running like a holy fool, all his proper dignity left behind in the dust, hollering over his shoulder at the astonished servants. "Bring a robe! And the ring in the cashbox! Go! Now!" So, embraced by the father's welcome, the kid can abandon his pathetic little speech that he'd been trying so hard to get just right, as he made his hungry, humbled way back to his father's house.

While in the far country, the younger son has forgotten to remember that "everything he has comes from his father." His possessions, his money, his clothes, his food and drink, even his own body, were given to him. Now, these are all good things; but those things become the younger son's undoing as he uses them only for himself. They don't give him the freedom or joy he was looking for. Instead, he tries to fill up an emptiness inside with one new thing after another, a faster car, a fancier house, snazzier friends. And then, . . . still empty in the far country. He left home to find freedom, but ended up enslaved -- and humiliated. Good Jews wouldn't ordinarily go anywhere near pigs, yet the pigs ending up eating better than he did.

Like the younger son, we have freedom to head out into whatever far country we set our eyes on. We can choose to hang out there—whooping it up, or maybe, ending up hungry, envying the pigs. And, as with the prodigal son, when we are in the far country God waits for us, always aching to reconcile, to welcome us home.

Although the younger brother shut himself out of his father's house, the story shows us that one does not need to go away to a "far country" to be cut off. The elder brother trudges through a life of joyless duty, seeing himself as no better than a slave in his own father's house, although this is not what the father wants for him.

With a cynical sneer, the elder brother figures that repentance is "what you do to get your own way when you can't do anything else." Seen from outside of the father's loving heart, the welcome home just seems profoundly unfair, unwise, scandalous even. The angry elder brother turns his back on his father.

Now, notice that the father goes out to each of his sons, reaching out to include each of them. The elder brother is not rejected. The father accepts him as the faithful "Son Who is Always with Him," and who has everything that the Father has. The gracious father loves him too, even though the older brother resists the invitation, choosing to act like a slave, and not a son and brother.

The elder brother cannot accept that the father's love for the wayward son does not diminish at all the father's love for the dutiful son. "This son OF YOURS," he spits out at his pleading father. His father tries to reconnect him: "YOUR brother was dead, and he is alive." Will the whining brother continue to stand in judgment, outside, cut off from the wild joy of the household at the safe return of a lost child?

The younger son thought he could begin to redeem himself in his father's eyes by a willingness to be his slave. How long do you suppose he was rehearsing his speech, struggling to get the words just right: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands?" But the loving parent suddenly overjoyed at the long-lost child's return, will have none of that. And we do not earn our position in God's eyes—not by being "dutiful and self-righteous," and not by being sufficiently "pitiful and ashamed."

Do we ever find ourselves with "elder-brother-itis," wanting God to pat us on the back with one hand, while smacking the slackers into shape with the other? Do we recognize that elder brother, caught in joyless duty, unwilling to be reconciled and join the party, offended at God's outrageous and unfair welcome to the undeserving brother? The elder son is as far away from the father's loving heart as that son in the far country had been. The lost younger son is found and joyfully welcomed home. The elder brother? He is also lost, he is also sought out, but will he come in out of the angry dark and stony cold? The question remains.

At the heart of this story is the amazing love of the father. Both sons receive the father's gracious invitation to be reconciled and join the party. And how about us? God loves us and waits for us even when we have wandered. We have been reconnected with God through Jesus, who is the very picture of God's grace with a human face.

We don't have to get our careful strategy for reconciliation just right for God to welcome us home. The waiting father kills the fatted calf, and greets us with the kiss of peace—no matter if we are wallowing in unworthiness. And no matter if we are out behind the barn, armed folded across our chest, having a stony self-righteous griping session. God still says, “welcome home.”

Why should I trust that God is waiting for ME with open arms? Why not a God who meets me with a groaning ledger sheet of grievances and meager achievements? If there is a God waiting at this gate, why should I ever trust that it will be extravagant grace and unlimited forgiveness that I find there? Well, Jesus is the one telling this story. He's not just talking about welcoming the lost, but he is opening himself to death on a cross as he reaches out to welcome all those who are lost-- in the far country, or right in the back yard. Calling on us to become more like the father ourselves, welcoming each other as we have been welcomed.

Each day, do we remember that we are beloved children of God, baptized into the joy of God's presence, with cause to be grateful for all the abundant gifts of God's grace? Or are we gamely keeping the rules, keeping in and keeping up and keeping out, slaves to a need to measure whether we are “good enough” for God's love, turning away from God's repeated invitation to join in the joy of home?

It is a divinely foolish and unfair God who goes the difficult distance to seek out and bring back the lost. So we can come on into the party. Be reconciled; share the love of this foolishly welcoming God. You'll have to leave behind the urge to control the situation, take off old gripes and grudges like muddy shoes at the door, and let your host take the dusty cloak of shame from you. God's grace invites both brothers to the party. God's grace invites us home. Come on in out of the cold and celebrate God's surprisingly extravagant love.

“It’s not fair.” Any parent who has had two children together in the same room for any length of time has heard that one. If you have a piece of cake to split, they may be looking for a scale to weigh the pieces.

To be honest, it’s not just kids. We all want things to be fair. But what about when bad things happen to good people? What about children brutalized by bombs? What did they do to deserve that? Beneath the question “why?” may also be deeper, unspoken questions: where is God in all of this? Is God fair? Is God good?

These are not new questions. The Book of Job and some of the Psalms demand to understand the why of suffering. When, in another story, the disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” the question assumed that there was a direct cause and effect link between sin and suffering. Jesus says no, but still the idea persists: poverty, isolation, illness, and death must be punishment for sins known or unknown. Otherwise, life would not be fair.

When good things happen to us--when we are healthy, our children are doing well, our business is flourishing—well then, it all makes perfect sense--especially if we don’t think about it too much. When life is going well, it all adds up. But what does it mean when I suffer or the people I love are in pain? Or when the innocent ones become the victims? We can know that there is no direct cause and effect between suffering and divine punishment --- until we are suffering and find ourselves asking “what did I do to deserve this? Is God mad at me? Is it OK to be mad at God?”

God’s people are not immune to danger and disaster. A person can run up against their “dead-line” at any moment. Suddenly the aneurism blows, a baby dies in the night with no warning or explanation, or a life is cut short or maimed by a moment of inattention on an icy road. A tornado comes and one child is sucked from his father’s terrified arms and dashed to its death, and another is found unharmed, shielded by a bathtub from the destruction. A stray gunshot, a lifetime of work washed out in a freak storm, whole families struck suddenly by a deadly virus. We cry out to God in anger or in fear, or lash out at others, attempting to set things right in our own eyes. We may complain bitterly that God just isn’t being fair! Or even suspect that this God stuff is, well, bunk.

The disciples asked about those eighteen people who were killed when the tower under construction at Siloam fell on them. What did they do to deserve that? We might also ask: were they really much different than the innocent occupants of their offices who were killed when the twin towers collapsed on 9/11? What about those who missed their doomed flights, or those who were delayed getting to work that morning and so were saved when their workplace fell, flaming, to the earth? Were they better people than those who died? Jesus says, “no.”

Suffering may come as a natural result of a person's behavior; sometimes that's true, but we all know that often it is not. It isn't fair, but Jesus reminds us that we must not lose track of our own connection with God while focusing on other people. When we try to blame other people's suffering on their shortcomings, we may be whistling in the dark. Just because you are not suffering doesn't mean that you are home free. And just because you are suffering doesn't mean that God is saying that you somehow deserved it.

Jesus says, "Don't ask whether God is fair." Because, here's the deal: God is not fair, as we count fairness. And thank God for that! If God were completely fair, we would all be in serious trouble. "Therefore let those who think that they stand take heed lest they fall." But, no matter what is happening in our life, God's mercy will be there for us, for Jesus' sake.

We'd like to think that "things go well for the good; things go poorly for the bad." This is orderly and feels secure, and we like that—especially when things are going well. But, clearly, Jesus himself overturns these assumptions about God: the worst thing came to the most righteous one: the sinless Son of God suffered terribly and died a profoundly unfair, shameful and painful death. Jesus shows that it isn't just the bad people who suffer. Jesus suffered, and on the cross, we see that now God is putting the world right in Jesus. God takes on all our suffering and works in and through it, gospel grace beyond all fairness.

But what of those who say, "But look at the resurrection. That's where we see God's power; winning is what counts, not this suffering thing." But what if the resurrection isn't about proving that suffering is simply swept under the rug forever as shameful and weak, a loser-experience unworthy of a true, triumphant believer? What if the vulnerable love of Jesus, even though it led to a cross--what if this is God's way, not an exception to God's way? What if this unfair mercy to us is God's life-giving water in our desert, and sharing this mercy with others is the fruit that God wants from us?

Having been watered with this mercy, God comes looking for fruit. Our crucified and risen Jesus, the vine into which we are grafted, makes fruit on our branches possible. Fruitfulness--like letting God be at the center of our lives; like faithfully hearing the Word and sharing in the Lord's Supper; like thanking God by serving others and seeking compassionate justice to address the aching needs around us.

It is God's life-renewing mercy, and we need that spiritual tending, because we really aren't very good at getting it right. God's final reckoning of our fruitlessness is withheld for a time, but not indefinitely. Knowing that ultimately, we do have a "dead-line," can prompt us to look at the fruit we are bearing--or could be bearing. God is much better at sticking with the program – us – than we are. God tends us, waters us, digs at our roots and spreads the Good News of God's saving grace that frees us from our preoccupation with saving ourselves. That's Good News that frees us for bearing God's fruit; caring for the world, advocating for those who are unfairly targeted.

This “stay of execution” for the tree happens so that, with special care, it might eventually bear the fruit that it was planted to produce. Imagine that you are that tree. How is God caring for you to craft you into a more fruitful steward of the gifts you have been given? Aim to live each day in such a way that you will have no fear of giving an account for how you have used God’s gift. Live each day, knowing that we will never be able to give a perfect accounting of our own efforts, and that God loves us anyway. Knowing that sometimes suffering will come and will make us sad or afraid, or angry, or confused or just bone-weary. Jesus knows what that’s about.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal theology professor and writer, shared this in an article on “Life-Giving Fear.” “Terrible things happen . . . . But don’t let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.”<sup>1</sup> If we step away from the escalating tyranny of the self-serving blame-game, and stand in the shadow of the cross, we can learn from our own vulnerability and pain. We can celebrate that, to save us, God promises mercy, not fairness according to our human standards. And thank God for that.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor [Life-Giving Fear – Religion Online \(religion-online.org\)](http://religion-online.org) This article appeared in the *Christian Century*, March 4, 1998, page 229; copyright by the Christian Century Foundation.

We often see images of God that are all about power and glory. So, it might be a little surprising to imagine God as a mother hen gathering her chicks under the protection of her wing. God the mother hen loves us and longs for us, like Jesus loves and longs for the city of Jerusalem.

God loves and longs for us; so we can live gathered under God's wing--or we can choose to scurry away. We can respond to God's embrace of grace by offering our lives in loving service to our neighbors, or we can turn away to follow a self-serving path. God's Holy Spirit broods over us, urging us to trust and follow Jesus. God nurtures us with faith, hope and love. Still, we are free to turn away. God doesn't browbeat us into turning our lives around. Today we hear God's response when we reject that love and care. God cares when we turn away.

In the Gospel passage for today, some Pharisees come and warn Jesus that Herod is looking to kill him. Maybe they're really concerned for him, or maybe they just want him to clear out and go upset someone else's applecart. But whatever their motives, it would not be a surprise if the ruler of Galilee who beheaded John the Baptist is no fan of Jesus. So, would Jesus let the raging political power-plays of this world determine how he would react? Or would he remain faithful to his mission in spite of what was happening?

Here is another variation on the temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness, which we heard about last week, when the devil offers the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus will worship him. Jesus does not let the push and pull of this world tempt him away from God. Jesus keeps his eye fixed on the road to Jerusalem, which will lead to the cross, and nothing will turn him away. Jesus knows "Herod's not going to be killing me here in Galilee; I'm headed for Jerusalem. I'm not there yet; I still have work to do here."

Jesus calls Herod a fox, a cunning little critter with designs on our henhouse. Jesus doesn't allow the foxes of this earth to determine how he will do his ministry. Today and tomorrow, Jesus cures and cares, giving notice to all the powers of evil that they do not have the ultimate power in this world; their foxy days are numbered. Jesus stays the course. And when the time does come, Jesus allows himself to be taken by a legal lynch mob, hungry to have him gone for good.

There is a story told about a farming community that was hit by devastating grass fires. One hot, hazy day, the farmer looked off into the distance and he saw the tell-tale smoke. He quickly let his animals out of the barn to fend for themselves, and he and his wife packed a few prize possessions and headed out, ahead of the flames. The next day when they ventured back to the farm they were met with total devastation.

As he walked around the barnyard, between the blackened buildings he saw a charred black lump fluttering in the breeze. Without thinking, he kicked it. It was one of his hens, the one who had just hatched a large clutch of eggs. From underneath the black lump ran a half-dozen yellow, fluffy chicks. The hen had stayed with her chicks, shielding them under her wings, dying in the effort.

If the fox gets too close to the vulnerable little chicks, a mother bird will suddenly fly up and expose herself to the danger in order to draw the fox away. Jesus, as our mother hen, did just that when he finally did arrive in Jerusalem, and the foxes sprang their trap, abused and betrayed him and nailed him up to die. In our place, for our foxy failures. And on Easter, the “third day,” Jesus completed his work, and now we can be gathered safely into his new and everlasting life. The powers of this earth did not prevail.

Jesus longs for us, even when we scurry away from him, again and again. Which we do. His love gathers us together in the midst of the many dangers of our lives. God’s care is the brooding concern of a mother hen who knows all about the threat of the world’s deadly foxes in our henhouses.

Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem, bearing not only the current threat from Herod that the Pharisees warned him about, but also the final threat that awaits him. He will suffer at the hands of the very people he loves and longs for. “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” But then those wrenching words, the tragic knowledge: “But they would not.” Rejecting the one who seeks them and loves them so strongly. Heart breaking, like any parent whose beloved child has turned away: “But they would not.” Yet Jesus goes on.

Jesus faced Herod the fox. Herod’s threat to shut Jesus down is an example of the kind of “foxes” that we run into. What foxes come to raid your henhouse, threatening to turn you away from God’s path for your life? Is it “the daily grind,” gradually pulling more and more of your time and energy away from worship and service of God? Or perhaps a fondness for nursing old grudges or a need to be right even when you just might be wrong? Maybe it’s the world’s values filling us with a nagging anxiety over whether we will have enough, or seeking to maintain the power and prestige we think we need to keep on going, no matter the cost. Or maybe the foxes look like worry and weariness, depression, or maybe forgotten hope, faint and far away, feeling forever out of reach.

Herod wills to kill Jesus, Jesus wills to gather the people as a hen gathers her chicks, and the people will not have it. Jesus laments over Jerusalem because “they would not.” The Lenten question that can challenge us today is this: Will we? Will we respond to God’s covenant of love and care by investing our lives more completely, today and tomorrow, because we know we have life “under the shadow of that wing” and no place else? Will we ask ourselves, “what might God be calling me to do with the gifts I have received in my life?”



God continually seeks us out, even when we're entertaining our favorite foxes in our henhouse. We continue to be the target of God's love, even when we just keep on running around—or maybe even running away--like dizzy baby chicks. God gathers and protects even when the world around us is escalates its threats to do us in.

God has many ways of accomplishing that caring for us. Sometimes we bring God's grace to one another in a way that we couldn't possibly plan, and are perhaps not even aware of. Even the discipline of coming to church regularly could make a significant difference. Your being here could be a witness or encouragement for someone else, even if you feel far from the welcoming wings of God. You may even discover the surprising grace of finding yourself forgiven and kept safe under the gathering wing of our holy and healing mother hen.

Jesus loved us fiercely through the fires of hell itself. There is no greater love than to give one's life for another. Sheltered in the love that God has first shown us, we can turn our lives each day toward sharing that love with our neighbors, in all the ways that come to us throughout our day.

Stand firm against the foxes, wherever and whatever they are. Learn from and lean on the Lord. Gathered safely under the sheltering wing of our loving God, we can say today and tomorrow, guided and empowered by the Spirit of God, "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." God's Spirit keeps on turning us back to the promise of our baptism: "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." Lord, lead us to know and embrace your vision for us, trusting that we can dare to serve, for in you we do not need to fear the foxes in our henhouse.

Thanks be to God.

There is an old comedy sketch where the country doctor is consulted by a patient who says he broke his arm in two places. The crusty old doc replies, “Well, then, my advice is to stay out of them places!” Jesus did not stay out of the places where he would have to wrestle with temptation. Still wet from his baptism in the River Jordan, with the words from heaven still ringing in his ears: “this is my son, the beloved one, in whom I am well pleased,” Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. There he wrestles with temptations.

How should he carry out his mission? Jesus chooses the path of humble service, even though it will take him to a cross. That path goes back to the Garden of Eden, that first place of temptation; it led Jesus into the wilderness, through the gut-grabbing agony of the Garden of Gethsemane. Finally, it led to the empty tomb in the Garden at Easter.

The humorist Oscar Wilde once wrote: “I can resist anything -- except temptation.” We laugh, a little sadly maybe-- because he’s nailed it, hasn’t he? From the very beginning, Adam and Eve were tempted to “Be Like God.” But Jesus gets it right. He counters the temptations that we humans so often fail to resist.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness are like those that Adam and Eve faced in the Garden. Turn these stones into bread--the temptation of materialism, of simply taking the things we want, when we want them -- even at the cost of our own spiritual well-being. The Eden apple was a good thing. But we too are tempted to use the good things of God against God who gives us all those good things. “Do this, and your deepest needs and dearest cravings will be met, now”—with this promise, advertisers entice folks to buy their products. Our world is drenched in those enticements.

Then the next temptation: Worship Satan; believe that the Evil One rules in this world, and not God. This is like Adam and Eve hearing the claim that Satan is the one who really holds the truth about the apple, and then trusting that Satan can give something vital where God seems to be holding back. It is a temptation to turn away from a God who sometimes doesn’t give us what we want, yet promises to give us what we need.

Finally, Luke brings us to Jerusalem, just as the whole story of Jesus’ life in the Gospel of Luke points Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward the cross and resurrection. So, Jesus meets the final temptation: put God to the test: “throw yourself down and see if God will rescue you.” Here even Satan quotes Scripture, a verse from the psalm for today. In the Garden of Eden, they heard it something like this: “God’s limits for human life are not really that good; God isn’t telling the whole truth-- you won’t really die if you eat that apple.” Don’t worry about actions that threaten to turn your hearts away from God.

Jesus says, “Trust God, don’t test.” When we are reckless with our lives, we put God’s care for us to the test. God gives us freedom along with all the other good gifts in our life: our selves, our families and other relationships, our environment and all those things that make life possible. God wants us to use our freedom responsibly to tend and care for these, and not do our own version of throwing ourselves down from the pinnacle of the temple. We answer to God for how we take care of what we have been given.

Eve and Adam were tempted in the Garden to “Be Like God.” They failed to resist that temptation, and were driven out into the vast wilderness beyond the Garden of Eden. We continue to find ourselves in that wilderness, outside of Eden. Jesus joins us there, where he wrestles with the same kinds of human temptations that we all confront.

But Jesus did not fall victim to the tempter. He did not “try to be like God” to spare himself the trials of his life, although he could have. He faced the tragic outcomes of human hatred and fear, trusting completely in God through what must have been the most tormenting temptation of all, when he willingly took on the cruelest capital punishment that a cruel empire could inflict, a cross.

Now, it’s not that the things the devil wanted Jesus to do were bad in themselves. Jesus did feed the poor, he did do amazing signs and wonders, and he certainly did engage the political rulers, challenging their arrogant claims to have the ultimate authority. But Jesus walked this earth among us, and as the hymn in Philippians 2 puts it, he did not “count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Not a fruit to be plucked from the forbidden tree--no stones to bread, no spectacular miraculous theatrics to whisk away the horror of the cross, no shock and awe army to rescue him from his enemies. Where Adam and Eve failed in the Garden of Eden, Jesus succeeded in the wilderness at the beginning of ministry; and later, in the Garden of Gethsemane when Satan again found “an opportune moment.”

We all need food and other material stuff, we all look for power to carry out our purposes, we all want to be recognized and valued for who we are. These are basic human needs. But, tested in these things, Jesus kept his trusting relationship to God. He honored the human limits that God pronounced “good.” Called to be co-creators with God, we answer to God. When the creatures try to take over the creator’s place to further our own self-centered purposes, then even the good things will be put out of whack. By trying to be like God, Eve and Adam distorted their created goodness and put themselves at odds with God and each other. And like those first creatures, who among us doesn’t share Oscar Wilde’s situation--we can resist anything, except temptation. Jesus is the only one who has never fallen for it.

Notice, Jesus was not tempted because he had somehow gone against God’s will. It was, after all, the Spirit of God who led him in the wilderness. And temptation isn’t just about messing around with bad things. The toughest temptations involve good things, used in a bad way.

The stronger we get in our disciple-life, the more dangerous the temptations will be, and there's just no getting off the hook in this life. We will run up against our limits, and find ourselves at the thirsty, hungry end of our rope, wrestling with our own demons in our own wilderness.

But, here's the surprising good news that turns all our worldly expectations upside down: the wilderness is where the grace of God comes to us most powerfully. In the wilderness, the Spirit equips us for our spiritual battles. When we are challenged, then we can grow. Trust, hope, love, endurance, wisdom, community: these gifts help us resist the daily temptations that wear us down.

Jesus does not resort to power plays and manipulations; he stays always rooted in his complete trust in God. Being real and being vulnerable like that can add up to a cross--to whatever sort of public lynching, relentless lying, or character assassinations that the world can arrange to inflict. Jesus went to the very heart of the beast, exposing the self-serving fears, the cruel violence and heart-rending betrayals of the world around him--he took on the raging sinfulness of the wilderness world around him -- our world -- down to its very depths: the final test, death, disgraced and abandoned.

And emerging out of those depths, the new life of the Easter Garden extends a promise that God has something new in mind for this world, God's world. Something new for us. Jesus is more than just an impossible example out there, or up there, good for maybe guilting us into trying really hard to be just a little bit better. Which always falls short. Jesus joins us right here in our wilderness wandering, loving even to the point of dying, so that we may have new life in him.

We can trust God in the midst of the temptations in our wilderness, for we have seen in Jesus how much God loves us. We trust God's promise enough to pray: "send your angels also to minister to us amid the temptations of our lives." Thanks be to God even for the temptations and the wilderness. Thanks be to God for the hope we can hold onto, creatures relying on a loving Creator. Thanks be to God who sends the Spirit to keep our hearts turned to God, our ears tuned to the Gospel, and our feet on the path, following our Lord always.